

ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE SEVERN ESTUARY 1995

by Nigel Nayling (Secretary)

1995 saw another busy year for committee members, reflected in the packed programme at our Annual Meeting and the contents of this year's report. In addition to specific fieldwork based projects, the Committee is increasingly involved in initiatives or fora where clear advice on the archaeological perspective is actively being sought.

Planning Issues

The Levels continue to be subject to considerable development although there seems to have been something of a lull in associated archaeological fieldwork this year. This is unlikely to remain the case for long. The preferred route for the new motorway running south of Newport has been announced and substantial fieldwork is anticipated in advance of its construction. Infill development of 'green field' sites adjacent to infrastructure development of the Second Severn Crossing will continue, if not accelerate in 1996. A recent planning application outlining Cardiff Bay Development Corporation's updated plans for alternative bird feeding grounds on the Gwent Levels, which includes development of a substantial area landward of the numerous prehistoric intertidal sites at Goldcliff, is particularly sensitive given the growing evidence for near-surface Roman archaeology in the area (see Bell 1995). The future of the wreck of the *Louisa* in Cardiff Bay will also need to be resolved in the face of ongoing construction of the barrage in Cardiff Bay.

The comprehensive representation of archaeological curators within the SELRC offers the hope that the impact of individual developments can be assessed against an estuary-wide perspective, with individual members

still being free to comment on planning applications of specific concern to them. Two factors are likely to muddy the waters somewhat through 1996: local authority reorganisation, particularly in England, may require some adjustment of arrangements for archaeological advice to local planning authorities and, in Wales, the status of Planning and Policy Guidance Notes (particularly PPG16 with regard to archaeology) remains unresolved in advance of the proposed publication of a single PPG for Wales.

Publication of Stephen Rippon's (1996) *Gwent Levels Historic Landscape Survey* (see p 11) can only help heighten awareness of the archaeological and landscape value of the Levels. This year's report contains a multidisciplinary paper highlighting other methodologies which can be applied to investigation of areas of the Levels (Canti *et al.* p49). Some critical assessment of appropriate methodologies for the characterisation of the archaeological and palaeoenvironmental resources within the Levels is urgently needed if curators are to provide consistent briefs for archaeological assessment, evaluation and mitigation.

Beyond Planning

Many of us will be only too well aware that planning control has limited value on the seaward side of the sea wall. The Code of Practice for Seabed Developers has been widely distributed in the hope of assisting commercial concerns to consider the archaeological impact of their activities. Indeed a planning application submitted during the year, proposing increased abstraction of sand and aggregate from the Bedwin Sands, was subsequently withdrawn. In most

instances however, natural processes of marine erosion and possible sea-level rise are providing the impetus for continuing fieldwork in the intertidal zone, either in response to enhancement of sea defences or to intertidal erosion. It is this type of fieldwork which predominates in this year's report with papers presenting the interim results of site specific excavations and area surveys. The intertidal survey of peat exposures off the Gwent Levels (p29), although in its early stages, shows promise and should prove invaluable in highlighting archaeological potential and assessing the vulnerability of these sites.

Increasingly, we are becoming involved in broad-based initiatives aimed at developing management plans for aspects of the Severn Estuary. An example is the Severn Estuary Strategy (1996) a partnership of local authorities and other organisations designed to develop management strategies for the estuary. The project manager is Susannah Bleakley. The strategy has grown out of European Union initiatives with which members of the committee have had some involvement from the outset. Similarly, the committee intends to emphasise archaeological concerns during the development of the National River Authority's Estuary Catchment Management Plan and the Shoreline Management Plan. Extensive enhancement of flood defences on both shores of the Severn will occur over the next decade, and close involvement of committee members will be required if archaeology is to take its proper place with other environmental concerns.

Meetings

Stephen Rippon organised a field visit on 24.9.95 to the excavations at Kenn, interim results of which are presented below (p35). The Steering Committee met at Tredegar House (courtesy of the curator, David Freeman) on 5.4.95. The Annual Meeting was held at Bristol

University on 18.11.95, thanks to the efforts of Vanessa Straker as local secretary. Professor Mike Fulford opened the presentations with a review of England's Coastal Heritage Project before members reported on the progress of their own endeavours.

International contacts

In 1994 exchange arrangements between Wales and Baden-Wurttemberg had brought Dr H. Schlichtherle and Dr Bodo Diekmann to visit the Severn Estuary, a momentous visit which led to the discovery of the Magor Pill boat (p85). In September 1995, Rick Turner and Martin Bell made a return visit to Landesdenkmalamt Baden-Wurttemberg and lectured on recent work in the Severn Estuary. The visit provided the opportunity to discuss common problems of wetland archaeology field techniques and site conservation in the context of remarkable prehistoric lakeside settlements around Lake Constance and peat sites on the Feddersee. The hospitality of German colleagues who arranged this visit is very much appreciated. During 1995 Dr Keith McConnochie University of South Australia also visited sites in the Estuary.

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