

# ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE SEVERN ESTUARY 1996

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(Secretary)

As in previous years, 1996 proved a busy one for many members faced with the diverse pressures of local authority re-organisation, widespread development, particularly associated with the now fully operative Second Severn Crossing, and extensive upgrading of sea-defences around the estuary. Long running issues such as aggregate extraction, and impacts from the Cardiff Bay Barrage continued to require attention.

## Planning Issues

Completion of the Second Severn Crossing combined with some rise in business confidence appears to have prompted the anticipated increase in development on the Levels. The establishment of new Unitary Authorities around the majority of the Estuary may also have contributed to an apparent increase in planning applications, some of which may have been held back awaiting re-organisation. These changes in the structure of local government have had an impact on archaeological curators, especially in England where new posts have been established as a result, but to date the transition does not seem to have added to the threat to the archaeological resource. In some instances, it would appear that new authorities with large areas of Levels within their territory may take a stronger line on preservation. It is to the credit of all curators that the archaeological value of the Estuary is now so widely accepted in discussions on planning control. The sheer number of curators with responsibility for some part of the Estuary has led to suggestions for the formation of a sub-committee in which they can discuss issues of common concern and advise the Steering Committee. This subject is likely to be considered during 1997.

At the time of writing, decision on the most recent planning application for the Gwent Levels Nature Reserve (formerly the 'alternative bird feeding grounds') on the Caldicot Level has yet to be resolved. This long running issue, over which many committee members have expressed concern, continues to cause heated debate. Field evaluation has highlighted the presence of near surface archaeology especially near Goldcliff (see Locock, this volume), but the most vociferous recent objections have come from other interest groups including land owners and local residents. The continuing erosion of agricultural land through development, at times through compulsory purchase orders, will inevitably alter the character of the Levels and is an understandable concern for farming communities. The more direct impact of the Cardiff

Bay Barrage, now under construction, on the fate of the wreck of the *Louisa* has led to useful discussions involving committee members. Hopefully the vessel will receive appropriate attention before, during and after impoundment of the Bay. The fate of the proposed new motorway link running south of Newport remains uncertain: there seems little prospect of action until larger political battles have been decided. Proposals for a Severnside Airport seem dormant if not abandoned: with the demise of Gwent County Council, there may not be the same degree of political support for such development now.

## Beyond Planning

On both sides of the Estuary, maintenance or enhancement of sea defences, usually under the auspices of the Environment Agency (formerly the National Rivers Authority), has required liaison and fieldwork, some of which is presented in this year's report (see M. Allen *et al*, this volume). Given substantial capital programmes to improve sea defences over the next few years, this will continue to be an area of concern and activity. Effective liaison between curators and Environment Agency sections remains crucial in addressing archaeological impacts of construction work. A number of recent cases of 'managed retreat' highlight a policy with potentially greater impacts on archaeological sites and landscapes which merits continued discussion between curators on the appropriate responses to such threats. Fieldwork, particularly on the foreshore adjacent to sea-defences (eg Neumann and Bell, this volume), can provide curators with the data necessary to make informed decisions about the archaeological threat.

The committee continues to promote archaeological interests and concerns through contributions to a variety of fora and initiatives including the Severn Estuary Strategy (SES), the Severn Estuary Conservation Group, the scoping phase of the Shoreline Management Plan, the joint SES/Environment Agency Issues Document, and the Welsh Office study into dredging and marine aggregate extraction.

## Meetings

Two field meetings took place during the year. Colin Green kindly organised a tour of post-medieval wrecks exposed on the foreshore and a visit to the restored trow, *the Spry*, while she was docked at Gloucester after

the Festival of the Sea. Martin Bell led a visit to the Magor Marsh Nature Reserve and intertidal sites in Redwick and Magor, Gwent. Derek Upton, true to form, provided an entertaining and informative tour of the reserve before Martin led participants via the church at Redwick down to the intertidal prehistoric structures on the peat shelf. The party then walked east to Magor Pill to view ongoing fieldwork on the site of the medieval boat and the plethora of fish traps exposed on the foreshore between Magor and Collister Pills (see Nayling, this volume). Field meetings continue to be well attended and are the safest and most effective way of allowing interested individuals to visit sites located in the hazardous intertidal zone. The enthusiastic and informed feedback of participants fully justifies the efforts of the organisers.

The Annual Meeting was held on 16th November 1996 at the Town Hall, Weston-Super-Mare with Vince Russett acting as Meeting Secretary. Many of the papers given at the meeting are published here. During the AGM, an alteration to the Constitution was made to reflect the growing responsibilities of Steering Committee members. We now have four officers: Chair, Secretary, Treasurer and Editor. Astrid Caseldine kindly agreed to continue her *de facto* role of dealing with finances and membership subscriptions. Martin Bell passed the baton of Editor over to Stephen Rippon. Martin's contribution to the Committee both as Secretary and editor of what has become a widely respected publication has been instrumental in raising the profile of the archaeology of the Estuary, placing it on an international footing. His continued presence on the Steering Committee will be invaluable. Vince Russett, Rick Turner and Derek Upton were re-elected as members of the Steering Committee and Richard Brunning (Somerset Levels and Moors) and Antony Firth (Wessex Archaeology) were elected as new members.

### Annual Report

This volume of *Archaeology in the Severn Estuary* once again contains a range of papers relating to both sides of the Estuary. Neumann and Bell describe the results of their recent intertidal survey on the Gwent side of the Estuary, which places the discoveries at Goldcliff in a regional context. Papers by Brunning, Aalbersberg and Allen *et al* then examine several recent archaeological and palaeoenvironmental investigations in parts of the Somerset Levels including further evidence for the long palaeoenvironmental sequence at Brean Down. Rippon presents an interim report on the latest season of fieldwork on the North Somerset Levels, which includes the important discovery of a late Saxon rural settlement. Gilbert's brief note describes fieldwork on several similar sites in that area.

Attention then returns to the Gwent Levels, with

a report on recent work at Goldcliff, inland of the sea wall, which has produced important evidence for a buried (probably Roman) landscape. John Allen looks at the history of the sea wall at Rumney Great Wharf, establishing a late medieval origin for the present structure. Nigel Nayling brings us up to date with progress on the Magor Pill wreck, as well as other evidence for activity around Magor Pill.

Moving up the Estuary Insole reports on excavations on a medieval site on the Avon Levels, while Green looks at aspects of the much neglected post medieval archaeology of the Estuary. Finally, Brett describes the expansion of Bristol Docks and some of the resulting archaeological discoveries.

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