

A PREHISTORIC TRACKWAY AT COLD HARBOUR PILL, REDWICK, GWENT

by Martin Locock

This paper reports the recording of a probable Bronze Age trackway at Coldharbour Pill, in the intertidal zone of the Gwent Levels, during 1987.

Introduction

A group of roundwood structures was exposed by spring storms in 1987 on the foreshore off Redwick, to the south west of Cold Harbour Pill (ST 431 841) (Figures 1-2). As part of a wider survey of the Gwent Levels, supported by Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments, a programme of survey and excavation was undertaken by the Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust (GGAT) in 1987-8, under the supervision of Stephen J Parry. The structures proved to form a short

stretch of trackway with oblique vertical stakes. Interim summaries of the Cold Harbour Pill site (GGAT excavation 121, also known as Cold Harbour Site A; Primary Record Number 4328g) were included in GGAT's *Half Yearly Review* and *Annual Review* (Marvell 1987; 1988), and the wider survey was reported briefly in *Archaeology in Wales* (Parry 1987; Parkhouse and Parry 1988), but no other publication was produced. The project archive was recently consulted as part of the Cadw pan-Wales coastal archaeology survey, and the present report was prepared, based on the primary records and interim reports.

The scope of the work was limited both by the tidal window of exposure and the shifting silts overlying the deposit. Fieldwork comprised

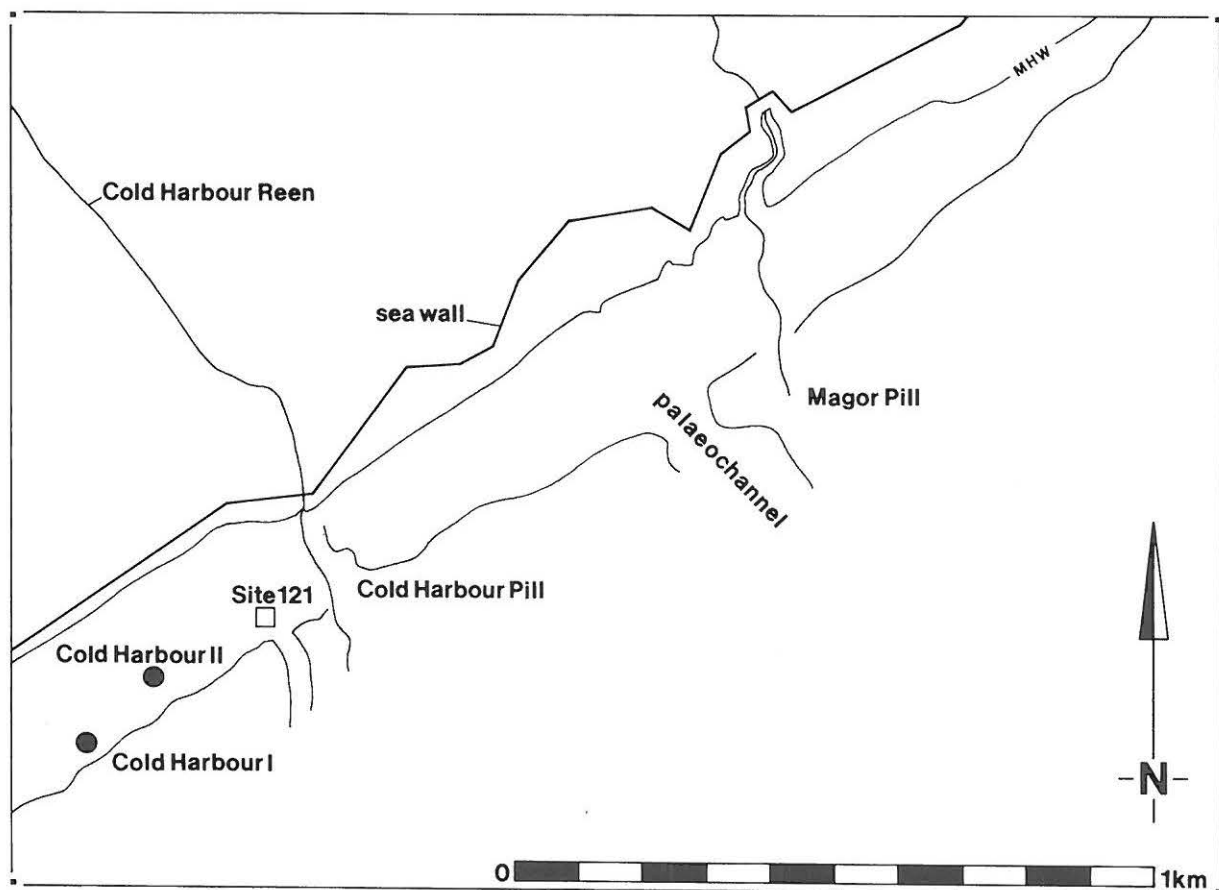


Figure 1: Cold Harbour Pill foreshore, showing extent of peat and known sites

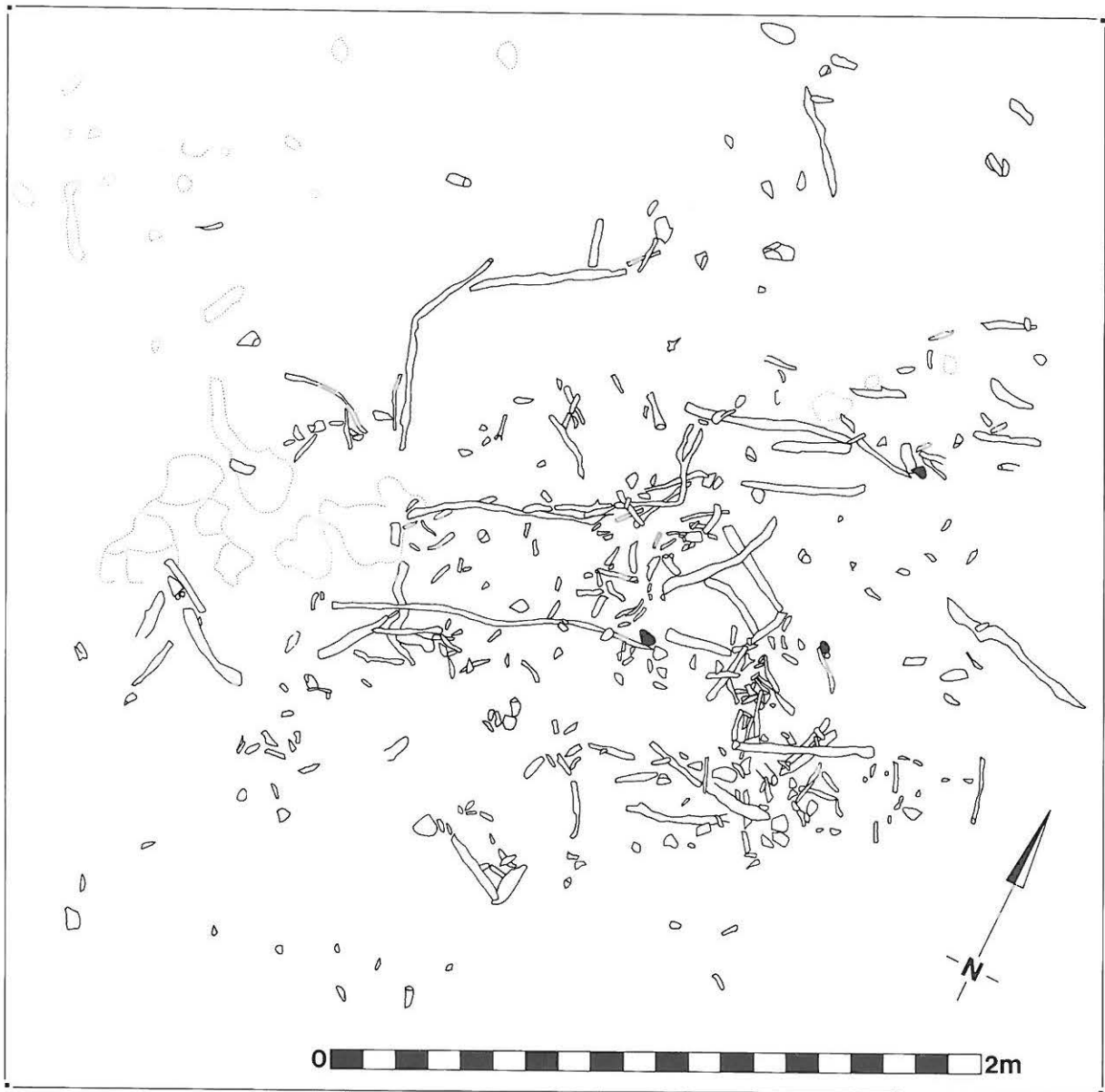


Figure 2: Surface of the Cold Harbour Pill track, as exposed in March 1987.

excavation of a 4 m x 4 m area, encompassing the area of vertical roundwood; this excavation revealed a substantial spread of horizontal timbers. Recording and lifting of the timbers was followed by the excavation of sections to expose vertical timbers.

Description

The structures were aligned east-west along the foreshore, at about 4 m OD, exposed by the erosion of overlying alluvial clay (001). The upper parts of the track lay within a thin layer of clay (003), 0.2 m thick, immediately overlying a peaty clay with phragmites reeds (005). At a

depth of 0.5 m, an organic horizon (characterised as charcoal) was noted, 0.1 m deep (006); below this was a further peaty clay (007). A further shallow phragmites peat layer (002) was recorded as partially sealing the clay (003) containing the track timbers, orientated northeast-southwest. A human footprint in clay (003) was recorded 10 m north of the trackway.

The upper part of the track, as exposed in the clay (003), comprised a layer of fine brushwood and brash laid on the peat surface (005). This was overlain by brushwood bundles laid longitudinally with some transverse roundwood, with the top surface being a compacted layer of fine brushwood and brash.

The inland (north) side was pegged with sharpened roundwood pegs. The lower part of the track, sealed by clay (003), comprised a series of pairs of sharpened stakes, driven in obliquely, creating V-shaped supports.

Over 200 individual wood elements were recorded, of which 65 were lifted and described in detail (no species identification was undertaken). The pieces of wood used varied in diameter from a typical 30 mm to a maximum of 65 mm, the longest surviving pieces being the stakes, 650 mm long. In addition to the sharpened ends, a few had had side-branches lopped off; many retained some bark.

In addition to the wood, hazelnut fragments were found along with two bones: a sheep/goat rib and a cow tooth. The finds are held at Newport Museum (NPTMG:88.40), along with a plaster cast of the footprint (NPTMG:88.169). Monolith samples through the sediments were taken, but were not analysed. No radiocarbon dating was undertaken.

Discussion

The location of the track, on the surface of a peat bed of the middle Wentlooge Formation, is broadly comparable with Bronze Age activity that has been noted along the peat shelf just south of the present site, at Cold Harbour 1 (Whittle 1989, 212-217; Primary Record Number 2530g) and Cold Harbour 2 (Neumann and Bell 1997, 14-15). Cold Harbour 1 was a scatter of 'pot boilers', Late Bronze Age pottery, charcoal, and a group of stakes, dated to 2900 +/- 60 bp (CAR-991). Cold Harbour 2 was a group of wooden structures within a palaeochannel, probably a fish-trap, dated to 2520 +/- 60 bp (SWAN-214).

The use of oblique paired stakes as a support for a linear feature is also found at the Sweet Track, Glastonbury, Somerset (dated by dendro-chronology to 3807/6 BC) (Hillam *et al.* 1990); at the time of excavation, this was the only known parallel.

In 1992, a feature similar to the Cold Harbour Pill track was found at Goldcliff (Bell 1992, figs. 6, 9 and 10; Bell 1993, figs. 29-30), recorded as trackway 1108, on the surface of a late prehistoric peat above the main Middle Wentlooge peat. It comprised an alignment of paired oblique posts, and ran for 100 m east from Structure 4, onto which brushwood was laid,

forming a trackway along the peat shelf. Structure 4 has been radiocarbon dated to the Iron Age (2140 +/- 60 bp, CAR-1435) (Bell 1993, 81). Wood identification from trackway 1108 showed that a wide range of species were used, with stakes of oak, elm, alder, birch and willow, and mainly alder brushwood (Johnson 1993, 108, table 11).

Although the Cold Harbour trackway cannot be directly dated, its stratigraphic location is diagnostic. It lies on top of the Middle Wentlooge peat, and is buried by a layer of alluvial clay and a thin layer of upper peat, probably the Early Iron Age peat seen at Goldcliff. There was a late prehistoric tidal transgression in the Severn Estuary (Bell and Neumann 1997, 100), with which clay 003 might be correlated. It would appear that the length of track at Cold Harbour Pill is likely to be of Bronze Age date, forming part of the active use of the peat shelf in the period of onset of transgression.

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