

# ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE SEVERN ESTUARY 1999

by Barbara Taylor  
(Secretary)

## Protecting the archaeological resource

Perhaps it appears gloomy to start this report with the message that another year's research work on the Severn Estuary seems to demonstrate further the challenges faced by archaeology and indeed the broader cultural heritage. So often decisions are being ratified without the benefit of adequate archaeological understanding in its wider estuarine context, thus rendering the effect of the pressure of substantial areas of industrial and housing development almost impossible to predict.

The concern lies not only with the visible landscape which dates back to Roman and medieval periods but also within the buried archaeology. The latter is a substantial resource, hidden by the sediments deposited during 12,000 years of sea level changes. Important artefacts have been located in recent years, including the Magor Pill and Barlands Farm boats, the Iron Age buildings and trackways at Goldcliff, the Uskmouth Mesolithic footprints and the Neolithic Sweet Track in Somerset, but these are but the tip of an archaeological iceberg, and it is the need to become more pro-active in identifying further sites that is one of the keynotes of this report.

There are several projects afoot that should improve the situation. One such development is the emergent 'Les Estuariales' Project, in which several of our members are engaged. It is hoped, should this become a successful proposal, that strategies can be implemented which will provide a major contribution to the ideology of sustainable development with respect to the rich archaeological resource of the region.

Another keynote is the wider dissemination of information on archaeological matters relating to the Severn Estuary, its Levels and also other tidal estuaries in Europe, and to this end the Committee is also collaborating with another major project currently taking place, the 'Severn Estuary Strategy'. Those of you who attended the AGM in November 1999 will remember the update given by the Project Manager, Janet Brown, when she confirmed that progress is being made towards the Consultation Draft of the 'Strategy for the Severn Estuary'. This document will encourage organisations such as ourselves to suggest new targets and actions that will

implement policy guidance through a partnership approach.

## The Annual Conference

This year saw another very successful annual conference, held at Thornbury, South Gloucestershire. The major event at the AGM was the election of a new Chair. Having served in this post in a highly dedicated manner, Professor John Allen felt that after five years, it was time to retire. Dr Martin Bell was then unanimously voted in as Chairman. We will, however, continue to have the benefit of John's continuing support as a member of our Steering Committee, and this report provides a good opportunity with which both to thank him for his sterling efforts and to welcome Martin as incoming Chairman.

We had our usual high standard of interesting papers at the annual conference, beginning with John Allen's treatise on the Magor Pill multi-period site with particular reference to the post-medieval pottery and shipping trade. This was followed by Vanessa Straker and Richard McDonnell on the work recording the newly exposed archaeology in Porlock Bay, while Martin Locock kept us apprised of Gwent-Glamorgan Archaeological Trust's continuing work on the late Bronze Age landscape at Cabot Park, Avonmouth. Just before lunch, we were treated to an account of intertidal archaeology in East Anglia, and particularly the "Sea-Henge Monument", by our distinguished guest speaker, Peter Murphy, from the University of East Anglia in Norwich. It is always of great benefit to be able to compare work on the Severn Estuary with that of elsewhere in Britain and it provided a healthy discussion afterwards.

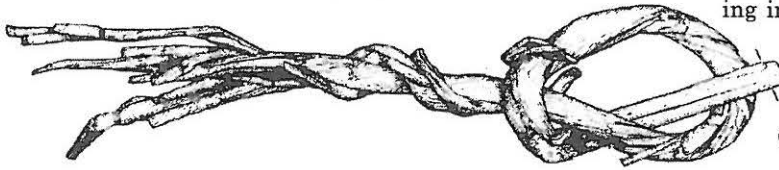
Again on the theme of the Bronze Age, Martin Bell evaluated the potential of the site at Redwick and its surroundings. A slightly different topic was introduced by Simon Haslett from the Bath Spa University on the mid-holocene stratigraphy and sea-level change in the Axe Valley on the Somerset Levels. Antony Firth of Wessex Archaeology kept us updated on the Bristol Channel Aggregates Project and its resources and constraints. The importance of dendrochronology, both from its past perceptive and

# CBA Research Reports on Welsh Archaeology

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## Prehistoric Intertidal Archaeology in the Welsh Severn Estuary by Martin Bell, Astrid Caseldine and Heike Neumann

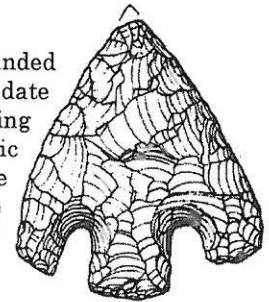
The Welsh Severn Estuary has perhaps the greatest concentration of prehistoric intertidal archaeology yet found in Britain – at Goldcliff, survey and excavations have revealed finds from the Mesolithic through to the Iron Age. The archaeological evidence is complemented by work on sediments, pollen, wood, and insects, and the Goldcliff data is put into a wider context by a survey of 25km of intertidal coast between Cardiff and the Second Severn Crossing. This evidence provides a new perspective on the prehistory of Wales and has helped in developing approaches to intertidal archaeology which will be of interest to those working in similar environments in many parts of the world. Further data is included on a CD-ROM.



RR120, ISBN 1 872414 11 7, 2000,  
440pp, 245 ill, £36 (normally £42)

## The Walton Basin Project: Excavation and Survey in a Prehistoric Landscape 1993–7 by Alex Gibson

The Walton Basin lies on the Welsh borderland and is a discrete lowland area surrounded by uplands. Numerous flint scatters and monuments have been discovered which date from the Mesolithic to the Roman invasion and indeed later. Prehistoric standing monuments comprise barrows, standing stones, and a stone circle. The Neolithic archaeology is particularly rich and includes two palisaded enclosures and at least one cursus, as well as extensive flint scatters. This report deals with the explorative archaeology of the prehistoric sites undertaken by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust.



RR118, ISBN 1 872414 95 8, 1999, 176pp, 73 ill, £28

## The Magor Pill Medieval Wreck by Nigel Nayling



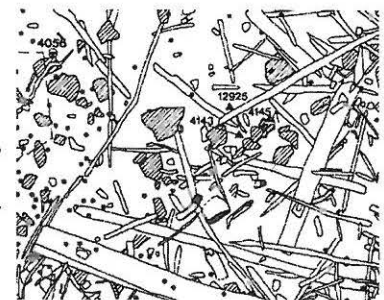
In 1994, the distorted timbers of a medieval boat came to light at Magor Pill, on the coast of the Gwent Levels, when storms washed away the sediments which had covered them since the boat ran aground about 700 years ago. This report charts the complex and difficult excavation and recovery of the boat and its cargo of iron ore. The boat's discovery emphasises the importance of creek ports, both in the Severn estuary and beyond, during the medieval period.

RR115, ISBN 1 872414 86 9, 1998, 174pp, 133 ill, £28

## Excavations at Caldicot, Gwent by Nigel Nayling and Astrid Caseldine

The site at Caldicot, located on the alluviated floodplain of the river Nedern, a small tributary of the Severn Estuary, south-west Britain, comprised a complex sequence of alluvium and palaeochannels dating from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages.

RR108, ISBN 1 872414 79 6, 1997, 350pp, 163 ill, £32



## Gwent Levels: the Evolution of a Wetland Landscape by Stephen Rippon

The Gwent Levels Historic Landscape Study has examined c 111 km<sup>2</sup> of reclaimed coastal alluvium on the northern side of the Severn Estuary in south west Britain, and the story of its creation is unfolded in this report.

RR105, ISBN 1 872414 63 X, 1996, 148pp, 58 ill, £18 (was £24)

All of these publications are available direct from the CBA. Prices are inclusive of postage. Council for British Archaeology, Bowes Morrell House, 111 Walmgate, York, YO1 9WA tel 01904 671417 email books@britarch.ac.uk website www.britarch.ac.uk fax 01904 671384

its future relevance, was discussed by Nigel Nayling. The final discussion of the day was the talk by Janet Brown previously alluded to.

### Development issues and new research initiatives

This year has seen a number of important steps being taken towards the publication of work carried out around the Estuary. Most notable is the publication of the monograph *Prehistoric Intertidal Archaeology in the Welsh Severn Estuary* (CBA Research Report 120) which Martin Bell co-authored with Astrid Caseldine and Heike Neumann. This major report provides a new perspective on the prehistory of Wales and helps to develop approaches to intertidal archaeology.

On the North Somerset Levels, the final publication of the North Somerset Levels Project (phase 1) is imminent, with the report on Late Iron Age and Romano-British sites shortly to appear in *Britannia*. Post-excavation work on the series of excavations in around the Romano-British and medieval settlements at Puxton has begun, though fieldwork continues most notably through a survey of standing buildings in the area.

On the Avonmouth Levels, the long delayed post-excavation work on the Second Severn Crossing (English side) has been put out to tender, whilst further assessment at Cabot Park is underway by the Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust.

On the Gwent Levels, the final stages of the evaluation of the proposed M4 Relief Road, has revealed two substantial sites: an Iron Age settlement at Magor and a medieval settlement next to Broad Street Common. Further research initiatives include the analysis of 1000 boreholes on the Gwent Levels, as well as littoral gravels along the inner margin of the Caldicot Levels (this by John Allen). John is also conducting a further project, with Simon Haslett, using foraminifera and Holocene plant macros from behind the sea wall at Redwick to explore the ability of the intertidal environment to respond to sea-level changes on a millennial scale.

Also at Redwick, funding has now been granted for work by Martin Bell on Building 4 and the wooden structures in palaeochannels between Cold Harbour Pill and Redwick. It is proposed that an open half day will be arranged as part of the Redwick field season. Redwick is also likely to be included in the proposed field meeting which is part of our forthcoming decadal celebration to inspect the

landscape, natural environment and inter-tidal archaeological sites in this area of the Gwent Levels (see below).

The news, however, has not all been good. There are grave concerns over the future of archaeology in North Somerset due to the proposed redundancy of the county archaeologist which will mean that expert archaeological advice will no longer be available in that planning office. A further specific concern is the proposed development at St Georges, near Weston-super-Mare, where an old planning permission without adequate archaeological evaluation has been activated, which threatens to destroy an 'infield' site of very similar character to nearby Puxton.

**Estuarine Archaeology: the Severn and Beyond** is the title that has been given to our tenth annual conference, which is to be residential and held at the Hill, Abergavenny, Monmouthshire. Several major themes have emerged from the past ten years of research into Severn Estuary and its reclaimed wetlands and these are to be addressed at the conference in such a way as to evaluate the success of a decade of multi-disciplinary investigations and to set an agenda for the next ten years. Topics will include sea-level change, and changing land forms, maritime archaeology, and environmental indicators and reconstruction. Reconstruction also will be considered in connection to understanding the historic landscape, and buried landscapes in wetland environments, along with wooden remains as an archaeological resource. Finally, the concluding session will be on the typicality of wetland sites. Each session will have one theme addressed by a member of the Committee, matched by a similar project from elsewhere in Britain and Europe. There will also be a conference dinner for members to socialise. Further details can be obtained from either the Secretary or the Treasurer.

This volume of **Archaeology in the Severn Estuary** contains the usual range of papers that reflect the diversity of research being conducted around the Estuary, and the geographical spread, from Swansea Bay to Lydney is particularly noteworthy. Interim reports are provided on a number of long-term research projects, notably Martin Bell's work in the intertidal zone of the Caldicot Level, Stephen Rippon's research on landscape development on the North Somerset Levels, and John Allen's investigations of the long

history of human activity around a major tidal inlet at Magor Pill. We are also updated on a number of on-going development-led excavations, notably Cabot Park on the Avonmouth Levels, and the Gwent Europark on the Caldicot Level.

Another major theme is fishing. Nigel Nayling presents the results of survey work at Magor and in Swansea Bay on medieval and later fishtraps, while John Allen and Martin Bell report on the discovery of an important early medieval find in a palaeochannel at Redwick.

Two papers show the value of synthesising older data. The identification of ephemeral buried land surfaces stratified within the upper part of the alluvial sequence has been a major achievement of the past few years, and Martin Locock brings together some of this material from the Gwent and Avonmouth Levels. Finally, Rupert Housley, Vanessa Straker and David Cope have re-analysed borehole data from the moors west of Glastonbury, that allow a series of maps to be drawn of how that landscape changed over time.

This overview of archaeology around the Severn Estuary aims to be as comprehensive as possible, and author apologises for the omission of any relevant material, both in this report and in our website ([www.selrc.dial.pipex.com](http://www.selrc.dial.pipex.com)). If this is to become properly effective, it requires up-to-date information to be disseminated through its members. The author would be very grateful to receive written input of any current or future initiatives.

Although this report may have commenced on a pessimistic note, in conclusion, it would seem that the participants in the Severn Estuary and its Levels, ourselves included, are finding ways to provide stronger responses to the challenges of balancing modern day development with the respect due to the archaeological heritage. This volume, like its predecessors, sets out to achieve the twin aims of identification and dissemination.

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