

CELEBRATION AND REFLECTION: THE SEVERN ESTUARY LEVELS AFTER TEN YEARS

by John Coles

The beginning of modern wetland archaeology in Britain can be traced back to the 1930s and the work of Grahame Clark in the Fenland of eastern England. Here, for the first time, archaeology was combined with palaeoenvironmental studies to present a unified picture of prehistoric occupation on the fen-edge. The Fenland Research Committee, established in Peterhouse, Cambridge, brought together a whole range of disciplines, and without the War of 1939-1945 there would certainly have been major impacts on the development of archaeology throughout Europe. As it was, the Committee was dismantled and never came together again after the War, although various individuals pursued their own agendas into the 1950s. Among them was Clark, a specialist by then of the Mesolithic period.

In the late 1940s, Clark began to seek a Mesolithic site that would consist of more than just pits and flints, and would match those sites in Denmark that had begun to turn up organic material as well as good environmental evidence. Due to a series of fortunate events, Clark was told of a discovery in Yorkshire of Mesolithic material, and by 1950 he was at work there, recovering a quite revolutionary array of objects of bone, antler, wood, bark and stone. The site, Star Carr, was promptly published, and wetland archaeology was 'on the map' in Britain. The focus of wetland archeology in Britain then shifted.

In the early 1960s, work began in the peatfields of the Somerset Levels, at first very tentatively and then, with government funding, more boldly. Here again the combination of archaeology and environmental studies were intimately linked, and the Somerset Levels Project operated, and published, from 1973 to 1989, building on the earlier individual work. With this as a model, the central agencies accepted the challenges posed by drainage and peat-cutting, and installed new wetland projects in the Fenland (1976-1996) the North-West (1990-1998), and the Humber lowlands (1992-2000). These have all conducted massive surveys and palaeo-

environmental studies, and major excavations in the Fenland. The results of the four projects have now appeared in a series of publications that are widely applauded throughout Europe and beyond. There is no other country that has established such all-embracing surveys of wetlands, and although much still remains to be done to assess and implement strategies for managing the remaining wetland resource, the database is formidable.

In other parts of the wetland world, surveys have not been as large-scale and comprehensive as the excavation projects, although there are notable exceptions in the Federsee and Bodensee in Germany, and in parts of the Alpine Lakes of France and Switzerland. Major projects of excavation have been established in many countries, and the results are quite outstanding. Among the themes pursued, that of settlement evolution around the lakeshores of the Alpine region has been significant, as has been the economic evidence recovered by extensive sampling and analyses of hunter-gatherer sites in Japan, and also the extraordinary preservation of organic artefacts on settlements along the north-west coast of North America. Evidence like this has greatly expanded our understanding of prehistoric activity in many parts of the world.

In the United Kingdom there have been a number of projects that have not been conducted in the glare of governmental inspectors who monitor, quite rightly, to ensure 'value for money'. Work in the Romney Marsh, in the Thames estuary and more minor works in other places have added a good deal to regional pictures, and the methodologies used have sometimes been innovative and always rewarding. One more major project, or rather a set of projects, has been operating for a decade under the benevolent eye of the Severn Estuary Levels Research Committee, although funding has come from several sources. CADW has supported major work at Caldicot (Nayling and Caseldine 1997), along the Welsh Severn Estuary (Bell, Caseldine and Neumann 2000), and in the Gwent Levels (Rippon 1996); all

of these reports have made important contributions to our knowledge of the region. Moreover, they have signalled the value to be gained from undertaking work in what probably appeared to be unpromising landscapes. In part rescue-driven, these projects developed into full-scale research studies and their influence has been considerable both here and abroad.

The Conference for which this paper was written was a celebratory event, marking ten years of existence and involvement of the Severn Estuary Levels Research Committee. Ten Annual Reports have been issued and they make for interesting reading (for the latest issue, Rippon 1999). Analysis of the contents is left to others to digest but even a brief sampling demonstrates the main ingredients. Above all else, landscape and environment are pre-eminent with about 40 contributions overall. Surveys with some accompanying excavations combine for about 30 reports, some of them quite detailed for an Annual Report; there are also rather brief reports on the Second Severn Crossing work. Trade and industry are subjects of about 10 reports, and wrecks are rarely noted. There are very few statements on strategy and preservation, but such major documents are rarely presented in Annual Reports; it may be timely now for a considered statement to be prepared, on the current and presumptive future position as regards monitoring and management of the resource. Glancing at the adjacent Somerset Levels Papers, I see no such statement either, and the Fenland monographs were not suitable for such an approach. Only the Humber Wetland monographs address the issue on a site-specific level.

In the next decade we will be faced by very significant problems. The first and most important will be obvious to all who work in wetlands of whatever sort: the continued assault on the evidence by degradation processes, whether these be drainage, dumping, ditching, erosion or development. We have already recognised and characterised nationally important archaeological and palaeo-environmental deposits within wetlands, and we have expended much effort in monitoring the physical, chemical and biological processes of damage and decay that operate upon the deposits. Not much in the way of determined action has so far been exerted to address the problems. Legal protection is often a palliative, easing the anxieties for a time, but it is not a solution that will arrest most of the damage; indeed, it can hinder efforts to amend the natural regimes to achieve a better balanced system.

In circumstances like these, where surveys have

identified the potential, and where protective efforts cannot succeed in the long term, we should accept the challenge and seize the opportunities, by excavation; it is surely that, or abandonment unseen. On the continent, the rewards of extensive, and expensive, excavations have been great – although some sites have proved to be less well-preserved than expected, others have yielded extraordinary results both in information and in physical remains.

A second problem for wetland archaeology in the next decade will be the need to develop increasingly sophisticated techniques to recover, indeed recognise, organic remains that become evermore fragile and ephemeral through time and decay. It is easy enough to visualise basketry and textiles as being vulnerable and difficult to recover, but other evidence that by its nature is less visible, such as organic residues on tools (the blood, sweat and tears of our ancestors included) is going to require particularly complex techniques to identify. And once identified, the conservation of such evidence as textiles and plant and animal residues, as well as more ordinary (to us) wooden objects, will continue to require scientific experiment and application of the highest degree of rigour. Already we cannot guarantee the survival of some toolmarks and signatures on wood from essential and well-tested conservation procedures, so here the necessity for utmost care in recording the evidence is paramount.

As more and more wet sites are discovered, through the ever-increasing greed and need for 'development', including flood relief channels, and as lowlands and wetlands come within the grasp of numerous agencies, the problems of heritage protection and conservation will become more and more acute. We archaeologists and heritage managers cannot assume that the case for preservation will be accepted except in the most acute and visually-rewarding instances. So priorities for preservation have to be drawn up, somehow, with a weighing of all the elements, from the politics of the economy to the philosophy of the significance of the cultural heritage. Much will inevitably be lost, much unseen, unless we make the case that identification and report need not curtail the progress of economic development. But we have to be prepared to stand up and assert our values and our judgements about what is truly important, either to explore or to preserve for the future. At an individual scale, the question of conservation needs to be addressed. How much to conserve from a site (or indeed of a site)? The point of conservation is to make available for

the future some of the evidence of the past as it has been identified and retrieved. The purpose of this operation is not often explored. A room full of once-interesting material, conserved at great expense, but now housed in poor conditions and barely visited either by the scholar or the public, is surely poor value to all, and the public will know it.

Although most of the projects noted here, the Severn Estuary Levels, the four English surveys, and some of those major schemes of survey and excavation in Ireland and on the continent, are good examples of a marriage of archaeology and palaeoenvironmental study, it still may appear to some of us that the combination is less than happy, unfulfilled in places. More than any other environment, archaeology in wetlands demands full integration within the studies of landform and evolution, and the days of sometimes grudging acceptance of the statutory pollen diagrams, with their expense of compilation, must come to an end. Long ago I suggested that the direction of an excavation in a wetland should be entrusted to the environmentalist, with the archaeologist consigned to an observation post; today, matters are mostly better, with shared interests and responsibilities.

This is surely not the place for a diatribe about the non-publication of results of wetland work, in view of the exemplary record of the Severn Estuary Levels impressive list of major and minor reports. But others with equal responsibilities have not risen to the challenge, opportunity and necessity of presenting their results to the community for evaluation, criticism and/or applause. The list of such recalcitrants and their sites will be well-known to most wetlanders and will not be presented here; after all, some may manage to complete their reports in this new millennium.

A continuing problem for all archaeologists lies in the need to present our results to those who in the final analysis pay for all our work. The public rightly demands to see what has been achieved, and must be given every opportunity to understand the importance of what we do. Scholarly publications are not the answer, and display of objects without context in museum cases is not satisfactory either. Wetlands can yield such well-preserved material and evidence of all sorts that presentation of results should be easy; it never is. Nonetheless, well-conceived reconstructions and dramatic displays, hands-on material and activities, question and answer projects, experimentation and 'living exhibits' are all made possible by the variety and condition of evidence contained in wetlands. There are excellent

examples of capitalisation at Biskupin in Poland, in the French, German and Swiss Alpine Lakes and further afield in Japan and west coast America. We do not yet have comparable presentations here in the United Kingdom although several more modest exposures have succeeded in interesting and educating a large number of people, but it is time for us to look abroad for ideas, and to find the resources for truly innovative presentations.

A final comment. Wetland archaeology has succeeded in the recovery and identification of a large range of different kinds of evidence, both domestic and environmental. The quantities of all sorts have often been overwhelming, so the tendency has been to devote most energies into the processing of the evidence into its logical sequences, to build up the evidence for context and association, and to seek the patterns of behaviour that are often so well-preserved by the wetland. This is all to the good, but almost all of these patterns refer to what I like to call the Commoners, the ordinary folk who made up the bulk of the communities of the past. The processes of evolution and change, and identification of those who helped drive them, are not so often addressed in our work. These aspects remain a challenge for the future.

Bibliography

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