

ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE SEVERN ESTUARY 2002

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WRECK LESSONS

Since the last publication there have been numerous developments in the archaeology of the estuary. The Newport boat has been in the headlines on many occasions, not always perhaps for the right reasons. Although the end result of the saga is not going to be the ideal one, the vast majority of the vessel was recorded and lifted and the timbers will be analysed and conserved. This was largely due to the 'Save our Ship' (later 'Save our Stern') campaigners of Newport who demonstrated the popularity and passion that the archaeology of the area can generate.

As I write this piece, another historic wreck is heading for an uncertain future at the hands of a local council. In this case the vessel in question, the 'Nornen', was only built in 1876 and was wrecked on Berrow Sands in Bridgwater Bay 1897. It is a much loved feature of the inter-tidal flats, has been visited by countless numbers of people over the years and even features on the front cover of the parish leaflet. Now Sedgemoor District Council have decided that it has suddenly become a health and safety hazard and are planning to remove it, after archaeological recording. This has caused a storm of local protest that serves as a reminder of the interest and pride that communities have in their local heritage.

SELRC will have to rise to the challenges of nurturing and satisfying this interest under a new Chair. Professor Martin Bell stood down as chair after many years of successful service culminating in the Decadal Conference and the major publication that resulted from it. Martin has not given up his long-term research in the area however, and will be keeping a keen eye on the workings of the committee. His successor, Nigel Nayling will already be known to most members as a previous SELRC committee member and for

his many research projects, lately including work on the Newport ship.

Barbara Taylor has also stepped down as Secretary after many years of excellent work keeping SELRC going, organising the AGMs and establishing the SELRC website. She will be sadly missed, especially as the new Secretary is not likely to do the job half as well as she did! She will be continuing to maintain and update the website however, and it is hoped that it will be used more in future as a way of publicising discoveries and issues and generating interest and new members. So take the opportunity to add to your favourites!

AGM AND MEETINGS IN 2002

The 2002 annual conference and AGM was held in the National Museum in Cardiff and was a roaring success for which thanks are due especially to Elizabeth Walker and Barbara Taylor. The guest speaker was Garry Momber who gave a fascinating presentation on the archaeology and landscapes that are being discovered beneath the murky water of the Solent. The other highlight was the presentations by Kate Howell and Nigel Nayling on the Newport Boat.

The other speakers covered a large time frame beginning with Martin Bell's work on the Mesolithic activity at Goldcliff and Redwick and ending up with Colin Green's overview of travel and trade in the Severn Sea in more recent times. In between were fascinating talks by Elizabeth Walker on Burry Holmes, Rick Turner on recent research at Chepstow Castle, Martin Locock on medieval reclamation at several recently excavated sites, and a presentation by Richard Brunning on why not to excavate Roman salterns in February.

A successful SELRC meeting was had on Flat Holm looking at the C19th and C20th fortifications and other structures. There was also time to experience the geology and wildlife of the island and the joys of crossing the waters of the Severn estuary in a small vessel.

THE 2003 ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND AGM

This year's conference will be held at Bristol University Geography Department on Saturday the 15th of November. All members should already have had notice through the post but if not, details are available from the Secretary. The speaker list will be posted on the society website, for those who haven't read the first few paragraphs. We are very lucky to have as a guest speaker Tom McErlean of the Centre for Maritime Archaeology in the University of Ulster, who will be giving a presentation on the amazing results of the Strangford Lough archaeological survey (now available as a huge but remarkably cheap book).

Dr. Tony Firth of Wessex Archaeology, a long term SELRC member, will also be presenting a paper on recent work on several aggregate extraction sites around the country that hold many lessons for the Severn. Other speakers will be covering recent research in the estuary, including prospection techniques in wetlands, Mesolithic activity on the coast fringe of Exmoor and recent assessment of Somerset's wetland archaeology.

THIS VOLUME

This volume contains a wide variety of papers, some of which were presented in the 2002 AGM and some entirely new. One of the main themes is the Mesolithic period in the estuary, centered around the work of Martin Bell and others at Redwick and Goldcliff. The combination of lithics, bones, environmental evidence, submerged forests and human and animal footprints show the great potential of the inter-tidal zone for the study of this period.

Environmental evidence is always important on sites in and around the Severn Estuary and features highly in many papers concerned with recent work at Wentlooge, Katherine Farm at Avonmouth and Severnside in

S Gloucs. By understanding the changing prehistoric environments through such studies we can unravel the backdrop against which human activity took place.

By the Roman period there was much modification of the wetlands by humans and two papers re-examine the evidence for this on either side of the estuary. John Allen reconsiders the context of the Goldcliff Stone and Jan Grove examines part of the extensive Roman field systems, settlements and canals of the Axe valley.

For the Medieval period Barry Lane and Steve Rippon examine the reclamation of 'Gooseland' in the Axe valley and Meare in the Brue valley respectively. Of a similar date is the fascinating medieval sub-tidal water cistern at Chepstow Castle in Rick Turner's paper. A paper on the Old Passage at Aust by John Allen brings the post-medieval period into the volume, together with the shorter note exploring the possibility that the great flood of 1607 was caused by a tsunami.

The publication is expensive to produce and would be a major strain on the very limited resources of SELRC if it were not for the publication grant aid received. For this volume many thanks are due to CADW (for Redwick and Chepstow Castle papers), Wessex Water (Katherine's Farm), Wessex Archaeology (Severnside) and Forestry Research (Community Woodland paper).

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

A new SELRC leaflet has now been created and produced ready for distribution. Its mission is to generate more interest and awareness in and of the archaeological resource and to publicise the role of SELRC. It has been well designed by CADW, looks excellent and can be unfolded to make a dramatic poster. This project would not have happened without the determination of Rick Turner. Every member will get one but if you want more copies to distribute at society meetings just contact the Secretary and they will be posted to you.

Development work is continuing apace all around the estuary, but most especially along the

new motorway routes in S. Wales and the M5/M4 area on the English side. Many urban areas are significantly expanding and new archaeological discoveries will no doubt result, such as the recent Roman salterns at the edge of Weston-super-Mare.

Elsewhere archaeological remains are being put at risk by other factors such as agricultural drainage or inter-tidal erosion. These issues are harder to deal with because there is usually no money to mitigate the problem but SELRC is well positioned to argue and campaign for appropriate action. These threats are being assessed in Somerset by a number of projects financed by English Heritage, the Environment Agency and Somerset County Council. Many SELRC members will also be continuing with research projects in the area, such as Martin Bell and Nigel Nayling's work on Mesolithic activity in the inter-tidal area.

The next couple of years could be interesting times in the estuary because some EU money is likely to become available for heritage projects in the estuary through the Severn Estuary Partnership. At the same time English Heritage are pushing through a wetlands strategy, one part of which is an inventory of the most important wetland sites and landscapes. The English side of the Severn Estuary figures very highly in this.

Many possibilities lie ahead for the SELRC and its members over the coming year. Hopefully the new initiatives and projects will help to raise awareness of the heritage of the area and of SELRC.

