

# ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE SEVERN ESTUARY 2005

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Is archaeology relevant to life in the present day? Discuss in not more than 500 words. That's a topic that archaeologists are sometimes forced to deal with in order to justify funding, and sometimes even their jobs. A more interesting question is how can present day experiences enhance our understanding of the distant past?

The news items of the last two years have included lots of environmental events such as the Asian tsunami, melting of the ice caps, rising sea levels and warming seas producing extreme weather conditions such as the devastating hurricane in New Orleans. The archaeological record is full of environmental changes that were just as dramatic or even more so. The incredibly rapid sea level rise of the early Mesolithic period can perhaps be appreciated better now that the world may be facing something similar again and the drama of the Severn tsunami of 1607 is easier to appreciate after we have all seen film of what such waves can do. Beetle remains found beside the Sweet Track suggest that the climate back in 3,806 BC was a tad more continental than today with summers slightly hotter and winters slightly colder. If the climate change predictions are right we may all live to find out what difference that will make.

In the Severn Estuary we are doubly lucky to have a wealth of information on past climate and sea level change, and the experts from various Universities to decipher it. That is one reason why the archaeology of the estuary continues to be so important and so intriguing.

## WHAT'S GOING ON IN SEVERN ESTUARY ARCHAEOLOGY?

Lots of new sites are being discovered all the time through development related work including Roman salterns near Weston-Super-Mare, and some very early wooden Neolithic causeways and

possible fish traps from a landfill site at Walpole. Post excavation work is ongoing many projects including the Newport Boat, whose timbers are currently being recorded using the latest technology, and Chepstow Waterfront where several small scale trenches are producing big answers to questions about the town's development.

Numerous large scale developments are proposed or ongoing, that will should produce interesting archaeological results, the most notable being the M4 relief road in South Wales, expansion of Gwent Europark, redevelopment of Llanwern steel works, new port facilities around Avonmouth and enhancement of flood defences in numerous places around the estuary.

The Severn is still a hot spot for archaeological research including Martin Bell's work on the Mesolithic site at Goldcliff East, and several people who are studying different aspects of the submerged forests of the Severn. New techniques are developing such as LIDAR (see the River Siger article in this volume), that is proving useful for detecting archaeological sites and relic river channels. Tree-ring and radiocarbon dating work on the fish traps on Stert Flats (Somerset) have shown construction in the late Saxon, medieval and post-medieval periods, a millennium of fishing structures complementing the excellent dating information already obtained from the Welsh side of the estuary. Landscape research involving coring and environmental analysis by several Universities is ongoing in many locations.

A Rapid Coastal Zone Assessment Project, funded by English Heritage, has begun looking at paper and aerial photographic information for the English coast of the Severn. This will hopefully be followed by a phase 2 project undertaking prioritised fieldwork and research along that coast, complementing the similar work that CADW have

already funded for the Welsh side.

### **HOW IS SELRC DOING?**

Just fine, thank you very much for asking. Membership is remaining healthy and at the moment the bank balance is fine, helped by two of our most successful ever AGMs and conferences in Chepstow. Those successes have prompted SELRC to return to the same venue this year. As one member pointed out, it is about as close to neutral ground as it is possible to get in the estuary, the bridges themselves being a tad too windswept as a venue.

A bid to fund a new website for SELRC has gone into the Awards For All lottery fund and an answer should be forthcoming in May. CADW and English Heritage have kindly offered some match funding towards the bid.

Paul Davis (Editor), Julie Jones (Treasurer) and Nigel Nayling (Chairman) are standing down from the Committee after doing excellent work for SELRC over many years. Finding replacements has been hard in the past but we have been lucky this time around. The new joint editors are John Allen and Alex Brown (both of Reading University), Emma Tetlow (Birmingham University) has volunteered to be Treasurer and Steve Rippon (Exeter University) to be Chairman. The posts of Publications Officer and Secretary are also due for replacement at this years AGM but so far no one has stepped forward for election. This is your chance to get involved in the inner workings of SELRC so don't be shy – volunteer yourself, before you are volunteered by someone else! Please contact me if you would like to volunteer or propose someone.