

ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE SEVERN ESTUARY 2009

By Paul Driscoll

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As my first year tenure as Secretary draws to a close I am thankful for the opportunity to be involved in such a dynamic and rich historic environment. My introduction to the Severn Levels has been rapid, but both educational and enjoyable, even if a little bewildering at times.

The year has seen the new SELRC website go live, and the new look web presence can be viewed at www.selrc.org.uk. Training has taken place on the management of the new website and although some maintenance is needed to remove a few glitches (such as missing links) these are easily remedied and the new internet presence will be important for letting people know about the research taking place within the Levels.

The AGM and annual conference took place once more at the Drill Hall in Chepstow, where speakers covered a range of subjects from the implications of climate change on estuarine and coastal historic environments to the Severn Estuary Rapid Coastal Zone Assessment. Ron Cowell, Curator of Prehistoric Archaeology at the National Museums Liverpool gave the keynote lecture on Prehistoric Coastal Change and settlement around Liverpool Bay. A debt of thanks is owed to those who spoke and helped on the day, especially to our seasoned tea-men Rick and Richard.

The current Steering Committee is as follows: Chairman, Steve Rippon (Exeter University); Secretary, Paul Driscoll (South Gloucestershire Council); Joint Editors, John Allen and Alex Brown (both University of Reading); Treasurer, Emma Tetlow (Headland Archaeology); Publications Officer, Scott Timpany (Headland Archaeology). The other steering committee members are Martin Bell (Reading University), Richard Brunning (Somerset CC), David Haigh (S. Glos. CC), Rob Iles (English Heritage), Bob Jones (Bristol CC),

Neil Maylan (GGAT), Nigel Nayling (Lampeter University), Vanessa Straker (English Heritage), Rick Turner (CADW), Elizabeth Walker (National Museums and Galleries of Wales) and Jan Wills (Glos. CC).

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There have been some significant events in the last year, notably the workshops on the impact of the proposed Severn Barrage on the Historic Environment. Data has been collated and we currently await the final documents on the implications the various schemes will have on the archaeological resource. The Severn is the second largest tidal range in the world and at least one of the five schemes (Brean Down to Lavernock) could generate 5% of the UK's energy needs, using this natural resource. The consultation involved considering both the direct (construction) and indirect (changing water levels etc) effects of the five schemes. Voices were heard and issues raised and we await the outcome.

Further energy schemes, notably Nuclear Power Stations, are proposed within the Levels at Hinkley Point and the subject of archaeological work.

More worryingly, a major development project occurred at Severnside on land with planning consents that were granted in 1957. This was long before archaeology was a consideration and therefore the effects of development cannot be mitigated by planning law, meaning the possible destruction of unrecorded heritage. Other proposed developments have been earmarked within the same block of land.

On other matters, the annual AGM and conference will not be taking place as usual in 2010. Instead the SELRC will be organising a 3-day conference entitled *Fish and Ships* to be held at the National Museum of Wales in September. Details will be released shortly and keep checking the website for an update.

Research continues to flourish within the area as commercial work and academic study contribute towards a better knowledge of the Levels. The Severn Estuary Rapid Coastal Zone Assessment Survey, for example, has progressed to fieldwork stage after the highly successful desk-based assessment phase.

On Saturday 6th June 2009, the SELRC undertook its annual fieldtrip, this time to Lydney Victorian Harbour and Roman Temple. Lydney Docks have recently been restored by the Environment Agency in partnership with English Heritage, Gloucestershire County Council, Forest of Dean District Council and Lydney Town Council. Ed Wilson, archaeologist for the Environment Agency who led the restoration, guided SELRC members around the newly renovated historic docks. This was followed in the afternoon by a tour of the Roman Temple complex at Lydney Park, which was led by Professor John Allen. This visit was by kind permission of Lord Bledisloe.

And finally, should anyone be concerned about how well regarded the historic environment of the Severn is, nationally or internationally, as I finish writing this report I have just received an enquiry on archaeology within the Levels from Chicago, USA.