

**An archaeological watching brief at
The Underfleet, Seaton, Devon**

Centred on NGR: SY 2463 9015

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Report to Emlor Homes Ltd

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Summary statement

A planning application was submitted to East Devon County Council for a residential development on land to the west of The Underfleet, Seaton, Devon. An archaeological watching brief was requested by the local authority as part of the planning consent. This was the third phase of archaeological work, following on from a desk-based assessment and an archaeological evaluation. The work was carried out by C K Currie of CKC Archaeology for Emlor Homes Ltd.

This phase of the watching brief failed to recover any evidence for further archaeological features in the area covered. Further finds of moderate quantities of prehistoric flint seemed to confirm earlier views that the site was used as a temporary base on the edge of the estuary whilst waiting for favourable tidal conditions for fishing/hunting. There was no evidence for permanent settlement here. Likewise there was no evidence for medieval activity to suggest contemporary settlement in the close vicinity.

An archaeological watching brief at The Underfleet, Seaton, Devon (centred on NGR: SY 2463 9015)

This report has been written based on the format suggested by English Heritage in *The management of archaeological projects* (London, 1992, revised edition). The ordering of information follows the guidelines given in this document, although alterations may have been made to fit in with the particular requirements of the work. This report also pays attention to the Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (Birmingham, 1994).

1.0 Introduction (Fig 1)

A planning application was submitted to East Devon County Council for a residential development on land to the west of The Underfleet, Seaton, Devon. An archaeological watching brief was requested by the local authority as part of the planning consent. This was the third phase of archaeological work, following on from a desk-based assessment and an archaeological evaluation. The work was carried out by C K Currie of CKC Archaeology for Emlor Homes Ltd.

The development site is presently occupied by a car park and a pasture field about 200m inland from the sea. A previous archaeological evaluation recovered a number of prehistoric worked flints, suggesting contemporary activity on the site (Currie 2001a). The watching brief was required in the hope of learning more about this activity.

This watching brief was the first part of a two part exercise, looking at the results of a general topsoil strip plus the excavation of the footprint of the main building on the site, a large block of flats. The second part of the watching brief is expected to look at further small-scale topsoil strip, plus the excavation of the foundations for a small group of cottages. This is not expected to take place for some months. The first part of the watching brief is reported on in this report. The work was carried out on Tuesday 24th July 2001 in dry and fine conditions.

2.0 Historical background

The study area lies in an area of former curved plots, which runs between Fore Street and the edge of Seaton Marshes in Seaton, Devon. It is about 50m east of the Town Hall, centred on NGR SY 2463 9015, and covers about 0.6 hectare. The area is covered by a superficial layer of Valley Gravels, overlying Mercia Mudstone (Keuper Marl), situated on the west edge of the tidal floodplain of the River Axe. To the east and west of the Axe Valley are Clay-with-Flints overlying Cretaceous Chalk.

Saltworking was known to have been carried out at in the Axe estuary around Seaton during late Saxon times until at least the 12th century, with a revival of working taking place in the 18th and 19th centuries. The salt working probably took place to the east in Seaton Marshes, but it is possible that features associated with the industry spilled over into the study area. The Underfleet itself may have been associated with an early trackway (Dixon & Turton 1995).

Seaton was reputed to be a town in the medieval period. An estate is mentioned under this name in a Saxon charter of 1005 (Sawyer 1968, no 910). The name derives from the 'tun' or 'settlement by the sea' (Ekwall 1960, 410). Its location, sheltered by Beer Head, made it a favourable position for a small medieval port, and associated industries may have grown up therein. There is also plentiful evidence for Roman activity in the area, with nearby Beer stone being quarried from that period onwards. On the opposite side of the estuary is a hillfort on Hawkesdown Hill, suggesting that the mouth of the river was recognised as an important place from prehistoric times.

Further details of the area's history and archaeology are reported in a desk-based assessment of the site by Currie (2000). An archaeological evaluation recovered a reasonable assemblage of prehistoric flint. This suggested that the site may have been used as an outlying hunting/fishing base serving an unlocated settlement nearby (Currie 2001a).

3.0 Strategy

The strategy for this evaluation is outlined in the project design issued by Currie (2001b). Readers are referred to this document for further information. Copies can be seen in the Devon County Council Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) at County Hall, Exeter. The site code was 'S/UF', standing for Seaton Underfleet. The watching brief was of a localised nature, being restricted to the pasture field in the north part of the site. The south part of the site was covered by a car park, made up of dumped materials. Engineer's test pits here had suggested that this part of the site was much disturbed. Context numbers and photograph number allocation runs on from the previous evaluation.

4.0 Results

The footprint for the main block of flats in this development was unusual. It required the drilling of over 500 holes to take supports for concrete piles. Each hole was about 400mm in diameter, and immediately filled with stone chippings as part of the drilling process. Consequently there was nothing for an archaeologists to see during this process, although the procedure was seen with interest during other works on site.

The watching brief was confined to the north part of the site (approximately 60%) under pasture. The southern part of the site had been built up with contaminated soil to a depth of nearly 3m in the past and had served as a temporary unmade car park. The turf and part of the topsoil had been stripped from the northern part of the site prior to the archaeologist's arrival, and part of this area had been covered by contaminated soil moved from the old car park prior to removal from site. Furthermore, the area at the highest part of the site (on the far west) had not been stripped of turf but had been left untouched. It is proposed to build a small group of cottages here, using conventional strip foundations. This work is not scheduled for some time (possibly over six months time), when it will be undertaken by a different groundworks' contractor. It is hoped that this area can be reported in a separate document.

The turf/topsoil strip left conditions similar to those normally encountered during field walking, and this allowed a scan of the remaining areas of former pasture. No features were

visible in the area scanned but a number of pieces of worked flint were collected here, together with a smaller number coming from the dumped turf/topsoil. Following this collection, an area about 20m by 10m was stripped by machine down through two intermediate gravel layers [contexts 18 & 19] to the underlying red-brown clay [context 20] as preparation for part of the block of flats. This was the only area treated in this way within the area of interest, piling being undertaken elsewhere. No features were seen during this stripping, although a small number of worked flints were recovered from residual contexts.

5.0 Discussion

No features were seen following the topsoil strip, or during the reduction of ground levels for the building footprint. It should be noted that most of the work undertaken during these observations were in the vicinity of trench 2 during the previous evaluation (Currie 2001a). This was an area where no archaeological material was found. The area where features were found during the previous work tended not to be disturbed during this phase. The area around trench 1 (where a ditch was found) will not be disturbed during this phase, being the area proposed for cottages. The area around trench 3 had the turf and about 200mm of topsoil removed and was then used to dump soil from the rest of the site. Part of this area was scanned for features and artefacts before the dumping extended over it. It is understood that no further disturbance will be undertaken in this area, as it is to be used for car parking.

The only archaeological evidence recovered during this exercise was unstratified or residual. This included 27 pieces of worked flint. This was fairly evenly distributed over the area observed, with a tendency for more to be found on the higher and lower parts of the site (that is near trenches 1 and 3 of the previous evaluation). Fewer flints were found in the vicinity of trench 2, although why this was so uncertain as it stands between trenches 1 and 3. Only one piece of possible late medieval/early post-medieval pottery was found, the rest of the pottery assemblage being 19th-century or later. The latter was not collected.

The flint assemblage was similar to that found during the previous evaluation. Details are given in section 7.1 below. Scrapers seemed to dominated the tools, with a number of core fragments suggesting on-site flint working. The finds seem to confirm the view expressed following the evaluation: that the site was not used for habitation, but could have been an area where prehistoric peoples collected whilst waiting for the tide in the estuary to allow them to fish/hunt/trap therein. Whilst waiting for the tide these peoples seemed to have passed their time making tools, and possibly carrying out tasks such as preparing catches for eating or other forms of exploitation. The present observations found no evidence for medieval settlement or salt-making activity in this area.

6.0 Conclusions

This phase of the watching brief failed to recover any evidence for further archaeological features in the area covered. Further finds of moderate quantities of prehistoric flint seemed to confirm earlier views that the site was used as a temporary base on the edge of the estuary whilst waiting for favourable tidal conditions for fishing/hunting. There was no evidence for permanent settlement here. Likewise there was no evidence for medieval activity to suggest contemporary settlement in the close vicinity.

7.0 The finds

7.1 Worked flint

27 pieces of worked flint was collected from the site. All were from residual contexts, and were either casual losses or discarded material following working on site. The assemblage, with one exception, comprised black flint not normally found on this site. The one exception was a heavily patinated piece that seems to have been a much-blunted point, possibly the result of excessive use. The worked flint broke down into the following categories, and is roughly similar to that found during the previous evaluation (Currie 2001a). The material seems to be mainly Neolithic in date, with some possible Mesolithic-type blades.

Worked flint type	number of pieces
Waste flakes	13
Core or core fragments	4
Points?	1
Awl/scrapper multi-tools	2
Blades	2
Scrapers	5
Total	27

7.2 Pottery

Only one piece of pottery was collected. This was an oxidised body sherd of moderately sandy fabric, with traces of green glaze on one side, about 10 grms in weight. Similar to Totnes type-wares, this fabric type is common throughout Devon during the later medieval or early post-medieval period. There were no diagnostic features to allow closer dating. The rest of the ceramic material on the site comprised 19th- and 20th-century types. These were not collected.

8.0 Copyright

C K Currie (trading as CKC Archaeology) shall retain full copyright of any commissioned reports or other project documents written by himself or his agents, under the *Copyright, Designs and Patents Act* of 1988 with all rights reserved; excepting that it hereby provides an exclusive licence to the client and the local Planning Authorities for the use of such documents by them in all matters directly relating to the project as described in the project design, as well as for *bona fide* research purposes.

9.0 Archive

The archive for this work will be deposited with a local museum recommended by the local authority or their advisers. Copies of the report were lodged with the client, the Devon County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) at County Hall, Exeter, and the National Monuments Record in Swindon, Wiltshire.

10.0 Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks are given to all those involved with this project. Carl Tunnicliffe, Design Manager for Emlor Homes, provided plans, and liaised with the various parties on site. The groundworkers are thanked for their co-operation. The staff of the Devon Record Office provided the author with access to historic maps of the area. Ann Marie Dick, of the Archaeological Section of Devon County Council, monitored the site on behalf of the local planning authority.

11.0 References

C K Currie, *An archaeological desk-based assessment of The Underfleet, Seaton, Devon*, unpublished client report to Emlor Homes Ltd, 2000

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E Ekwall, *The concise Oxford dictionary of English place-names*, Oxford, 1960 (4th ed)

English Heritage, *The management of archaeological projects*, London, 1992 (revised edition).

Institute of Field Archaeologists, *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief*, Birmingham, 1993.

P H Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon charters. An annotated list and bibliography*, London, 1968

Appendix 1: key to contexts excavated

The context numbers for this phase of the work continue on from the previous evaluation (Currie 2001a). The numbers used for that earlier project were context numbers 01-17.

Context	Description	Munsell Colour
18	gravel layer	7.5YR 3/3
19	gravel layer	10YR 4/6
20	clay layer	2.5YR 3/4

Appendix 2: catalogue of photographs taken

Photographs were taken in both colour slide and monochrome print. In the archive the colour slides are prefixed with the site code (S/UF), followed by 'S' to indicate photograph type, eg S/UF/S/* (* indicating the photograph number). Monochrome prints are number S/UF/M/*, following the same procedure as for slides.

The photograph numbers continue on from the previous phase of work on this site. The numbers used for that earlier project were 1-20.

Photo number	Description
21	Excavation of footprint area for flats at 12.25, midway through process from S
22	ditto
23	Excavation of footprint area of flats at 16.00, nearing completion from S
24	ditto

Appendix 3: glossary of archaeological terms

Archaeology: the study of man's past by means of the material relics he has left behind him. By material relics, this means both materials buried within the soil (artefacts and remains of structures), and those surviving above the surface such as buildings, structures (e.g. stone circles) and earthworks (e.g. hillforts, old field boundaries etc.). Even the study of old tree or shrub alignments, where they have been artificially planted in the past, can give vital information on past activity.

Artefacts: any object made by man that finds itself discarded (usually as a broken object) or lost in the soil. The most common finds are usually pottery sherds, or waste flint flakes from prehistoric stone tool making.

Context: a number given to a unit of archaeological recording. This can include a layer, a cut, a fill of a cut, a surface or a structure.

Cut: usually used to mean an excavation made in the past. The 'hole' or cut existed in time as a void, before later being backfilled with soil. Archaeologists give a context number to the empty hole, as well as the backfilled feature (called the 'fill').

Desk-based assessment: an assessment of a known or potential archaeological resource within a specific land unit or area, consisting of a collation of existing written or graphic information, to identify the likely character, extent and relative quality of the actual or potential resource.

Evaluation: a limited programme of intrusive fieldwork (mainly test-trenching) which determines the presence or absence of archaeological features, structures, deposits, artefacts or ecofacts within a specified land unit or area. If they are present, this will define their character, extent, and relative quality, and allow an assessment of their worth in local, regional and national terms.

Munsell colour: an objective method of defining soil colour using a specially designed colour chart for soils. The reading defines hue (an objective description of colour; eg YR means yellow-red), value (darkness or lightness of the colour) and chroma (the greyness or purity of the colour). For example 10YR 3/2 is a dark grey-brown.

Natural [layer]: in archaeological reports, this is a layer that has been formed by natural process, usually underlying man-made disturbance.

Period: time periods within British chronology are usually defined as Prehistoric (comprising the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age), Roman, Saxon, Medieval and Post-medieval. Although exact definitions are often challenged, the general date ranges are as given below.

Prehistoric c. 100,000 BC - AD 43. This is usually defined as the time before man began making written records of his activities.

Palaeolithic or Old Stone Age 100,000 - 8300 BC

Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age 8300 - 4000 BC

Neolithic or New Stone Age 4000 - 2500 BC

Bronze Age 2500 - 700 BC

Iron Age 700 BC - AD 43

Roman AD 43-410

Saxon AD 410-1066

Medieval AD 1066-1540

Post-medieval AD 1540-present

Pottery sherds: small pieces of broken baked clay vessels that find their way into ancient soils. These can be common in all periods from the Neolithic onwards. They often find their way into the soil by being dumped on the settlement rubbish tip, when broken, and subsequently taken out and scattered in fields with farmyard manure.

Project Design: a written statement on the project's objectives, methods, timetable and resources set out in sufficient detail to be quantifiable, implemented and monitored.

Settlement: usually defined as a site where human habitation in the form of permanent or temporary buildings or shelters in wood, stone, brick or any other building material has existed in the past.

Site: usually defined as an area where human activity has taken place in the past. It does not require the remains of buildings to be present. A scatter of prehistoric flint-working debris can be defined as a 'site', with or without evidence for permanent or temporary habitation.

Stratigraphy: sequence of man-made soils overlying undisturbed soils; the lowest layers generally represent the oldest periods of man's past, with successive layers reaching forwards to the present. It is within these soils that archaeological information is obtained.

Worked flint or stone: usually taken to mean pieces of chipped stone or flint used to make prehistoric stone tools. A worked flint can comprise the tools themselves (arrowheads, blades etc.), or the waste material produced in their making (often called flint flakes, cores etc.).

Archive list for The Underfleet, Seaton, Devon

SY 2463 015

The archive contains:

1. Context sheets, numbers 01-20
2. Finds recording sheets, total 3
3. Photographic recording sheets, total 1
4. Drawing record sheets, total 1
5. One pack of Black/White photographs with negatives.
6. Two plastic sleeves containing colour slide film.
7. Project design evaluation, 10 sheets.
8. Project design watching brief, 11 sheets
9. Original permatrace drawings, total 1 sheet.
10. Evaluation report with illustrations, 21 sheets.
11. Watching brief report with illustrations, 14 sheets
12. Desk-based assessment report, 28 sheets
13. Correspondence and miscellaneous papers concerning site, total xx sheets.