

Lost Islands and Hidden Landscapes

Recent archaeology from the Somerset Levels and Moors
Strode Theatre, Street. Saturday, 14th January 2012.

A conference organised by SANHS and Somerset County
Council and sponsored by the Somerset Levels and Moors Local
Action Group

The 308 delegates who attended this all day conference were treated to a rich banquet of fascinating information served up by ten expert speakers.

In his introductory talk Richard Brunning (Somerset C.C.) showed us how Somerset's coastline had changed since the end of the last Ice Age c.12,000 years ago using clear maps to plot the changes. After the Ice Age, the sea level, at first very low, rose, flooded the valleys of central Somerset far inland and created islands of higher land, the so called "Lost Islands". Gradually the valleys were filled up with sediments and peat and the sea retreated. Marsh and mudflats penetrated far inland in the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age and again in the late Roman period, following a period of coastal reclamation. The Anglo-Saxon period saw the reclamation of a lot of the coastal marshes, forming the present day field systems along the coastal levels.

Keith Wilkinson (Winchester University) had investigated the Moors between Langport and Boroughbridge between 2006 and 2010 using a series of boreholes. The boreholes at depths of between 8m and 25m went down to the bedrock. The cores were examined by radiocarbon dating, pollen analysis and diatom studies (which show salinity). This evidence showed how the Moors had been built up since the Ice Age and how, in the C13 flood banks, ordered by the Abbott of Glastonbury, began the reclamation of the land.

Tony Brown (Southampton University) had made a study of the River Siger (pronounced like tiger) which once flowed South of Brent Knoll. In the C10 it was blocked by coastal sand dunes, silted up and now only shows up during flooding.

However a brilliant LIDAR image revealed the Siger and its many tributaries which once drained a wide area inland. Two boreholes were used to study the structure of the sediments which showed an increase in lead, copper and zinc associated with Roman mining on the Mendips. The shape of the Siger meanders showed the typical effects of the large tidal range in the Severn estuary.

Andy Crockett (Wessex Archaeology) was commissioned to study evolution of the Steart Peninsula because it is proposed to create two areas of tidal marsh by allowing the sea in and dig artificial creeks which

might destroy archaeological evidence. He used maps, airphotos, boreholes and fieldwalking of specially ploughed strips for this study. He found that the bedrock slopes down to the East where the Parrett valley was and how it had been filled with layers of clay and peat since 4000BC. Human land reclamation began from the West before 1100AD with small irregular fields while later fields became larger and more regular to the East. Sea defences were constructed in the C18. He found some moated farmsteads, scattered Medieval pottery and a few Romano- British sites.

Toby Catchpole (Gloucester C.C.) was employed to study the archaeology of Somerset's tidal flats and seaboard as part of the English Heritage funded Rapid Coastal Zone Assessment of the Severn. Following a thorough air photographic survey he and his team went out into the intertidal zone to check what had been found. All along the coast were wooden V shaped tidal fishweirs, some as old as C7, and stone ones some in use recently. There were many other features relating to fishing and also paleochannels, wrecks, trackways and reminders of WW 2 such as the Kilton Tank Triangle on land.

Nancy Hollinrake (Archaeologist) described the prehistoric landscape revealed by large scale excavation made by Viridor to house landfill at Walpole north of Bridgwater. Just above the baserock, 5m below the clay levels, was a Neolithic landscape with a trackway, creek crossings and auroch bones. A buried knoll or island rose above this surface with evidence of prehistoric, Roman and medieval occupation on it.

After lunch Steve Booth (Geologist) treated us to a very entertaining and lucid introduction to the lost islands and their geology. Place names ending in zoy or ey indicate where some of the lost islands are (eg. Middlezoy, Athelney). These islands are places where the bedrock rises above the deep deposits of peat and clay in the floodplain. The islands are locally sometimes called batches or burtles where they are capped by a marine beach deposit called Burtle Beds, The Burtle sand was formed during the Ipswichian Interglacial, before the last ice age, when the sea level was even higher than it is now. Steve then showed some results of his geological survey of Aller "Island" using 3D modelling.

Steve Membery (Somerset C.C.) described the discovery of an Iron Age Oppidum south of Ilchester. Ilchester was known to be the Roman town of Lindinis, the northern capital of the Durotriges. Trial excavations showed that the oppidum was a large, lightly defended town of the late Iron Age probably the precursor of the Roman town. It was surrounded by a roughly semi- circular ditch, that joined onto a natural watercourse. Walls of white lias in one area and ham stone in another may indicate that two groups cooperated in its construction. It is at a point where the boundaries of three tribes met and may have been a threshold settlement where they could meet and trade with each other.

Laura Burnett is the Somerset officer of the Portable Antiquities Scheme. She told us why this scheme was set up, how it works and why it is important. She displayed statistics of all the finds from Somerset and also those which came just from the lost islands which were rich in Iron Age material. She showed us many photographs of attractive artefacts and also the results of a study she had made comparing the Roman coins found at Pawlett and Chedzoy.

After tea Richard Brunning returned, relating the amazing story of five human skulls found in a sand quarry at Greylake in 1928. After a convoluted history only two of these remain at Blake Museum, Bridgwater. Recent carbon dating to 8445-8275BC place them in the early Mesolithic period and Greylake represents a unique UK example of a Mesolithic open cemetery. The Lost Islands Project has also discovered an Romano-British site on the Muchelney archipelago, the religious history of Burtle, enclosures on Aller Island and many crop marks at Chedzoy. Local residents were involved in a back garden test pit project at Alfred's Burgh of East Lyng which was built, not only to protect the monastery at Athelney but also, like those at Axbridge and Langport, to prevent the Danes coming further up the rivers.

Bob Croft (Somerset C.C.) continued the story of Athelney. Originally the Tone flowed between East Lyng and Athelney so Alfred built a bridge there defended by forts at both ends. A Time Team survey in 1993 and an excavation in 2002 revealed these features, the plan of the monastic church, the cemetery on top of the hill and some evidence of Iron age and Dark Age occupation. The Abbey Barn, recently restored, can be seen at West Lyng Farm.

Tony Brown summed up the whole eventful day. His theme was the importance of environmental change in human history. The Somerset Levels and Moors are an excellent example of how we adapt to the changing environment and then strive to change it.

David Baker. 25. 01. 2012