

## **'Footprints on the sands of time'<sup>1</sup>: the archaeology of the Severn Estuary**

The Severn Estuary has been a focus for human settlement and subsistence for millennia. Sediments and tides have alternately preserved and uncovered a wide range of archaeological sites and finds from many different periods. At Porlock and Blue Anchor Bays, Lydney and Goldcliff there are submerged forests with waterlogged roots and trunks still surviving under intertidal muds. Some buried trees are associated with flints, animal bones and even wooden tools left by Mesolithic people (c. 10 000–4000 BC), who gathered plant foods and deliberately set fire to reeds and woodland to encourage new shoots for grazing game animals. They hunted and fished at a time when sea levels were much lower and Flat Holm and Steep Holm were rocky outcrops within a broad, shallow river valley.

Neolithic (c. 4000–2500 BC), Bronze Age (c. 2500-800 BC) and Iron Age (c. 800 BC–AD 43) people left artefacts, animal bones and human remains. As sea levels gradually rose, peat deposits and salt marshes developed and wetlands such as the Somerset and Gwent Levels formed diverse mixes of alder and birch carr, peat bog, marsh and standing water, rich in resources. Prehistoric wooden trackways have been found in areas like the Gwent and Somerset Levels, and Bronze Age and Iron Age timber buildings have been excavated at Redwick, Goldcliff and Greenmoor Arch. Brean Down was a dramatic setting for Bronze Age occupation.

Human and animal footprints are evocative yet ephemeral traces of prehistoric lives, pressed into fine silts, sealed by later sediments then exposed once more by erosion. At Uskmouth, Magor and Goldcliff there are prints of Mesolithic women, men and children, animals such as aurochs (wild cattle), deer and wolves, and many bird species. At Oldbury, Neolithic human footprints were found alongside domestic cattle hoof prints, and similar hoof prints were associated with the later prehistoric buildings at Redwick and Goldcliff. Prehistoric and Romano-British people used the estuary for seasonal activities including summer livestock grazing and salt production. Drainage of the Gwent and Somerset Levels and riverside areas in Gloucestershire probably began during the Roman period, and continued during the medieval period and the

18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Different phases of flood banks, windmill mounds, ditches, rhynes and grips are all testament to human struggles against the waters.

Bronze Age and Romano-British boats from Goldcliff and Barland's Farm, the late medieval ship from Newport and 19<sup>th</sup> century vessels at Lydney and Purton show the significance of the Severn Estuary for communication and trade. Putt and putcher ranks, numerous V-shaped fish weirs, some Anglo-Saxon in origin; and basketry fish traps used since prehistory indicate the long-term importance of fishing. World War II anti-invasion defences highlight the strategic importance of the Severn estuary.

Some of this archaeology is perhaps better known on the Welsh side of the Severn, but a Rapid Coastal Zone Assessment Survey (RCZAS) project is currently investigating the English side from Beachley to Maisemore, and from Maisemore to Porlock. Funded by English Heritage and undertaken by Gloucestershire County Council Archaeology Service with the assistance of archaeologists from Somerset, North Somerset, Bristol and South Gloucestershire local authorities, the project aims to increase understanding of past and present coastal erosion and sea-level changes, and to inform future research and coastal management plans. Initial stages involved a detailed study of published and unpublished reports, and extensive aerial photographic analysis as part of the National Mapping Programme. This identified 928 new features and updated 373 existing records. The next stage of the project from April 2009 will consist of GPS-based survey to identify new archaeology and assess the threat to known features.

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For further information see:

<http://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=12558>

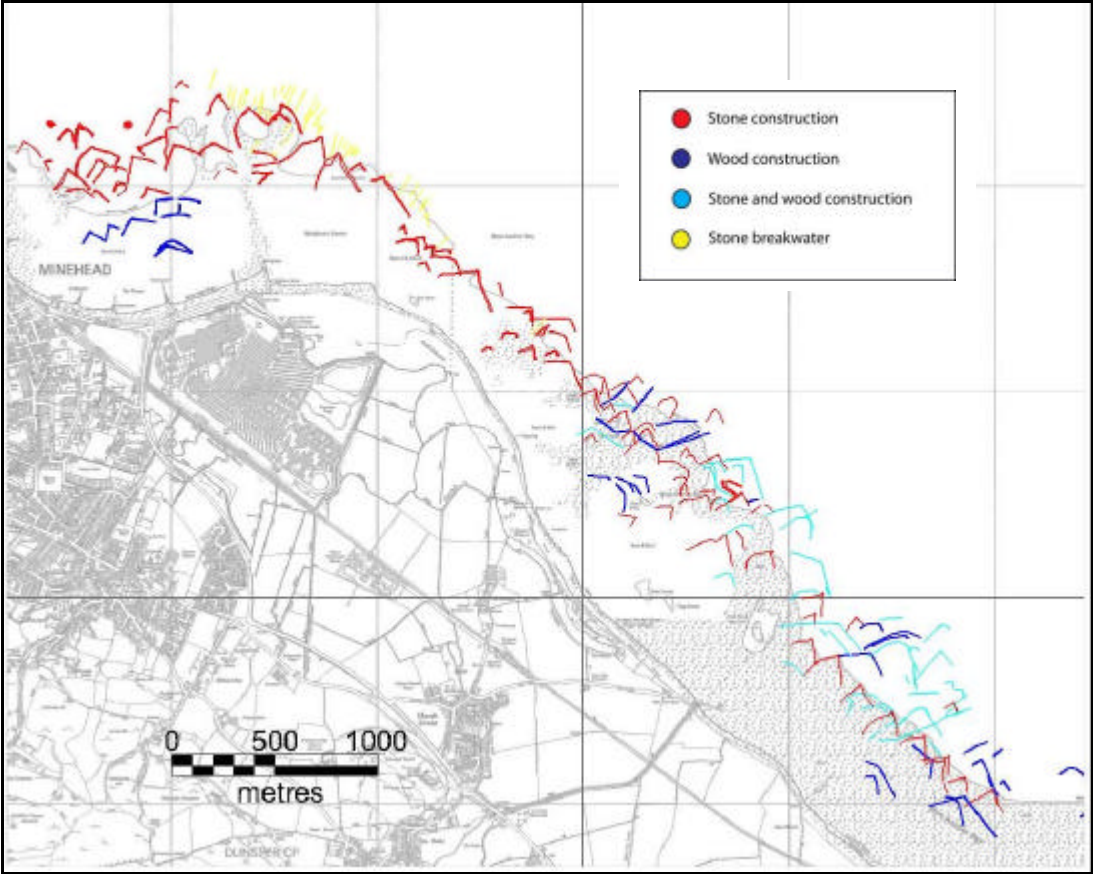
1. Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime,  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time. H.W. Longfellow. 1812. *A Psalm of Life*.

**Figure 1.**



Brean Down with Weston-super-Mare visible behind. NMR ST2859/34 NMR 23473/22. 02.06.2004. © English Heritage.

Figure 2.



Different types of V-shaped fish traps in the intertidal zone of west Somerset, mapped through aerial survey. © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved. Gloucestershire County Council 100019134 2008. Background map © Ordnance Survey.