

THE COAST FROM SOUTH SHIELDS TO WHITBURN



ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY

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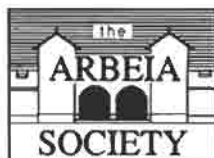
Archaeology and History

Based on a Local Heritage Initiative Survey
carried out by the Arbeia Society

The Arbeia Society

South Shields

2004



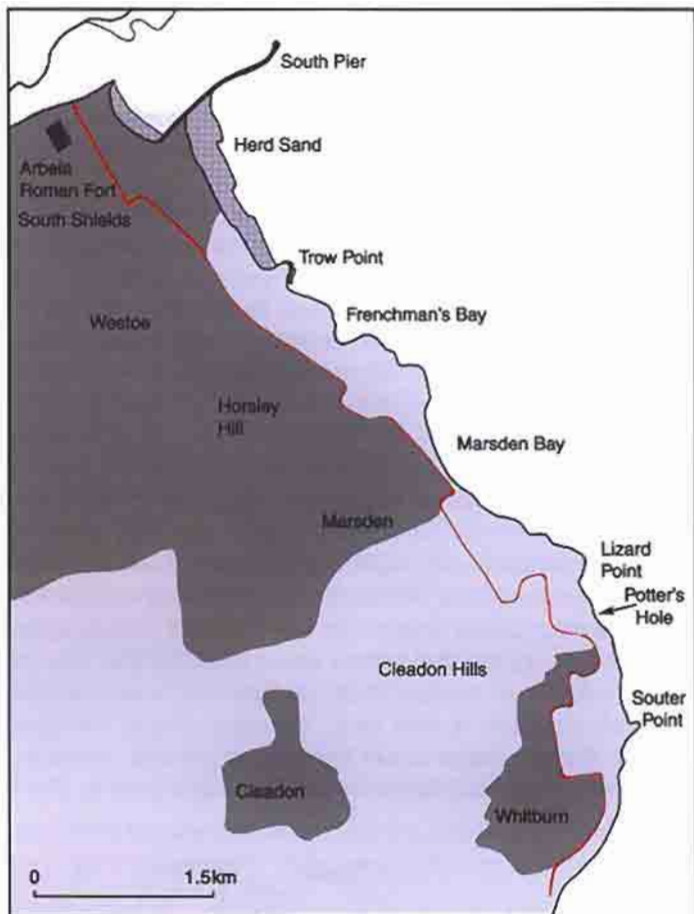
Foreword

The Arbeia Society had originally intended to carry out an archaeological survey of the green belt lands between South Shields and Sunderland, with funding from the Local Heritage Initiative (a partnership between the Heritage Lottery fund, Nationwide Building Society and the Countryside Agency), and support and assistance from Tyne and Wear Museums. This was prevented by the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 2001. With the agreement of the Local Heritage Initiative the survey area was moved to cover the coastline from the River Tyne to the southern boundary of the Metropolitan Borough of South Tyneside, at Whitburn (Fig. 1). This north - south corridor takes in not only the coastal cliffs and grasslands (largely used for leisure), but also the river mouth, the shoreline and the coastal waters. There are no ploughlands in this transect.

The survey was carried out by members of the Arbeia Society and local residents and volunteers, under the professional guidance, where necessary, of archaeologists from Tyne and Wear Museums. The survey took account of the existing Tyne and Wear Historic Environment Record (HER), but also explored aerial photographs, map sources, archive holdings and involved ground inspection of the grass lands, cliffs and the inshore seascape. The findings of the survey are collected in an archive which has been deposited with the Tyne and Wear HER, accompanied by a written commentary.

This booklet summarises the findings of the survey. For the first time it brings together in one place what we know of the succession of peoples and communities who have lived on and used the coastline between the Tyne and Whitburn, from prehistoric times to the twentieth century, and shows the extent to which the coastline and its use has changed, even in very recent times. This survey shows how ordinary people can get involved in finding out about the history of their community and landscape, and publish the results so that everyone can benefit. The Arbeia Society looks forward to carrying out further projects of this kind in the future.

Fig. 1 Map showing survey area



Introduction: Landscape and riverscape

The coastal rocks between South Shields and Whitburn (see front cover) are generally overlain by boulder clay. Most of the visible cliffs along sections of this part of the coastline are formed from a concretionary Limestone Formation ('Magnesian Limestone') which often contains the famous 'cannonball' structures. Other rock types are generally visible only as small 'glimpses' in this entire section.

Large ships can now use the River Tyne with ease, but before the nineteenth century it was different. The river was full of sandbanks and reefs and

was often shallow. On low spring tides there was only 2m of water over the Outer Bar at the mouth of the river, and a second bar further up river was called the Nine Feet Bar (Fig. 2).

In the nineteenth century, the river was dredged to make the channel for ships deeper and wider, and by 1895 two piers had been built to protect the river mouth.

The mouth of the river was not easy to enter, with the dangerous Black Middens Rocks on the north side and the Herd Sand on the south side. Ships trying to reach the safety of the river in a northerly or north-easterly gale were in danger of being driven onto the sands, and over the centuries a large number of ships have been wrecked here, causing the river mouth to be named 'a grave of good ships and seamen'.

Prehistory

Long after the polar ice cap began to retreat at the end of the last ice age, much of what is now the North Sea was inhabited dry land. This is the explanation for a prehistoric submerged forest that can occasionally be seen along the southern edge of Whitburn Bay near to the Seaburn Centre. Excavations beneath South Shields Roman Fort and studies elsewhere on the north-east coast suggest that before about 3000 BC the sea level may have been much lower than present south of the Tyne, with dry land spreading further east where there is now sea. Perhaps only in the period after 3,000 BC did the the sea come closer to form the present coastline. This means that prehistoric sites along this coastline belonging to the Middle Stone Age



*Fig. 2
Mouth of
the Tyne from
Gardner's map of
1654*

('Mesolithic': 10,000 BC-4,000 BC, and the New Stone age ('Neolithic': 4,000 BC-2,000 BC) might not have actually been on the coast when they were in use.

The eroding soil cap along the South Tyneside cliff edge has produced a number of stray finds of flint tools and the debris associated with their production. These date from the Mesolithic era through to the Neolithic and Bronze Age (2000 BC-600 BC).

Prehistoric finds

Excavations in the 1990s discovered an important prehistoric site underneath the Roman fort on the Lawe at South Shields. Many flints were recovered dating back to the Mesolithic (before 4000 BC). Some Neolithic ditches, perhaps part of a causewayed camp, dating to about 3,500 BC were found, as well as a Neolithic flint-knapping site, dating to about 3,000 BC. The Lawe Top has produced a number of Bronze Age finds, but as yet no settlement evidence. Above all this an Iron Age farming settlement was found, including a well-preserved roundhouse that had burnt down about 250 BC. The site was being used for agriculture by an Iron Age community when the Romans arrived around AD 80-100.

Previous finds along the survey area of the coastline to the south include (numbers refer to map at Fig. 3):

1. River Tyne: a Bronze Age sword blade found in the 19th Century.
2. Trow Rocks: a socketed bronze axe of the Bronze Age was discovered in 1864.
3. Trow Point: a Bronze Age cist burial was recorded in the 19th Century, but subsequently destroyed by quarrying operations by the Tyne Commissioners.
4. Marsden Area: surface finds of Mesolithic flint.
5. Camel Island in Marsden Bay: flint flakes and chips.
6. 'Marsden Island': records of flint.
7. Marsden Quarry Area: barbed and tanged flint arrowhead and other flints.
8. Wheatal Farm, Whitburn: an "early Bronze Age arrowhead" ?barbed and tanged, "knives and flakes" were found with a cist burial in January 1929.
9. Whitburn: flint from six sites found in 1935. Each was only a few yards in extent and all but one was exposed on the edge of the sea cliffs. These included microliths and "other types".

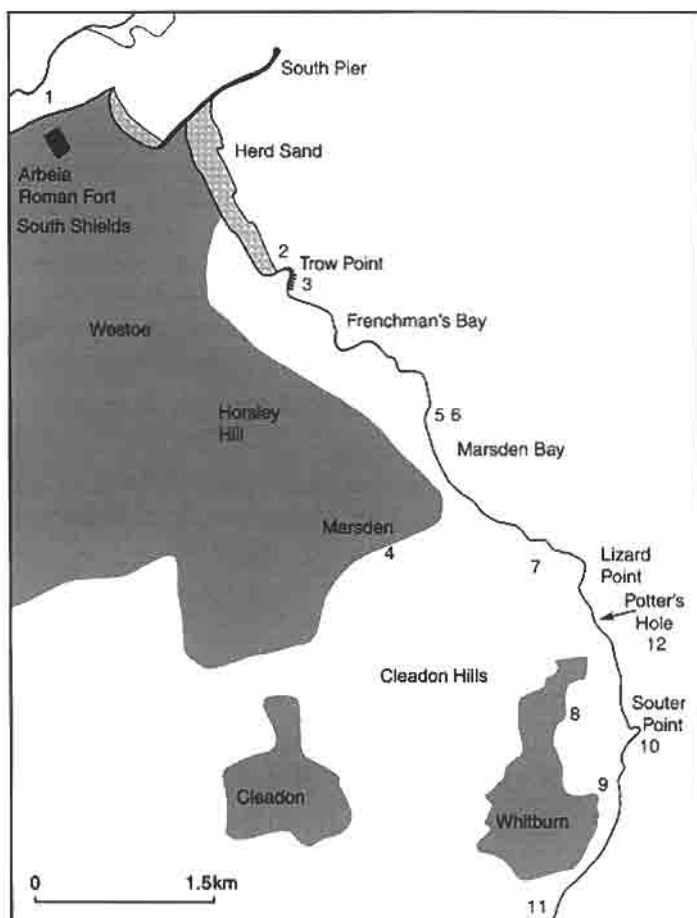
10. Souter Point: flints have been recorded.

11. Whitburn Bay: an outstanding find – a Later Mesolithic biserial antler harpoon made of deer antler. It may well have eroded out of the cliffs, being found on the sea shore not far from the flint scatters noted above.

Some of these prehistoric discoveries are shown in Fig. 4.

In addition, the present survey has made the following new discoveries of prehistoric material:

West face of Camel Island: further “bashed” local flint has been recorded by this survey team.



*Fig. 3
Approximate
findspots of
prehistoric
material*