

Archaeological investigations on the beach at Medmerry, West Sussex

**Chichester and District Archaeology Society
coastal monitoring and survey team**

Presented by Peter Murphy

For Citizan Conference, Bristol, 8th October 2016

We have not *only* been working at Medmerry – here are a couple of images from Chichester Harbour.

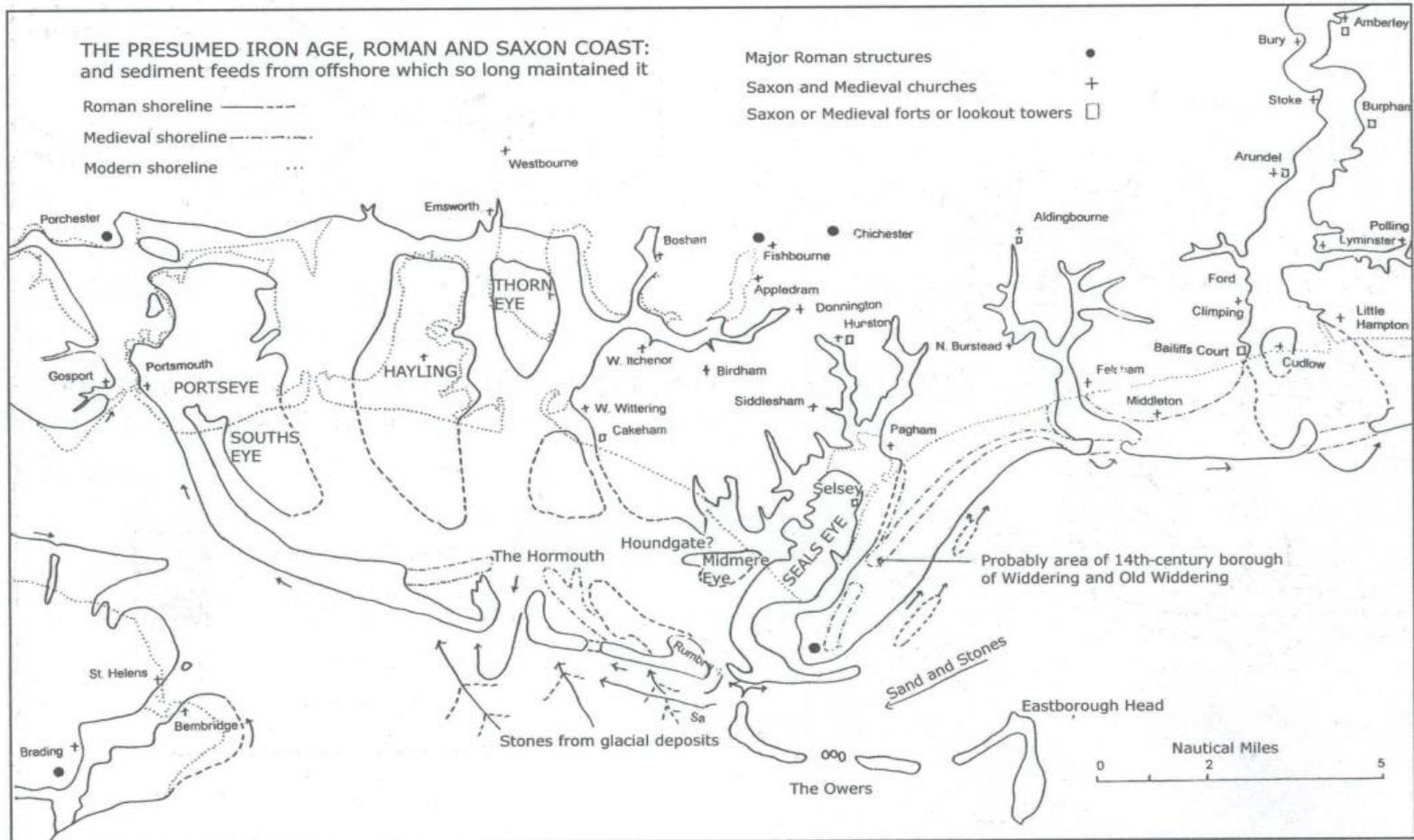


Lithic and ceramic assemblages, LBA/EIA



The team stands along a gravel 'haven' structure

From Wallace 1999: *imaginative* - right in general terms, but not to be relied on for detail.



The presumed Iron-Age, Roman and Saxon coast between Littlehampton and Portsmouth.
 (Wallace, 1999a, p.3)

Medmerry Realignment: Ordnance Survey mapping, published 2009 and 2015



2009, revised 2013



May 2015

This shoreline used to be managed by artificial raising of the shingle bank. This was abandoned and a breach cut, to allow development of more natural habitats behind. Since 2015 there have been substantial changes to the coastline around the breach, not yet available on a published map.

Archaeology South East excavations at Medmerry Realignment, 2013



Recording a large erratic



Part of medieval fish trap



Burnt mound



Wooden structure

2014-16: rough weather around Medmerry and Selsey in winter.



Storm at Selsey 2014.
Horizon not horizontal, but it was hard to stay upright, let alone use camera effectively.



Medmerry March 2016
The base of the horizontal boards marks the former beach level which had existed in January 2016

The pre-transgression surface



Roots of an oak tree pre-dating the archaeology (on left). Organic basal sediment and burnt BA deposits overlying Tertiary sediments (on right). Basal humified saltmarsh peats from the ASE excavations date to 4330-4050 and 4260-3990 Cal BC (95% probability).

Early to Middle Bronze Age burnt mounds/spreads



Some of these sites are *in situ*, others are spills within intertidal sediments. There is a long string of them all along the shore. The shoreline sites have not been dated by radiocarbon, but six samples from the excavations by ASE fall within the overall calibrated date range 1740-1490 Cal BC. There have been no artefactual finds from the beach sites, but a left humerus of the Great Northern Diver (*Gavia immer*) has been found (thanks to Poly Baker for identification).

An Iron Age skeleton on Earnley beach, just to the west of Medmerry, found by Mrs Cathy Dennis and lifted by the police.



The police did what they had to do, *rapidly* as it was a rising tide, but paid no attention to context. This mobile phone image is all we have to assess the context of the find. However, they did pay for a C14 date.

Meaning what?

We know:

The date: 3373 \pm 26 BP, calibrated to 760-410 BC;

The palaeopathology: a male, aged 25+, probably middle aged, with arthritis of the spine, *cribra orbitalia* indicating poor diet, tooth wear and pre-mortem loss, calculus and periodontal disease (with thanks for the report from Dr Paola Ponce, ASE)

We don't know:

The stratigraphic context, for it was recovered rapidly by the police with no reference to context. Was it an intentional burial, an accidental death, or a 'placed deposit' or 'bog body'?

We may *infer* from the single mobile phone image, which is all we have:

The grey coloration of the surrounding sediment strongly indicates a Holocene intertidal creek fill in this location, rather than the local Tertiary sediments;

There are dark stripes around the head which seem to be degraded remains of wooden planks, suggesting the skeleton was associated on a planked structure – perhaps a platform or even a boat.

We may conclude:

It was not a 'conventional' burial. Whether it was an accidental fatality or a placed body in a creek on some sort of wooden structure cannot now be determined.

Linear post-and-wattle structure: fish weir, oyster trap, reclamation structure, jetty?



The ASE excavations exposed several structures of this type, dating to the Late Saxon to 14th-15th centuries. This one is very similar. It cuts across one of the BA burnt mounds.

A fish basket



Dated to 1449-1635 cal AD (95.4% probability: SUERC -60639)

Fishing basketry in the Gloucester Life Museum.

It is likely that none of these corresponds with the basketry from Medmerry: there would have been many local adaptations for particular fisheries.



Salmon putcher (placed on a weir) and eel trap of osiers (placed submerged)



Eel box used for storage after trapping



Eel trap made of thin wood strips



Lamprey basket used for storage after trapping, Dated to 1914-18.

Timber and wattle fishtraps. Calibrated dates (95% probability): cal AD 1450-1650 (SUERC-66909, Context 3) and cal AD 1520-1670 (UBA-31689, Context 4).

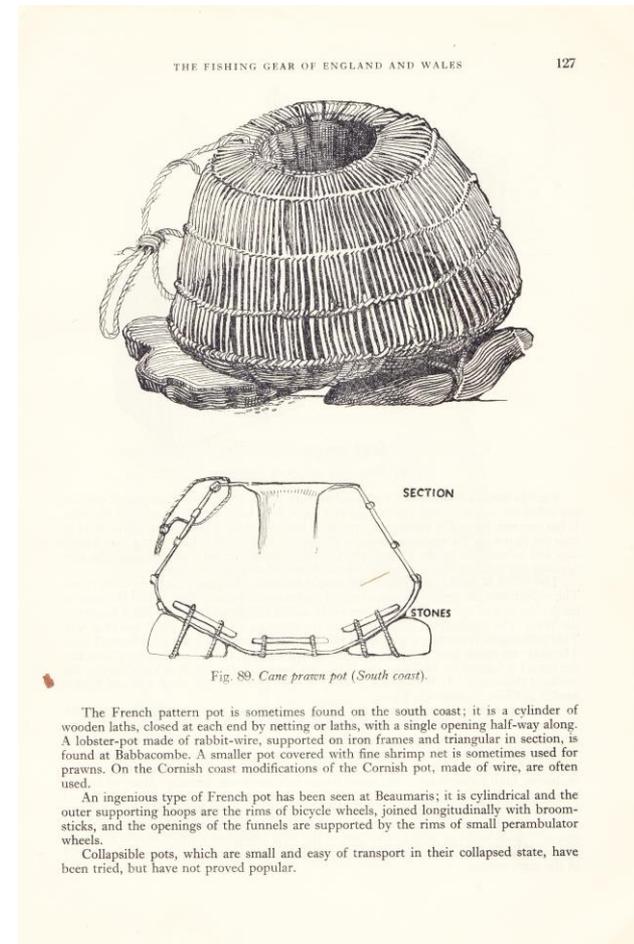


A braced timber structure with wattle infilling, Context 3.



**Hugh Fiske records contexts 3 and 4 for 3D imagery
Now available on the CDAS website**

Base of an early modern or modern French-pattern shrimp/prawn trap, weighted with interwoven flints



18th century slow match pouch.



Now donated to the Portsmouth Museum of the Royal Navy for conservation and display, it *might* have come from the wreck of the HMS Hazardous prize in Bracklesham Bay (1706). Ship nails from that wreck or another wreck litter the shore.

19th century drainage dykes and possible base of sluice gate – you coastal engineers tell me!



19th century marshland drainage dykes are now exposed on the beach



This 19th century brick structure traverses a former dyke., now infilled with sediment. Could it be part of a sluice gate?

Thorney (aka Thorny) Farm



No sign at all of 19th century ceramics, implying that this part of the farm, now exposed on the shore, was a farmyard area, not domestic. If there was a farm there in the 19th century it might have been a suitable site for one earlier. We will be looking out for this.

The wells of Thorney Farm



Chalk-lined well near the farm buildings

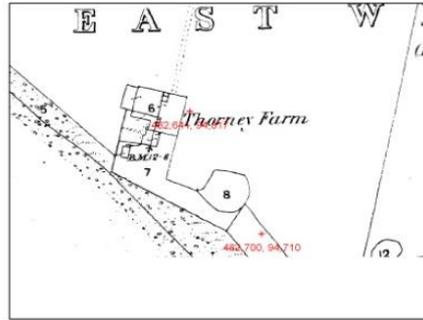


A more distant brick and timber-lined well, perhaps for livestock

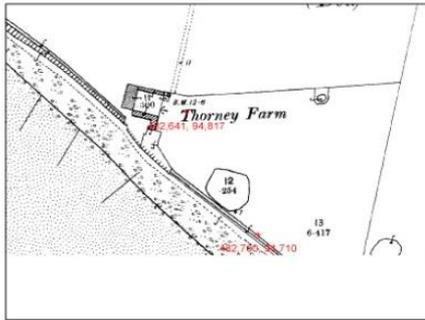
Thorney Farm, Medmerry. Map regression: courtesy of James Kenny.



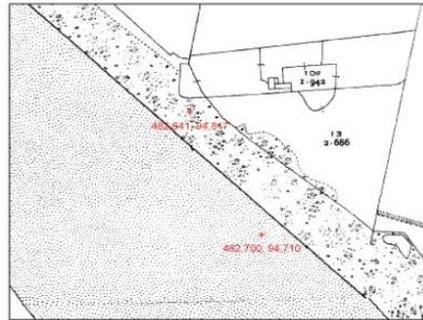
E Wittering TAM 1842



OS 25" c. 1875



OS 25" c. 1898



OS 25" c. 1933



OS 1:2500 c. 1966

By 1914 “the only signs of human habitation were two dilapidated huts inhabited by four or five men who made a hundred tons of wonderful hay, building about ten great haystacks ... [it was] transported a wagonload at a time over the shingle bank and the beach to Miss Scrimgeour’s barn and stables at Selsey”.

The farm was there by 1810, as it appears in a map of that date.

Mary Heron, *100 Years at Thorny*, 2015.



Transporting the hay, c. 1937, hay wagon at rear



▲ The cavalcade of riders, with a young horse being led, coming over the shingle bank from Thorny on its way back to the Selsey Stables, c. 1937.

Concrete anti-tank blocks, part of coastal defences from 1940, now eroding on the beach in a 19th century drainage dyke, probably originally alongside it (with labradorite boulders from recent sea defences).



Munitions and beach scaffolding from coastal defences (1940) and the air-to-ground gunnery range (1943-1954).



With thanks to ...



**The CDAS team for their stalwart work, often in awful conditions;
The RSPB for kindly giving access and providing information on recent erosion;
James Kenny, (Chichester District Archaeologist), Kris Krawiek (Archaeology South East)and Alex Belisario and Lauren Tidbury (CITiZAN) for training, professional support and radiocarbon dates.**