

**“The Geoarchaeology of the Severn Estuary”**  
**Professor Martin Bell**  
**University of Reading**

This was the annual joint lecture of the Cirencester Science & Technology and Archaeological & Historical Societies.

Professor Bell has been exploring the Severn estuary for more than 20 years and presented details of findings at sites on the Eastern Shore at Brean Sands on the Western Shore mainly at Goldcliff. Excavation at sites such as Goldcliff is particularly challenging since the lowest areas are only exposed for about two hours during the spring tides. Evidence has been found of Mesolithic, Iron and Bronze Age settlements. Before the 1980's, there was little awareness of the richness of the coastal area of the Severn Estuary.

Professor Bell outlined how a knowledge of the geology of the area particularly the wind blown laminated silt layers combined with the archaeological findings has led to a much greater understanding of how the early hunter-gathers lived. About 6000 BC, rising sea levels drowned a large area of forests and an area of the Welsh shore at Goldcliff became an island. It is on the edges of this that a complex of Mesolithic sites has been found.

Findings such as human, bird and cattle footprints, pollen and human intestinal parasites together with seasonal differences identifiable in the different types of silt layers have led to a reassessment of some of the assumptions about the lives of the early settlers. It is now believed that they used the rich salt marshes for cattle on a regular basis each summer/autumn and occasionally in the spring.

Bronze and Iron Age findings include evidence of rectangular wooden structures with animal stalls and well-defined tracks from settlements, some leading towards the sea.

At Brean Sands the Bronze Age structures were circular and yielded abundant artefacts including high status gold bracelets, acquired possibly through exchange for salt, which the Bronze Age community were known to be extracting from seawater.

*Given on Wednesday 16 March at the Ashcroft Centre*