

## **A Quarter Century of Archaeology on Merseyside - Summary**

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The conference proved to be a stimulating day thanks to the excellent papers from all the speakers. There was much to absorb, and so the publication of these proceedings will, I am sure, prove to be as important a contribution to the archaeology of the Merseyside sub region as Volume 7, which contained the papers from the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference, was.

As Ian Longworth pointed out in his introduction to that journal, published in 1991 and now out of print, the creation of 'Merseyside' in 1976 had for the first time focused energy and resources on an area previously under-researched and largely ignored. Peter Davey has also referred to this in his introduction to the present volume. The area had always been brushed aside as unlikely to be attractive to early settlement, being at the extremity of Fox's Lowland Zone. Nor had the area been blessed by the work of 19<sup>th</sup>-century antiquarians, with a very few honourable exceptions such as Ecroyd Smith, Hume, Mayer and Potter.

The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference in the mid 1980s had set the scene, pointing out directions for future work and outlining the much-needed programme of survey, excavation and research which was, by then, underway due to lobbying by Merseyside Archaeological Society and to the work of Liverpool Museum's Field Archaeology Unit. The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference in 2001, thanks to the considerable commitment and determination of a range of people, particularly those who spoke at the earlier conference, but also many other Society members along with colleagues from within and outside the area, demonstrated clearly the vast recent increase in knowledge of Merseyside archaeology over the intervening period.

The speakers at this recent conference have shown how our understanding of the past on Merseyside has changed. We have moved from the position of beginning to identify and explore sites to that of starting to understand what sites mean, and to assess the degree of human presence, rather than natural factors at work here, that brought about known major changes in the Merseyside sub region.

25 years ago Merseyside was far behind other areas and regions in terms of knowledge and understanding, but now the quality of work which has taken place over some fifteen years means we have been able to feed back into the regional and national contexts. Through the research strategy put together and developed by Ron Cowell and Rob Philpott of Liverpool Museum's Field Archaeology Unit, the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside has become a key player in the archaeology of the northwest region. It is something to take pride in for all involved. A consistent, systematic approach has been applied to field-walking, to aerial photography,

and to excavated sites. Important break-throughs have included the recognition of the area's Roman pottery and the importance of surface scatters of finds. Despite all the advances, however, it still remains a partial picture for the north west. This conference was a reminder, if we needed one, of the continuing need to re-examine previous finds and sites for the evidence and new light they continue to shed on our understanding of the past. Meols stands as the outstanding example of this. For the future as well there is the need to extend the systematic and coherent approach which has been so successful for the prehistoric and Roman periods right through into the post-medieval period. A further conference is planned by Merseyside Archaeological Society in 2003 to look at the current state of our knowledge for this later period and to set out the research agenda for the future.

The speakers gave examples of particular needs in each of their fields. Jim Innes commented on the lack of pollen sequences from late prehistoric and historic periods. The general trends are well understood now but each site reveals new, local detail that fills in the picture. Ron Cowell illustrated exciting advances over the last five years. In 1987 he had grounds for optimism but there were still few sites identified and chance finds distorted the picture. Now it is not just a question of investigating sites, but the ability to produce theories about human society. We hope he has the opportunity over the next years to release the enormous potential of the key site he is excavating at Lathom. The problem fifteen years ago for Rob Philpott was the intractability of the evidence. Just where were the sites? The breakthrough came with the recognition of Roman pottery scatters. He outlined the picture that has emerged from his work of continuity of settlement in the sub region over many, many hundreds of years, of the hierarchy of settlement, and possibly of local building types. Ben Edwards stressed the need to bring the same approaches to bear on the pre-Conquest period to break through the limitations of current sources.

Apart from Meols there has been little advance in knowledge in recent years. Jen Lewis has successfully used documentary evidence for medieval estates to show how they were managed. Although these sources often raise more questions than they answer, nevertheless we need to discuss the implications of her work in helping us to penetrate the intractable pre-Conquest period more successfully as well. She pointed out the complexity of medieval moated structures that require a wider, landscape approach to resolve the issues, and the need for a comprehensive study of medieval pottery across the region to place local issues into a regional context. Rob Philpott in discussing medieval settlement again emphasised the growing body of evidence for continuity across the centuries. His paper gave examples of enclosures possibly in use for more than 2,000 years. He made the point that a coherent research programme was needed for the medieval and post-medieval periods to ensure the same positive results that approach has produced for the prehistoric and Roman periods.

Above all, the conference showed how much things link together and overlap. Environmental work already informs the research programmes of Ron Cowell and Rob Philpott. Jen Lewis would like to see that extended to help the understanding of medieval agriculture. Aerial photography potentially helps across all periods, as does field walking, if we know what we need to look for. We have a number of important sites in the area, all the more exciting for the apparent continuity of use at places such as at Irby, Lathom and Meols.

Peter Davey's introductory overview underlined the contribution made by Merseyside Archaeology Society both directly and through acting as a catalyst. There is still a major role for the society and its members to play in the foreseeable future in both these areas. There is a renewed and welcome interest amongst members in field-walking. Potential funders are much more likely to support applications for archaeological projects in Merseyside if they can be made aware of the public support for and interest in archaeological work. More resources are required to enable the programme of research to continue and for the results of that work to be published and made available to as wide an audience as possible, with the society's Journal being an obvious and appropriate medium. We also need to ensure that the Merseyside Archaeological Society continues to attract new members of all ages and from all areas of Merseyside so that the important role it has played in Merseyside archaeology over the past 25 years can expand and develop.

Rob Philpott summed up very well for me what has been going on over the last quarter of a century, thanks in no small part to the efforts of Merseyside Archaeological Society: we have been "peopling the landscape of Merseyside."