

River Severn bank-side survey: Worcester to Tewkesbury

A new survey was undertaken in 2007-8 focussing on the history of the river between Worcester and Tewkesbury. This included fieldwork undertaken by boat.



General view of the river

The River Severn is historically the longest river in the country, as well as having the longest navigable length. River transportation was a principal means of inland communication in the past and this lasted into the later 19th century. On the banks of the River Severn there were once major inland ports such as Worcester, and many other smaller quays. Canals boosted this system from the mid 18th century; these being a very substantial extension of the pre-existing river navigation system. The building of locks at Tewkesbury and Diglis raised water levels to provide improved conditions for navigation from the 1840s.

The river would, therefore, have contributed to the lives of those along its banks in a variety of ways, typically by supplying goods and work through the cheap transport that it provided, or by directly providing food through fish-traps, or by boosting food production through the operation of water meadows. Today, however, the river is mainly the domain of pleasure boats.

Summary of survey results

Several old finds from the river itself are of great interest because of their antiquity and because they suggest that the river had a role in the prehistoric period as a place for votive offerings. Bronze Age weapons have been dredged from the river just below Diglis (Worcester), from the Teme/Severn confluence, between Kempsey and Pixham ferries, and at Pixham.

Much of the early history of the river is shrouded in mystery but it begins to emerge again in the Middle Ages when there are documentary references to the importance of the river trade on the Severn and, in addition to the quayside at Worcester, there were smaller quays, for instance at Hanley Castle, and Upton-on-Severn. Additional quays may also possibly be expected at Clevelode and Saxons Lode as the 'lode' element has been interpreted as indicating a place where goods could be loaded or unloaded.

Ferries have also been associated with the river from the medieval period onwards, for instance at Upton. They have also been identified at the Ketch, at Uckinghall, Kempsey, at Pixham, Clevelode, and Rhydd, though some of sites may have developed later when the river level was raised through the navigation improvement works in the 19th century. Some of these may, therefore, have succeeded earlier fords, which were once a feature of some parts of the river.

Based again on historical evidence several sites of fisheries are known, for instance at Timberdine (in south Worcester), Powick, Severnstoke and Ripple, where fish could be trapped. The enormous expanses of flat ground in large sweeping curves of the river (often termed 'hams') lent themselves to the development of water meadows (for example, at Ripple).

More industrial use of the river comprised the transport of heavy goods, such as the earthenware pots made at Hanley Castle in medieval times and the porcelain made in Worcester from the mid 18th century. And industry appeared on its banks in the form of brick and tile works in the 18th century and later, for instance just below Diglis, near Pixham, and at Upton. The brickwork structure observed during the survey by boat was probably part of the loading stage for this type of works at Mythe Hooke.



Brickwork visible under the river bank at Mythe Hooke

The sunken and part-submerged barges that can still be seen at Diglis, Clerkenleap (Worcester), and at Saxon's Lode also relate to the long history of the commercial navigation of the river.



Sunken barge at Saxon's Lode

In World War 2 the River Severn played an important part by enabling the stockpiling of fuel brought in by river, as well as performing a strategic role as part of a defensive loop around Birmingham ('the Severn Stop Line'). Oil was the last regular cargo brought up the river in bulk for delivery to depots on the south side of Worcester and near Upton-on-Severn.



Timber towers below Upton-on-Severn for off-loading oil from river barges

However, the barge traffic has now resumed with the conveyance of aggregates from Ripple to Saxon's Lode.



Aggregates transportation by barge in 2008

Conclusion

In spite of the somewhat limited extant archaeological remains on the river banks, there is a rich documentary legacy. In addition there is still the prospect that much more evidence of the ancient use of the river remains on the river bed itself could be revealed, where exploration by diving has previously uncovered archaeological remains.

This work in 2007-8 has been made possible by a grant from the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund (ALSF) administered through English Heritage. Thanks are especially due to the Worcester Sub-Aqua Club who kindly provided and manned the boat used in the field survey. It is intended that a full report will be made available in due course.