

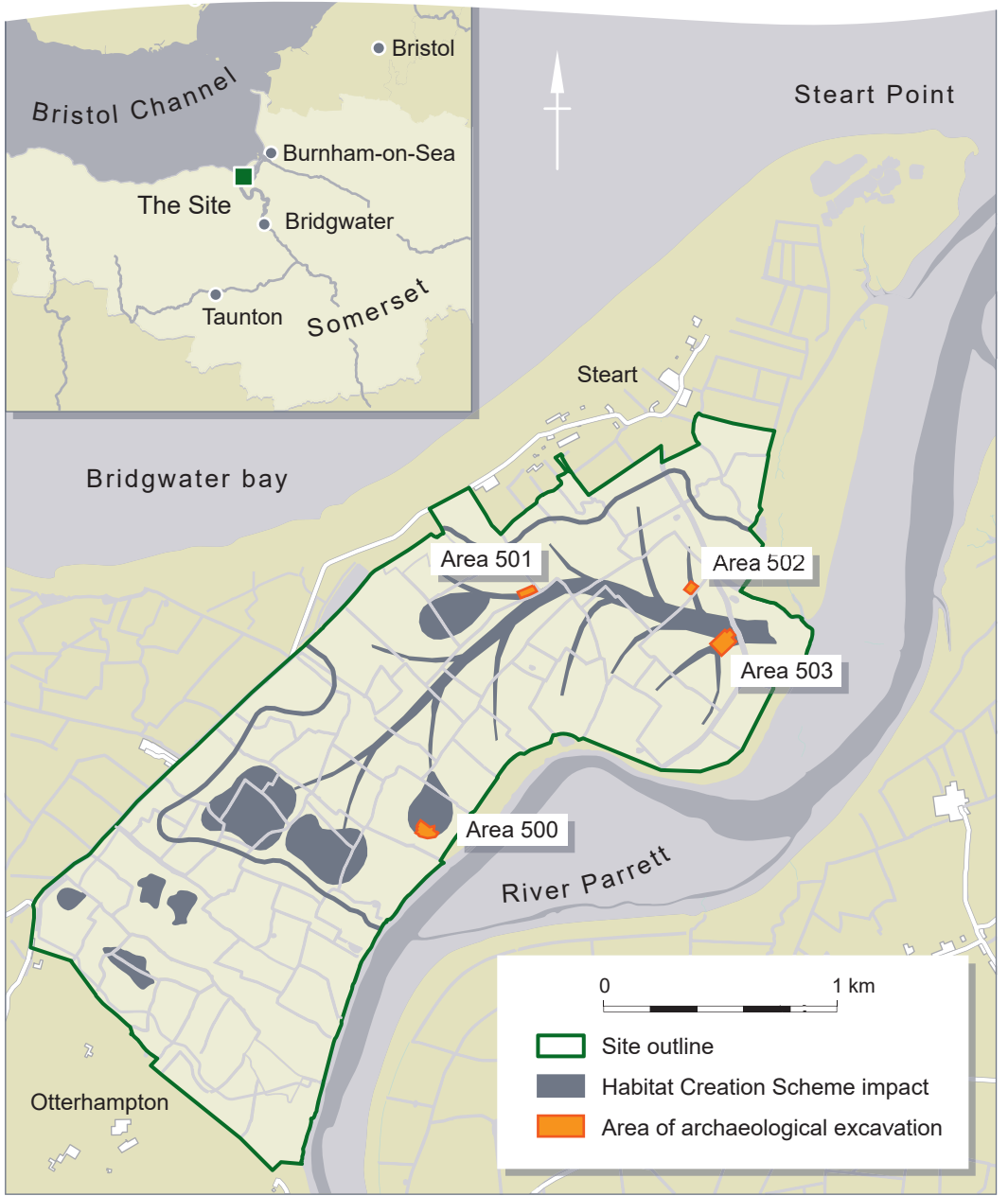
Archaeology of the Steart Peninsula



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*Aerial view of part of the Steart peninsula
(© Environment Agency)*

The Steart peninsula lies on the southern side of the Severn Estuary, bounded to the east by the River Parrett and to the north by Bridgewater Bay.

In 2008 the Environment Agency, in conjunction with the Wildfowl & Wetland Trust (WWT), initiated the Steart Marshes Habitat Creation Scheme, an ambitious project designed to return a large part of the peninsula back to managed saltmarsh and freshwater wetlands, thereby creating an extensive wildlife habitat and providing vital flood defences for Steart village.

The scheme involved the construction of an extensive floodplain creek system linked to the Severn Estuary via a breach in the existing sea wall along the bank of the River Parrett. This provided archaeologists with the opportunity to find out how people once lived and worked in this coastal environment.

The open landscape of the Steart peninsula



The Archaeological Investigations

Before any excavation, the archaeologists used a number of different methods to study the peninsula. These included the examination of aerial photographs, historic maps, LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) data, earthwork survey, geophysical survey and fieldwalking (the collection of surface finds across ploughed fields). This information was used to target the locations of trial trenches to evaluate any buried archaeological remains, and eventually led to open area excavations at four locations on the peninsula (see map, inside cover).

The earliest evidence came from the southern end of the peninsula close to the River Parrett, on the edges of what would have been an extensive area of saltmarsh (Area 500) where Middle to Late Iron Age (400 BC–AD 43) activity was recorded. The other sites were located in the central part of the peninsula. Evidence for occupation during the late Roman period (AD 250–410) was recorded in Area 501, while Areas 502 and 503 investigated two medieval/post-medieval (11th/12th to 17th century) moated sites that had previously been identified from WWII aerial photographs and LiDAR survey.



*Top: Fieldwalking across ploughed fields
Bottom: Open area excavation at Area 500*



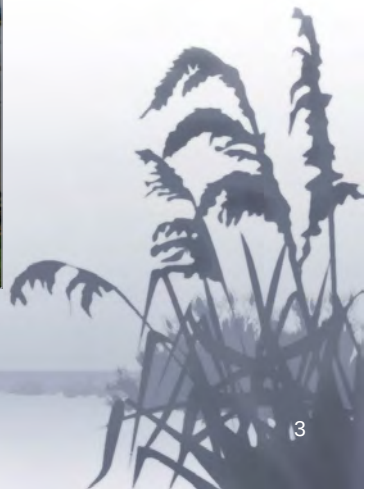
The peninsula is located in the coastal lowlands of the Somerset Levels, an area that has been exploited for its rich natural resources since prehistoric times, but one that has been prone to marine inundation and flooding for thousands of years. The deep sequences of peat and marine sediments that are occasionally exposed on the foreshore at various locations in the Severn Estuary provide a record of these past events.

Later changes in sea level also had an impact on the coastal lowlands of the Estuary. Marine flooding during the Iron Age (700 BC–AD 43) created an extensive channel from the coast to the Lake Village at Glastonbury. Another channel was formed during the early Roman period (AD 43–200). The course of this channel, known as the Siger, has been mapped using LiDAR and can be seen during flood events. The channel crossed the Brue Valley just to the south of Brent Knoll and the creek system that fed into it extended between the River Severn and Burtle, creating an extensive area of saltmarsh.

It was not until the Roman period that coastal defences were built and the land drained for cultivation and settlement, but archaeological evidence suggests that the area was still prone to tidal flooding. Eventually many low-lying settlements in the Severn Estuary were abandoned towards the end of the 4th century AD, and it was not until the 11th century that the coastal marshes were extensively resettled. Today this low, flat landscape is still subject to seasonal flooding.



Mudflats in the estuary of the River Parrett



Prehistoric Settlement in the Severn Estuary

The prehistoric settlement pattern in the Severn Estuary shows a cluster of sites along the edges of the marshes, with large, permanent settlements on the high ground and smaller settlements on 'offshore islands' in the saltmarsh. The rivers and creeks that meandered through the saltmarsh provided access to the mainland and a general means by which people and goods were moved between island settlements. Examples of these island settlements are known at Alstone and Lympham to the north and east of the Steart peninsula. At the famous Iron Age Lake Villages at Glastonbury and Mere the houses were built on artificial mounds to raise them above the water-level. These island settlements had the benefit of being easily defended.

For the Iron Age people living in and around the Estuary, the coastal saltmarshes provided a rich array of seasonal resources including foodstuffs (e.g. wildfowl, fish, berries) and raw materials (e.g. reeds for thatch and basket-making). Archaeological evidence suggests that local topography and the locations of rivers and creeks determined which areas were exploited. During the summer months some areas of the saltmarsh are likely to have been used to graze livestock.



Iron Age pottery vessels





There is limited evidence for prehistoric occupation on the Steart peninsula prior to the Middle to Late Iron Age (400 BC–AD 43). In Area 500, several thin occupation deposits were recorded adjacent to an old tidal creek, now filled in. The deposits contained pottery, animal bones and a rich assemblage of plant remains resulting from crop-processing and foraging. These plant remains included emmer wheat, barley, hazelnuts and sloes. Sheep and cattle were grazed on the grassland during the summer months, and some pigs and horses were also kept.

Further evidence of Iron Age occupation was recorded on the margins of the coastal marshes to the east and southwest of Area 500. Several ditches probably formed part of field systems and indicate a more formal attempt to manage and drain the landscape for settlement and farming.

Given the rather ephemeral nature of the archaeological evidence and the inevitable character of the environment, it seems likely that any occupation of the peninsula at this time was on a temporary or seasonal basis, most probably by communities living on the drier margins of the coastal lowlands, as seen elsewhere around the Severn Estuary.

Excavation at Area 500, dark occupation deposit in foreground



Roman settlement (Area 501)

Land reclamation in the coastal saltmarshes of the Severn Estuary was probably first attempted during the late 1st century AD, in order to improve agricultural productivity by expanding into marginal lands still prone to flooding, protecting them behind embankments. Extensive areas of saltmarsh provide their own natural defence against coastal flooding. However, once the land was drained and settled this natural defence broke down and the area once again became susceptible to flooding. Indeed by the late 4th century AD many of the sites around the Estuary were abandoned due to a declining economy and increased flooding.

Permanent settlements developed on the areas of reclaimed land between the Rivers Axe and Siger, and in the coastal lowlands around the fringes of the saltmarsh. Most of the known Roman settlements in the vicinity of the Steart peninsula were positioned to take advantage of the river network—for example Combwich and Crandon Bridge on the banks of the River Parrett, and others along the Huntspill River. There is extensive evidence for local salt production in the area.





The main evidence for Roman occupation came from the central part of the peninsula (Area 501). The site lay on a slightly raised area of alluvium between two old tidal creeks. Several phases of Roman activity were identified between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD, including a series of inter-cutting enclosure ditches and gullies, a few postholes, and spreads of stone rubble. The stones were probably deposited as hardcore to consolidate the ground surface following episodes of flooding. A small area of intact cobbled surface, possibly a yard, was also found, but there was no indication of any associated buildings.

Flooding was clearly an issue, from the number of times that the ditches and gullies had to be cleaned out and recut. Indeed one of these flooding episodes deposited a layer of alluvium over the site, which sealed a thin occupation layer that had accumulated since the previous deluge.

Excavation in Area 501



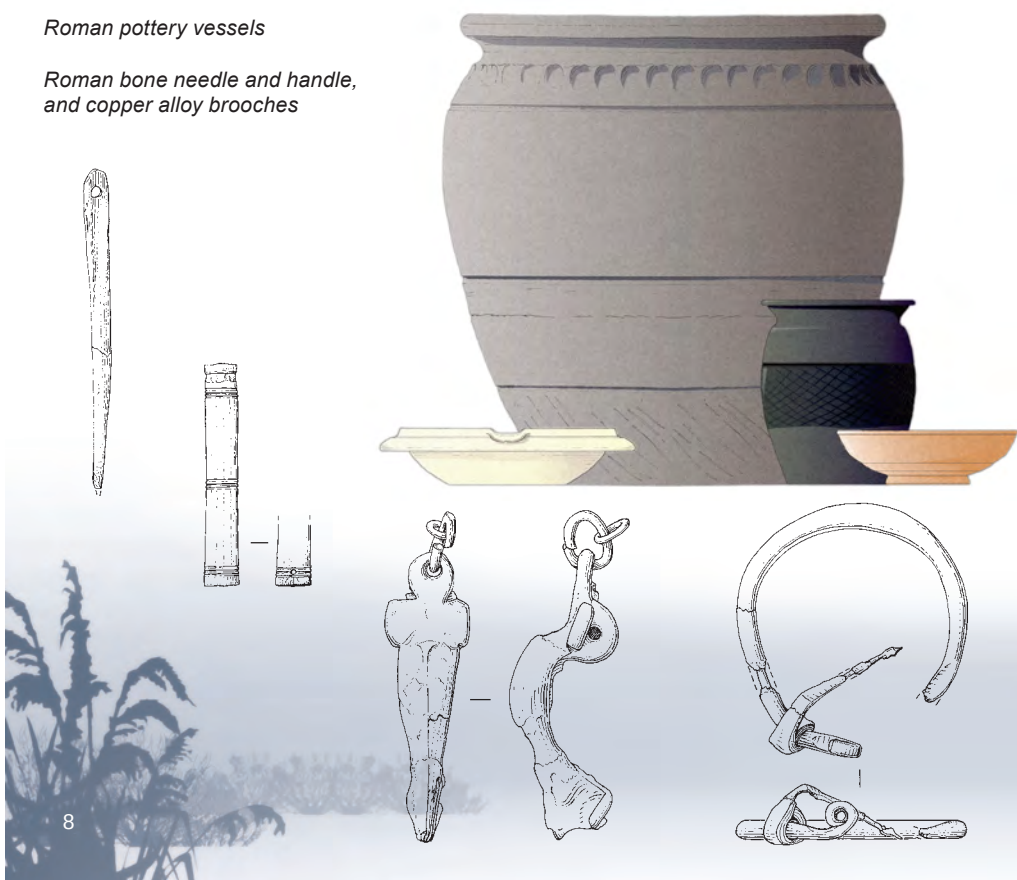
Roman finds and environmental remains

Finds from Area 501 include pottery, animal bone, fired clay, coins, brooches and stone objects. The pottery consists mostly of everyday coarsewares associated with food preparation and storage; there were few fineware vessels. Fragments of fired clay associated with salt-making were also found. The stone objects include a large thatch or net weight, two whetstones and part of a shale armlet. Other notable finds include the remains of a leather hobnailed boot, preserved in the waterlogged fill of one of the drainage ditches. Human remains including an infant burial were also recorded.

Environmental evidence suggests that the Roman inhabitants were primarily engaged in arable and pastoral farming. Spelt wheat was the dominant cereal crop, with small quantities of emmer wheat and barley. Hedgerows and scrub environments were also exploited for nuts and berries. The livestock economy was based on sheep-farming, with smaller numbers of cattle and pig, and horses and dogs were also kept.

Roman pottery vessels

Roman bone needle and handle, and copper alloy brooches





There is no archaeological evidence from the peninsula for any activity between the end of the Roman period (AD 410) and around the time of the Norman Conquest (AD 1066). This appears to have been the case for much of the coastal wetlands around the Severn Estuary, due primarily to flooding, although there is some sparse evidence for Anglo-Saxon occupation.

The coastal marshes were extensively reoccupied by the late 11th century, probably in areas protected by sea walls. Steart, Pawlett, Bridgwater, Stockland and Stogursey are all recorded as settlements in *Domesday* (AD 1086), and have their origins in the late Anglo-Saxon period.

From the 13th century, the Somerset Levels were being increasingly exploited. Behind the shelter of the sea walls or embankments, the recovered land was used not only for grazing sheep and cattle, but arable farming and fishing became more important. The climate deteriorated from the later 13th century, however, and the Parrett Estuary seems to have suffered particularly badly from flooding in the late medieval period.

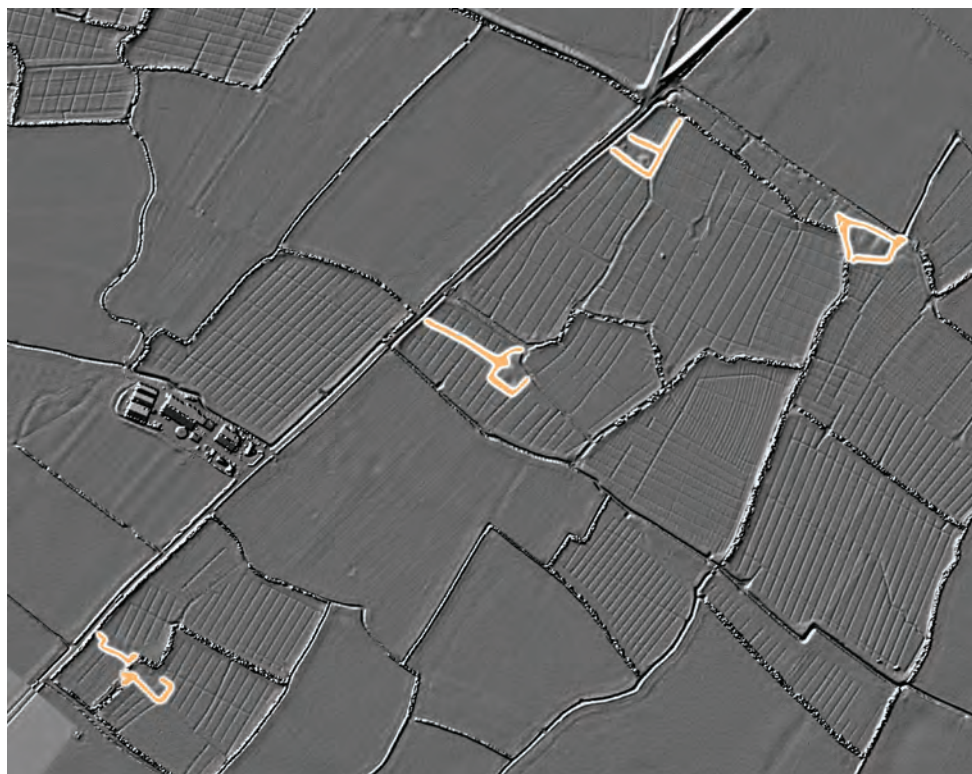
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The area around the Steart peninsula during the medieval period

Using the LiDAR data

Historic maps indicate that much of the medieval farmland on the peninsula was more subdivided than is the case today. There is evidence for extensive farming across the peninsula using the 'ridge and vurrow' technique, much of which is visible on aerial photographs and in the LiDAR data. This farming technique was used to improve pasture and meadowland drainage. The ridge and vurrow seen across the Steart peninsula is undated, and could be relatively recent, but similar methods of surface drainage may have been used since the medieval period and possibly earlier.



'Moated' sites highlighted in the LiDAR data

LiDAR images show 14 'moated' sites on the peninsula, to which can be added the two sites investigated in Areas 502 and 503, both visible on aerial photographs. Most of these sites comprise roughly rectangular platforms either wholly or partially surrounded by ditches or 'moats'. Some are linked to areas of existing settlement, whilst the remainder probably represent abandoned cottages, houses or farms.



The best evidence for medieval occupation on the peninsula came from excavation Areas 502 and 503. Both these sites uncovered the remains of ditched or 'moated' enclosures (the ditches probably flooded seasonally). Radiocarbon dates and pottery sherds suggest that both these sites were first settled in the 11th or 12th century, and may have been part of the reoccupation of the coastal marshes in the late Anglo-Saxon or immediate post-Conquest period, appearing just before or just after *Domesday* (AD 1086).

Exactly how these 'moated' sites were occupied is not entirely clear although there were some traces of timber structures at Area 503. Other evidence consisted of stone rubble spreads and cobbled areas. Despite their size and location, these small, isolated settlements were supplied with pottery from the Bristol area, and even from the Continent, presumably through local markets such as Bridgwater, although the majority of the material culture is likely to have come from the local hinterland. Evidence for a mixed economy (arable and pastoral) comes from the animal bones and other environmental material such as charcoal, seeds and molluscs.

Medieval glazed and decorated jug from the Bristol area

Area 502, stone rubble spread exposed



Historic maps

Bridgwater Bay has a complex history of erosion and accretion, resulting in radical changes to the coastal landscape, and this is apparent from historic maps of the area. The earliest known map, drawn up in 1723, shows the River Parrett from Bridgwater to Steart Point, and shows that Steart Island was originally joined to the mainland by a narrow causeway or neck of land. A map of 1782 shows the island still joined to the mainland by a narrow causeway, but by 1822 it was separate. Initially the breach seems to have been made by a high spring tide around 1792, and this worsened year on year.

The historic maps also illustrate just how unstable were the islands in the bay (Steart, Dunball, Slab and Fenning Islands), and how rapidly they could change in both size and location – for example, Slab Island appeared and disappeared from maps of the 18th century within about 70 years.

Dynamic coastline changes continued into the 20th century, and erosion has resulted in the destruction of the RAF gunnery and bombing site formerly situated on the coastal edge.



1782 map of Bridgwater Bay (© South West Heritage Trust)



Extract from 1822 map of Somerset, showing Steart peninsula (© South West Heritage Trust)



Between the 16th and 18th centuries, the fertile area of the Somerset Levels continued to be extensively farmed; there was continued investment in land reclamation, and improved water management. Documentary sources show that the peninsula included arable land, woodland and marshland, the latter healthy for sheep as well as producing wheat, barley, beans and peas, and this is supported by the environmental evidence (bones, seeds and pollen) recovered from the excavated sites.

Occupation continued in Areas 502 and 503. Sometime after the 14th century, and probably during the 16th century, a new rectangular enclosure ditch was dug in Area 503 and a masonry building was constructed, of which only the latrine survived. Other finds from Areas 503 included an interesting mixture of the everyday (ceramic kitchen wares) and exotic (Anglo-French coin, three Venetian or Dutch glass beads, lead pilgrim's ampulla). The pottery evidence, and almost complete absence of clay tobacco pipes (common finds on archaeological sites from the 17th century), suggests that both sites were abandoned early in the 17th century.

Stone-built latrine excavated in Area 503



A possible reconstruction of the house in Area 503

Long-distance connections

The coin, pilgrim's ampulla (a small container for holy water, obtained from a shrine) and glass beads found in Area 503 are all unusual objects, and their appearance here, on what seems to be a small farmstead of no particular pretensions, is intriguing. The ampulla (14th or 15th century) and coin (early 15th century) were found in the backfill of the latrine construction cut, and could have been deliberately placed there, perhaps as a 'foundation deposit' of curated objects – pottery from the same feature was up to a century later in date. They seem more likely to have arrived at Steart as personal property rather as traded items—it is tempting to see them together, as items once owned by one individual.

The glass beads (16th or 17th century), however, are likely to have arrived as a result of coastal trade. Both local and foreign shipping plied the north Devon and Somerset coasts, *en route* to Bristol, south Wales, Ireland and beyond. Ships called regularly at Combwich, Bridgwater's outport, in the 16th and 17th centuries, and in the 16th century some shipping put into Steart bay.



Lead pilgrim's ampulla in the shape of a cockle shell



Anglo-French coin

Venetian or Dutch glass beads





Why were the settlements in Areas 502 and 503 abandoned during the 17th century, at a time when Somerset was apparently prosperous? It seems likely that these small, relatively isolated sites were adversely affected by local flooding. There are many documentary references to storms and flooding in the 17th century – for example, 40 acres beside the Parrett were eroded away during a great storm in 1637, and in 1655 it was noted that the marshlands of Stockland were often flooded, spoiling valuable grazing grass for cattle.

However, it is an earlier event which may have been decisive for the settlements at Steart. In 1607 the parish of Pawlett was overwhelmed by a 'great inundation of waters', in an event which seems to have affected the whole coastal area of the Bristol Channel. Some studies have described this event as comparable to a tsunami wave. Whatever it was, it is tempting to attribute to it the abandonment of Area 502, while Area 503 may have survived for perhaps one more generation.

Flooding during the excavation of Area 502



Epilogue



Sunset over the Parrett Estuary

Very little archaeological evidence was recovered for activity on the Steart peninsula after the 17th century, and settlement probably largely contracted to the current village locations – Steart, Stockland Bristol, Stolford and Otterhampton. Growing crops seems to have become difficult in the 19th century, and much of the area was used for pasture. However, fish weirs, coastal defences and groynes continued to be built. In 1841 there were eight commercial fishermen at Stolford and one at Steart, but by the late 20th century the industry had virtually died out. During the Second World War the British military sited several gunnery ranges, telecommunications buildings and a bombing range observation post on the peninsula.

The landscape is still evolving, and the economy changing. After centuries of the construction of successive coastal defences, the current development by the Environment Agency, in conjunction with the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) has seen a breaching of the existing sea wall, resulting in the reversion of a large part of the peninsula to managed saltmarsh and freshwater wetlands. The new Steart Marshes are designed to flood about 100 times a year, and will provide vital flood defences for Steart village, as well as an extensive wildlife habitat.



Acknowledgements



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The fieldwork was directed by Chris Ellis with supervisory assistance from John Powell, Naomi Brennan, Olly Good, Lorrain Higbee and Piotr Orczewski, and was undertaken by a number of Wessex Archaeology staff who had to work in extreme site conditions. The fieldwork and subsequent post-excavation assessment and analysis were respectively managed on behalf of Wessex Archaeology by Andy Crockett, Alistair Barclay and Lorraine Mephram.

This booklet was written by Lorrain Higbee and Lorraine Mephram. Illustrations and typesetting by Rob Goller except the landscape reconstruction on page 4 by Karen Nichols and the finds drawings on page 8 by Elizabeth James.

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A full account of the archaeological work on the Steart peninsula has been published by Wessex Archaeology. For more details visit the Wessex Archaeology website at:

www.wessexarch.co.uk





The Steart peninsula has been occupied for thousands of years and exploited for its rich natural resources, but this has always been a marginal landscape, subject to incursions from the sea and coastal erosion. Prior to the recent development by the Environment Agency to return part of the peninsula to managed saltmarsh and freshwater wetlands, archaeologists spent time here investigating traces of earlier occupation, from the prehistoric period to more recent times.

Piecing together evidence from excavations, as well as scientific data and historic maps, they found that the peninsula has been settled at various times, sometimes on a seasonal basis and at other times more permanently. The land has been farmed, and the inhabitants also had access to coastal and wetland resources. Other goods were supplied from the wider region and even from the Continent. Environmental factors were a perpetual risk, however, and in the 17th century disastrous flooding may have overwhelmed two of the small settlements excavated.

