

The Archaeology and Heritage of Wembury

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The Setting

The parish is bordered by coastline on the west and south west, and by the Yealm Estuary and Cofflete Creek on the south-east and east. The south-facing cliffs are composed of Dartmouth Slate, which extends inland for one to two kilometres where it is succeeded by slates-with-grit of the Meadfoot Group. These are in turn succeeded north of Bovisand and north east of Knighton village by grits and slates of the Staddon Grits. Inland, the parish is hilly and cut by numerous small valleys. The highest ground is at Staddon Heights, which rises to 125m above sea level. The north-eastern extremity of the parish, bordering Cofflete Creek, consists of Middle Devonian slate. At the south-western edge of the parish the low cliffs incorporate a raised beach that was established in a period of higher sea level during a warm phase of the Ice Age.

The coast is exposed, and the absence of an accessible sheltered harbour here or on the estuary (like the one at Newton & Noss) meant that no ports or fishing settlements were developed. Instead, the main settlements emerged away from the coast. In recent centuries the proximity and influence of Plymouth had a major effect on the area. Land defences for Plymouth were first established in Wembury in the Elizabethan period, and coastal defences began with Staddon Battery in the 18th century and were spectacularly elaborated in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Wembury was also in the forefront of the defence of Plymouth during the Second World War.

In the account which follows, HER references are to the Devon Historic Environment Record. This provides detailed accounts of the sites mentioned. It can be consulted by

contacting Devon County Council's Archaeology Team.

The Prehistoric Period

There is much evidence of Mesolithic activity around Staddon Heights and Bovisand. Worked flints of this date have been collected here from the 19th century onwards (HER 14766, 20997, 56299 & 17348). Mesolithic flint implements have also been recovered from an eroding cliff face at Wembury Beach (HER 13492). Such coastal sites are typical of the Mesolithic period in Devon (10000-4000BC), but it has been reported that flint tools - allegedly including a hand axe - were also found inland around Traine Farm (HER 66708).

Evidence of later prehistoric activity is scarcer. Two enclosed settlements, probably of Bronze Age or Iron Age date, were identified on 1946 aerial photographs near Wembury village. One is located south east of the settlement (HER 55129) and the other is now built over (HER 55130). A gold ingot (HER 71360), believed to be Late Bronze Age in date, was found by a metal detectorist to the east of Knighton Farm in 2005.

The Roman Period

A surprising number of Roman coins have been found in the parish at, amongst other places, Staddon Heights, Staddiscombe, Bovisand, Heybrook Bay and Wembury Point. They range in date from the 1st to the 3rd centuries AD. However, no settlement of Roman date has so far been identified in Wembury. The closest known site is Mount Batten, the peninsula on the Wembury side of Plymouth Sound, where there was an industrial (metalworking) and trading centre in the Late Bronze Age. Throughout the Iron

Age this centre had extensive contacts with the Continent, and was perhaps involved in the trade in metals between South-West Britain, Atlantic Europe and the Mediterranean. It continued to function as a port in the Roman period, at this time involved in short-haul coastal trade with Dorset and Cornwall, rather than in long-haul international trade.

The Post-Roman Period

Like Bantham Ham in Thurlestone parish and Mothecombe in Holbeton, Wembury Beach may have been a coastal trading site in the post-Roman period. Pottery found at Bantham and Mothecombe demonstrates direct trading links between South Devon and the Byzantine or later Roman Empire between the 5th and 8th centuries AD. Timber structures, and hearths with charred food remains hinting at 'wining and dining', probably show these were seasonal trading posts with temporary buildings erected beside sheltered sandy beaches where boats could land safely. No pottery or food debris has been found at Wembury, only two gullies and a hearth that were probably the remains of a timber building that had burnt down (HER 70543); but radiocarbon dates of 420-600 AD match ones from Bantham and Mothecombe. The location of the church on the coast may indicate a foundation in the post-Roman Celtic Christian period.

The Anglo-Saxon Period

No structures or artefacts survive from this period, but a number of place-names, including Wembury itself, are Anglo-Saxon in origin.

The Medieval Period

The most important survival from the medieval period is the church of St Werburgh (HER 1735). This has a 14th century tower, and the remainder of the building is 15th or early 16th century. It is Listed Grade I.

Wembury Mill (HER 1731) is medieval in origin, but the surviving building is later. Langdon Mill, also dating back to the medieval period, was located a little further upstream, but became disused in the early 19th century and nothing remains of it now.

The two most important houses in the parish, Wembury House (HER 1733) and Langdon Court (HER 15468), were first built in the medieval period, but nothing survives of the earliest buildings. Wembury House was a 16th-century mansion of legendary grandeur. It was built around 1591 by Sir John Hele close to the site of 'Wembury Farm', which belonged to Plympton Priory before the Dissolution. This house was demolished and rebuilt in the late 17th century and the present building dates from 1803. The medieval house at Langdon was rebuilt in 1577, remodelled in 1707 and altered and extended in 1877. These dates coincide closely with the Calmady family's ownership of Langdon (1564 - 1876). The house's present incarnation is the Langdon Court Hotel.

A number of farms, such as Ford, Traine (HER 18290 & 61520) and Spirewell are recorded in the early 14th century, but the buildings there today are much later in date.

The pattern of medieval strip fields to the south and west of Down Thomas, and extending east to Langdon, is still very visible on the 1784-6 Ordnance Survey Surveyor's Drawing; on the 1869 OS 1:10560 map; and in smaller pockets even on 1946 RAF aerial photographs. This field pattern has almost completely disappeared today.

The sole medieval coin to have been found in Wembury is a silver penny of King John (1199-1216) (HER 27569), discovered at Lower Traine. (A second coin has been found at Traine Farm is of later, Elizabethan, date (HER 66706).

The Post-Medieval Period

Various sites and buildings in the parish are from this period.

Wembury House and Langdon Court were important houses in the late 17th and 18th centuries with elaborate gardens and landscaped parks. Both houses are now Listed Grade II*. Many features of the gardens at Langdon have survived, and some are also Listed Grade II*. Surviving features include a formal terraced garden with two contemporary pavilions (HER 29859) and, from the landscaped park, two (unlisted) rectangular ponds or 'canals' designed on a grand scale and unique in South Devon. These features can be clearly seen on the Calmady Map of 1788/89, which is part of the Calmady Atlas held by the Devon Record Office. This map shows the entire Langdon Estate of the time in great detail, providing extensive information on matters such as the balance of pasture and arable; variations in field size; tenants' names; and the location and scale of tenants' farms. Wembury Local History Society holds a digital photographic reproduction of this map, copies of which have been placed in the Plymouth and West Devon Record Office and the Devon Rural Archive.

Langdon Barton (HER 36078), with its associated farm buildings, is a good surviving example of a farmhouse from the 18th century. This cluster of agricultural buildings is Listed Grade II, as are the nearby tithe barn and Langdon Lodge.

The gardens and park at Wembury House were less ambitious than those at Langdon, but nonetheless included features now Listed Grade II or II*. The house also boasted a deerpark in the late 16th century. This was still commemorated in field names on the 1840 Tithe Map. The nearby Hele Almshouses (Grade II*, HER 13490) are a row of six houses with their own chapel (HER 1734) that were built and endowed by the family around 1590.

A number of sites, some still existing, point to the continuing use of the River Yealm for transport, communications and food resources at this time. There are two quays on the Wembury bank. These are shown on 19th century Ordnance Survey maps, as is the

Yealm ferry between Warren Point and Revelstoke in Newton & Noss. In 1802 the ferry belonged to the Wembury estate together with the 'Tolls and Dues of the said River, and the Water, Piscary, Fishing, Oysterage, and Royalty of, in, and through the same'. The estate included a 'valuable fishery' - perhaps the tidal pond first described in the 16th century and still present to the north of Thorn.

By the 19th century, however, the sea and the river were not as important to the economy of the wider parish. Only two mariners and one fisherman are listed in the 1851 census, and the sole building linked with this industry on the 1890 Ordnance Survey map is at Warren Point and is described as a fish store (HER 30524). Nevertheless, Wembury was a base for the coastguard service from its beginnings. Its original purpose was to control smuggling activities on the river and around the coast, and its life-saving function evolved later. The coastguard station located to the north of Warren Point (HER 36072) was built before 1824. Lookouts and a life-saving rocket apparatus (HER 30528) are also shown on the Point on later 19th century maps; Rocket Cottage is now built on the site. A lookout station (HER 48761) was built at Staddon Point before 1827, and a second row of coastguard cottages (HER 39086) is located to the east of Bovisand Fort.

There are few industrial sites in Wembury. Wheal Emily antimony mine (HER 30520) near Knighton Farm was active in the first half of the 19th century. The remains of small stone quarries for local building material, shown on 19th century Ordnance Survey maps, can still be found. And the workings of two larger-scale quarries - Devonport Quarry and Plymouth Quarry (originally in Plymstock parish) - can be seen on the coast at Staddon Point.

Because of its strategic position for the defence of Plymouth, military remains dominate the post-medieval archaeology of Wembury. Land defences were first established there in the Elizabethan period,

but no remains of these have been definitely identified. Coastal defences began in the 18th century with Staddon Battery (HER 39298), located above Ramscliff Point on the site occupied by Staddon Cottage today. This emplacement was replaced by Staddon Point Battery (HER 48759), completed in 1847 as part of an expanded 19th-century defence system that also included Fort Picklecombe and Eastern King Fort west of Plymouth Sound. The battery was designed to protect (1) the harbour and pier (HER 48768) at Bovisand, where naval vessels moored in Plymouth Sound were supplied with water, and (2) the eastern entrance to Plymouth Sound. It was in turn superseded by the construction of Fort Bovisand, part of the Staddon Heights Defences.

The structures comprising the Staddon Heights Defences are the most impressive remains to survive from any period in the parish, although Staddon and Stamford forts lie just outside it. The defences were built between 1860 and c.1870 following the recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Defences of the United Kingdom, set up because of fears of a possible invasion by France under Napoleon III. The Staddon Heights Defences were the eastern end of a wider ring of coastal batteries and forts designed to protect Plymouth Dockyard from attack by sea and land.

Fort Bovisand (HER 17323) and Fort Stamford defended the sea approaches to Plymouth Sound. The land defences consisted of two forts, Staddon and Stamford, and three batteries, Watch House (HER 17324), Twelve Acre Brake (HER 17314) and Brownhill (HER 17378). These were linked by a defensible military road. These positions formed a totally integrated and interdependent defensive system. The southern end of the defences, from Staddon to Fort Bovisand, was also protected by a massive dry ditch (HER 48748-51) on the landward side. Another impressive structure from the same period is the huge masonry wall of the target butts (HER 43589) at the southern end of the military firing range. These defences survive today in great

measure, although altered and adapted by continuing defence modernisation in the later 19th and early 20th centuries. Much can be observed from the coast path, which runs through this defence complex immediately above Fort Bovisand.

The Modern Period

Lentney and Renney Batteries, sited on the coast to the north of Heybrook Bay, are well-preserved defences of early 20th century date. Lentney (HER 39300) was completed in 1905. Renney (HER 13723) was built in 1905-6, and was designed to keep the largest battleships of this period out of range of the Dockyard.

Both batteries were rearmed and reused during World War 2, as were many other existing defensive sites. But numerous new defences were also built to protect Plymouth during the Second World War. As the Heritage Appraisal database demonstrates, many of these were in Wembury, where they were concentrated impressively in the western part of the parish. They included pillboxes, searchlights, a barrage balloon at Staddon Heights (HER 51616), an anti-aircraft rocket battery at Hooe Hill (HER 71921), a heavy anti-aircraft battery at Down Thomas (HER 13884), and bombing decoys at both Wembury (HER 13885) and Down Thomas (HER 59228). Traces of these survive to a greater or lesser degree.

During World War 2 an embryonic naval gunnery facility was established at Wembury Point. This was made permanent after the war; in 1956 the site was named HMS Cambridge (HER 50865), and was developed into the most important Naval Gunnery School and live firing range in the country. The facility dominated the Point until it was closed in 1999 and subsequently acquired by The National Trust in 2006. The Ministry of Defence demolished most of the buildings on the site in 2002, and subsequently the Trust removed the remainder with the exception of a radar facility that is still operated for the navy. One somewhat controversial aspect of

this clearance was the demolition of the Leach Building, a cold-war concrete command centre built into the cliff. English Heritage declined to list this building – despite its place in the evolution of defence structures around Plymouth Sound – and the National Trust indicated that it would not purchase Wembury Point if the building had to remain.

Apart from the military remains, the most visible monuments of the 20th century are new housing developments. When the Langdon Estate was sold and broken up in 1927, the sale catalogue highlighted the suitability of land for building at every opportunity. The swift results were the development of Heybrook Bay immediately west of Wembury Point; ribbon development, especially along Church Road and at Hollacombe; and outliers of housing such as that at Andurn. Much larger scale construction, a great deal of it planned for the coast, was prevented by World War 2. Then, in the late 1960s and 1970s, substantial estates typical of suburban housing of the era were built in Wembury and, to a lesser extent, Heybrook Bay.

Sources Consulted

Berry, N. 2006 *Archaeological and Historic Landscape Survey of Wembury Point & the Mewstone, Wembury, Devon* (The National Trust).

Collings, A.G. 2008 *History of Newton & Noss Parish* (Exeter Archaeology)

Cunliffe, B. 1988 *Mount Batten: A Prehistoric and Roman Port*, Oxford University Press.

Pye, A. & Woodward, F. 1996 *The Historic Defences of Plymouth*.

Reed, S.J. 2003 *Archaeological Recording at Wembury Bay, Plymouth*, Exeter Archaeology Report No. 03.58.

Sites of Interest

N.B. Listing these sites does not imply there is public access to them.

These sites, and many others, are detailed in the Heritage Appraisal's database.

Parish church of St Werburgh (HER 1735)
 Wembury Mill (HER 1731)
 Wembury House (HER 1733)
 Langdon Court (now the Langdon Court Hotel) (HER 15468)
 Hele Almshouses (HER 13490)
 Langdon Barton (HER 36078)
 Coastguard cottages at Warren Point (HER 36072)
 Coastguard cottages at Bovisand Lane (HER 39086)
 Staddon Battery (now Staddon Cottage) (HER 39298)
 Bovisand Pier (HER 48768)
 Staddon Point Battery (HER 48759)
 Fort Bovisand (HER 17323)
 Watch House Battery (HER 17324)
 Twelve Acre Brake Battery (HER 17314)
 Brownhill Battery (HER 17378)
 Target butts wall, Staddon Heights (HER 43589)
 Lentney Battery (HER 39300)
 Renney Battery (HER 13723)
 WW2 anti-aircraft battery at Down Thomas (HER 13884)
 WW2 rocket battery at Hooe Hill (HER 71921)
 HMS Cambridge, Wembury Point (HER 50865)