

# Great Archaeological Sites in Newport



## 3. THE WENTLOOGE LEVEL



Archaeology is the study of the physical remains of human activity, and whilst we normally think of it as dealing with individual sites and artefacts, it also works on a larger scale too – the appearance of the landscape itself is the result of the way people have managed it over the centuries. Nowhere is this clearer than on the Gwent Levels, the swathes of land that have been reclaimed from the sea on either side of Newport, the Caldicot Level to the east and the Wentlooge Level to the west.

Saltmarshes – areas of salt-tolerant vegetation that are covered by the sea at times of high tide – have always been used to pasture suitable livestock, but this interaction with the sea means there are times when grazing is not possible. In order to convert them to pasture that can be used all the time, it is necessary to get rid of the excess of water. Building sea walls excludes the sea, but steps also have to be taken to drain off the streams of water that come from the land, which would otherwise flood the newly-enclosed fields. This was done by digging channels to capture the streams and control their waters. On the Gwent Levels, these channels are traditionally called 'reens'. A network of reens divides the Wentlooge Level into rectangular fields; the smaller reens feed into larger reens until the water eventually arrives at the coast where the reens discharge into the sea. They do this through sluice gates, which are opened or closed depending on the state of the tides so that water from the land can drain away without allowing the sea to come in.

From the 1980s, archaeologists and geologists from the University of Reading have carried out research on the Levels and the lower-lying intertidal zone below the sea wall. The discovery of ditches associated with Roman pottery in the intertidal zone led them to the conclusion that at least a part of the present field system went back continuously to Roman times. However it is not all uniform, and detailed study shows how the landscape has developed over time. The richness of the livelihood it provided by the end of the Middle Ages can be seen in the two main villages, Peterstone Wentlooge and St Brides Wentlooge, where the inhabitants were wealthy enough to hire master- builders from the Bristol area to work on churches that are matched in South Wales only by St John’s in Cardiff.



Most of the Wentlooge Level lies between the main railway line between the Wales Coast Path and the Newport – Cardiff railway line, with small areas inland of the railway. Maps: OS Landranger Series sheet 171, Explorer Series sheet 152.

**Timeline** (the asterisks indicate the possible time-span)



You can learn more about the Gwent Levels on our Historic Landscapes pages at [http://www.ggat.org.uk/cadw/historic\\_landscape/main/english/historical.htm](http://www.ggat.org.uk/cadw/historic_landscape/main/english/historical.htm). You can search here too for other Registered Historic Landscapes in our area. You can contact us via social media or through the methods given at the bottom of the page.