

Archaeology and Cumbria's Coast

Cumbria has one of the longest coastlines in England and the actions of the sea along this coast have influenced the county over the centuries.

The subject of Appleby Archaeology Group's December evening lecture was "The Archaeology of Cumbria's Ports" and members heard how the coast and its ports have always been important to Cumbria, though often overshadowed by the focus on the fells, mountains and farmland in the county.

Richard Newman, Project Manager for Wardell- Armstrong Archaeology and Visiting Research fellow of Newcastle University, has a passion for the ports, harbours and bays of the Cumbrian coastline and he gave a very informative presentation about the archaeology and the historical development of some of the major locations.

The word "port" means "an entry point" – for people, goods, exotic items and were places where knowledge and ideas might have been exchanged over centuries. He provided detail of how Cumbria's coastline has no shortage of locations where some of the very earliest ports could have been established, with plenty of sites offering shallow beaches for loading and unloading of goods and several sheltered sites where ships could lay at anchor safely.

Prehistoric archaeological evidence for ports or harbours is often scanty but at Eskmeals there is evidence of Mesolithic flints and pottery, and another Mesolithic river-side location near Carlisle has been identified.

The Romans were the first to engineer "docks" in any sizeable way but they themselves did say of the Irish Sea that it was "full of ships" so there was clearly some large degree of maritime activity prior to their arrival in this region.

Ravenglass roman port is well known and it is likely that Maryport was used as a loading spot to send goods along the Solway to service Hadrian's Wall, passing Allonby and Silloth – two more places with some evidence of early ports.

Little is known about exact landings in the Early Medieval era but the nature and location of some finds have provided some clues to archaeologists. North of Morcambe Bay, Arnside and around Furness and Newbarns have been found coins, fragments of bowls and mounts from Irish hanging bowls. It was during the Medieval period that the legal concept of a "port" was defined and when "port books" began to show more systematically what goods were entering and leaving ports.

Members were surprised to learn that the city of Chester covered and controlled many of Cumbria's ports until Carlisle began to assume more maritime importance about 1560.

The 17th, 18th and 19th centuries saw many goods arriving at Cumbria's coast to be transformed into items which have become part of Cumbria's culture and identity such as rum (Cumberland Rum Butter), sugar (Kendal Mint Cake) and the arrival of tobacco created workshops and employment for many as it was prepared and turned into snuff.

Richard then went on to discuss "planned towns" such as Harrington Harbour and Whitehaven and explained how wealth from Liverpool created Barrow's shipbuilding industry. Finally he posed a question – "In years to come might the submarine sheds become listed monuments for future archaeologists to study?"

Richard was warmly thanked by an appreciative audience.

Appleby Archaeology Group will next meet at Centre 67 at 7.30pm on January 13th 2015 when it will be their AGM and members evening.