East Head, West Wittering, East Sussex

Reports by members of the public about two exposed wooden structures on the lower shore at East Head led to survey and sampling by the Chichester and District Archaeological Society (CDAS) in 2020/1. The structures are fish traps, but unusual ones. The majority of Anglo-Saxon and medieval fish traps in the UK are 'simple' structures with V-shaped plans, of varied sizes, constructed of posts with connected hurdles. The East Head traps differ in having a circular 'pound' at the apex of V-shaped leaders, into which fish were directed on a falling tides. Cooper *et al* (2017) have reported a very similar trap from Ashlett Creek, Southampton dated by radiocarbon to the Middle Saxon period. This presence of a large circular 'pound' remains restricted, in the UK, to the Solent area: it has a close parallel with another Saxon period weir at Binstead on the Isle of Wight; whilst similar circular pounds have been reported from Langstone Harbour, also dated to the Anglo-Saxon period, (Allen and Gardiner 2000, 112- 123) and at Medmerry, near Selsey, at present not yet dated. These 'Solent-type' fish traps show clear similarities to traps with circular pounds on the Northern French coast: there is an illustration of one from the 18th century, and they have remained in use until recent times (Cooper *et al.* ibid.)

East Head 1 has a pound around 7m in diameter with some internal wooden and sandstone slab components and with two leaders extending outwards and a less substantial cross-leader between them. There are subsidiary post alignments of unknown function, not necessarily contemporary with the main structure. East Head 2 is smaller, with a pound 5m in diameter, and no clear evidence for leaders. Although these structures now lie low on the beach, major changes in coastline morphology have taken place at the mouth of Chichester Harbour. Map regression shows that East Head has moved eastwards since 1786 by over 500m. (Searle 1975). It is a mobile sand and shingle spit which was formerly further east, protecting tidal creeks. Augering at the sites shows that they were constructed in low-energy creeks, and macrofossils from samples indicate a salt marsh/intertidal mudflat environment, which no doubt existed behind an earlier position of East Head.

Plainly, these structures at East Head required dating. CDAS is very grateful to CBASE for funding two radiocarbon dates, which were provided by Queens University Belfast. The results (95.4% probability) are as follows:

UBA-44774. 299 $\pm$ 23 BP, cal AD 1505-1653, median probability 1557 AD.

UBA-44775, 317 $\pm$ 25 BP, cal AD 1492-1644, median probability 1561 AD.

The two results are consistent, pointing to construction around the middle of the 16th century AD.

Obviously, these results were unexpected. Remarkably similar structures have now been reported from the Middle Saxon period and the 16th century, but apparently with no similar structures of intervening date. There are a number of possibilities, but no definite answers. It is possible that there were cultural contacts between the Solent area and northern France, so that there was interchange of ideas about how to construct a fish trap. Alternatively, local fishers in the Solent area during the 16th century may have seen the remains of much earlier structures and replicated them.

References

Allen, M.J. and Gardiner, J. 2000. *Our Changing Coast: A survey of the intertidal archaeology of Langstone Harbour, Hampshire*. CBA Research Report 124. York: Council for British Archaeology

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Searle, S.A. 1975. *The Tidal Threat – East Head Spit, Chichester Harbour*, Chichester Harbour Commission pamphlet.

Image by Peter King