

The Early Settlement of Hope Cove and Bolt Tail and the part played by Quay Sands

A brief discussion.

Introduction

This short paper in no way seeks to offer a definitive account of settlement but by referring to the evidence in the landscape wishes to offer a point of view for discussion. Challenges to any assumptions are most welcome.

What I have called Quay Sands may be called Pilchard Cove by some and indeed appears as such on modern maps. The central valley area of Bolt Tail runs from Redrot Cove in the south to Quay Sands in the north. The Courtney Map of 1841 calls Redrot Cove "Reed Rot" and the area between the two coves is named Reed Rot Bottom. In these notes I will refer to it as Redrot Bottom. It should be noted that the same map labels Quay Sands "Pilchard Cove". No doubt this refers to its use during the days of the pilchard bonanza but a sketch map drawn in 1823 for a proposed new breakwater calls it Pilchard Quay.

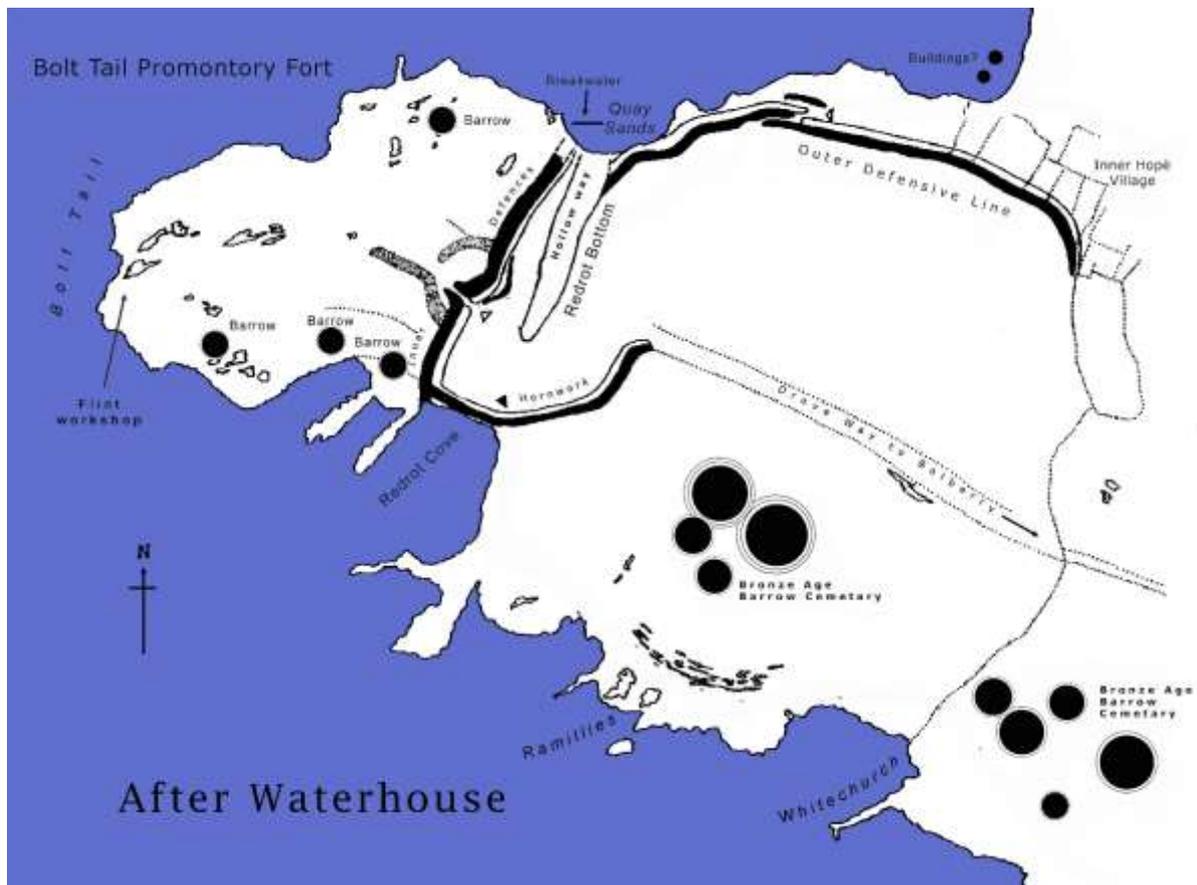


Figure 1 Early human activity on Bolt Tail and Inner Hope



Figure 2 Overview



Figure 3 Fortified area. Frances Griffiths, Devon County Archaeology

Discussion

There are a number of sixteenth century buildings in the twin villages of Inner and Outer Hope but nothing much to show for earlier habitation apart from an early mention in the Assize Rolls for 1281. The Iron Age Fort on Bolt Tail has had two comprehensive but non-invasive surveys in the last twenty years. It is considered to be of Iron Age date but Waterhouse hints that by comparing it with similar forts it may have its beginnings in the stone age.

It is also of considerable interest in being located at the extremity of the former parish of Malborough, in exactly the same way as Burleigh Dolts lies at one end of the linear estate of South Huish. It seems to provide further evidence that these 'linear' land holdings are prehistoric in origin. ¹

There is evidence of habitation at Hope from the mesolithic, through the bronze age, the iron age, possible Danish settlement, the Norman invasion and on to the present day. Waterhouse carried out

a comprehensive historical survey of the area but there has never been any thorough excavation in the immediate vicinity to assist in determining the early occupancy.

The starting point is to consider the environment as it existed in prehistoric times. Massey et al have shown how the sea level has risen since the end of the last ice age. This is due to the general sinking of the land in the Westcountry due to isostatic adjustment.²

The relative sea level along the south Devon coastline has risen by 21 m during the past 9000 years. The sea level rose some 13m during the first 2000 years following the end of the ice age but during the last 7000 years the rate slowed and since that time there has been a rise of around 8m. During the period when the sea level was lower a forest flourished in Bigbury Bay. In extreme conditions the remains have been seen at Inner Hope and more recently at Thurlestone.³

Examination of old postcards shows the cliff between Inner and Outer Hope has retreated by about 2m. Assuming the same rate of erosion one might assume that 1000 years ago the cliff would be 20m out into the bay. Thus the geography of the area may have changed although the valleys through Inner and Outer Hope would still shape the beach area and going further back one supposes the valleys would have met.

There is evidence of mesolithic habitation between Bolt Tail and Bolt Head with flint finds and barrows. At Inner Hope there is a possible stone age hut circle. In ancient times and lower sea levels Inner Hope would have been an attractive place to settle with fresh water running through the valley. However with rising sea levels and no sea wall to protect them they would be vulnerable to the forces of nature and exposed to attack by sea-going invaders.

The need for a defensible site was easily found on Bolt Tail. The high ground to the west would provide some natural advantage however against a large and determined band something more substantial was needed. Whatever the time period when the rampart was raised it would have needed a lot of labour to complete the work.

The discovery of flint tools from the mesolithic on Bolt Tail and Bolberry Down can arbitrarily be placed around 7000 BC so that seems a good date to start. Those early settlers would have experienced a high water mark around Quay sands – 8m lower than today. Forest conditions would be found from there to the present coastline.

Assuming the previous paragraph is correct it is debateable whether the best interface with the sea would be via Quay Sands and up the cliff or the gentle approach currently in use? Being one who always seeks the easiest option I believe the valley openings at Inner and Outer Hope would be preferred. Supporting this view the rocky approach to Quay Sands would have been less convenient than it is with its difficult entrance.

In those early days it is tempting to assume that communications were via the two ridgeways still in evidence today. One is at the top of the downs heading towards Galmpton and another proceeding from St Clements chapel towards Malborough. Intriguingly there is another – identified by Waterhouse but no longer easily seen – which goes from Bolt Tail towards Bolberry and which may provide a significant clue to early settlement.

Faint evidence of habitation dating from the bronze age has been observed in the area in the form of field systems and hut circles. In 1923 Winder noted a possible hut circle was seen near the slipway at

Inner Hope and another building on organic (forest?) material nearby. If the hut circle is of the bronze age period the sea level would have been some 5m lower than at present which presumably would make it safe from the sea and conveniently near a fresh water supply. These were seen again and photographed by the author in 2013.⁴

On the high ground either side of the valley in the middle of Bolt Tail there are remains which have been identified as bronze age barrows. This indicates that the area was in use before the construction of the Iron Age fort. Burials on high ground suggests a local resident population living nearby but the question is where?

In Redrot Bottom there is a depression running down from the fort entrance to Quay Sands. Paul Rainbird describes this as a hollow way – or sunken lane.⁵



Figure 4 Sunken lane or hollow way

These hollow ways, or sunken lanes, were known in the iron age so this one may be contemporary with the fort. This, and the semi-circular earthwork or platform where it meets the top of the cliff at Quay Sands indicates an important function for the small bay. The well worn hollow way further suggests a fair volume of traffic along its short length between the fort and the cove below.



Figure 5 Platform above Quay Sands

It is tempting to assume that in the late bronze age and early iron age there may have been a settlement in Redrot Bottom. Such a settlement would be protected from bad weather from all directions except the north. The fort may have been built for defensive purposes while the settlement was in use. Of course there is no evidence for such habitation although it would seem no one has looked for any. One problem in any such search would be that it is known that the area was ploughed from the 1840s – and probably earlier - up until the early nineteen fifties so any remains might have been destroyed.

The next piece of evidence in the puzzle is the construction in Quay Sands known by oral tradition as the Danish Breakwater. All that remains of the structure is the bottom course of rocks taken from the cliffs. These have been protected from the storms by a row of huge boulders on the seaward side but it seems to have been a substantial wall.

Risdon's "*Survey of the County of Devon*" completed in 1632 refers to the village as Hope Key as " a noted place for plenty of pilchards at times there taken". ⁶ Was the key – or quay – the present day slip way and hard standing at the north end of Boat Beach or does it refer to the "Danish" breakwater at Quay Sands?

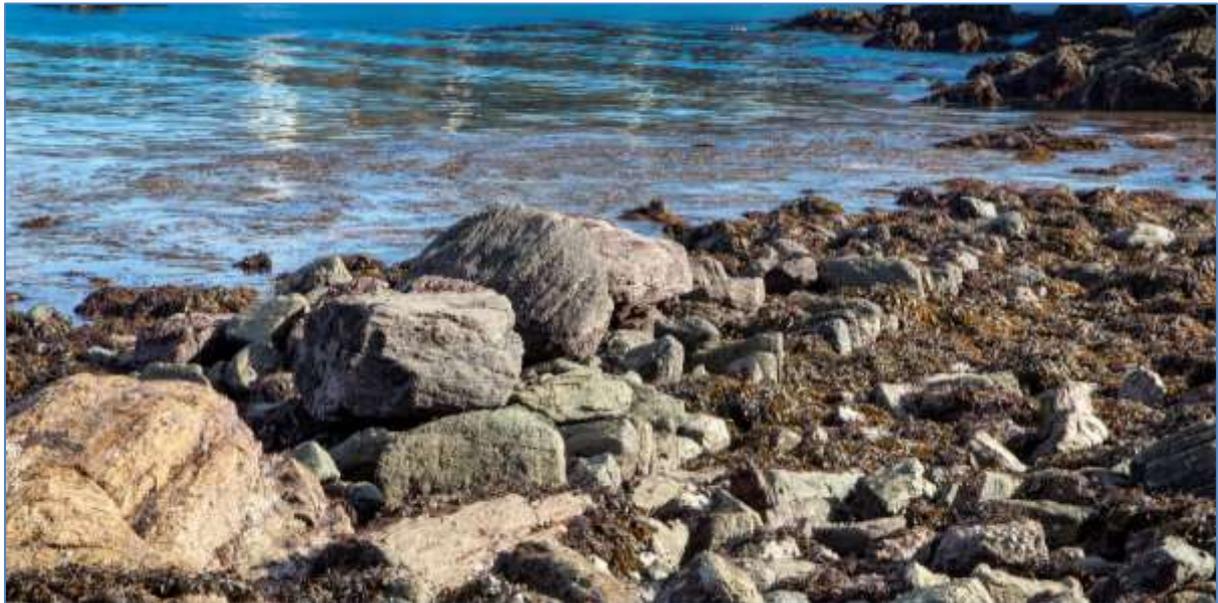


Figure 6 Old breakwater

Looking at the beach it was built to protect it would seem that all the large rocks one might expect to find at the base of a cliff have been moved to the western side. These rocks are a mixture of the three main types of schist found locally and the fact that they are mixed up suggests they have not just accumulated where they have fallen from the cliffs because if that were the case they would show distinct sorting. The cliffs here are about 25 – 30m high and are neither sheer or much graduated.



Figure 7 Beach area

Above them is a semi-circular area which has been thought of as part of the fortifications but which might also represent a work area for those early fishermen.

Danes are believed to have settled at Starehole Bay near Bolt Head but there does not appear to be evidence for settlement at Hope. Whatever the date of building the breakwater if it is contemporary with the clearing of the beach and constructing a platform above the cliff it does seem to be a fairly major effort. It seems unlikely that such effort would be undertaken unless there was an intent to create a settlement there and there is the point that the Danes preferred sites on estuaries to allow for a quick retreat.

Moving on from the Danes the next upheaval in the area was the arrival of the Normans. The castles at Blackdown and Totnes are the most visible additions to the nearby landscape but in Hope the evidence is not architectural but human. The Hurrell and Jarvis families came over with the invaders although exactly when they arrived in Hope is not known. Whenever it was they most certainly made an impact and are still to be found prospering locally.

J J Alexander has described how in 1069 nine manors from Thurlestone to Salcombe were laid waste by Irish mercenaries led by the sons of the defeated King Harold.⁷ The evidence for this lies with the depreciation of the manors as recorded in the Domesday Book. The Exeter copy of this document places the blame for the depreciation on the piratical horde attempting to reverse the success of the Normans at Hastings. Curiously the two Bolberry manors are not included but the considerable drop in value of these as shown in Domesday Book suggests they too were raided which brings the events dangerously to Hope. Eliot suggests that the fort on Bolt Tail as well as the nearby one at Burleigh would have been re-used for defensive purposes during the raids.⁸

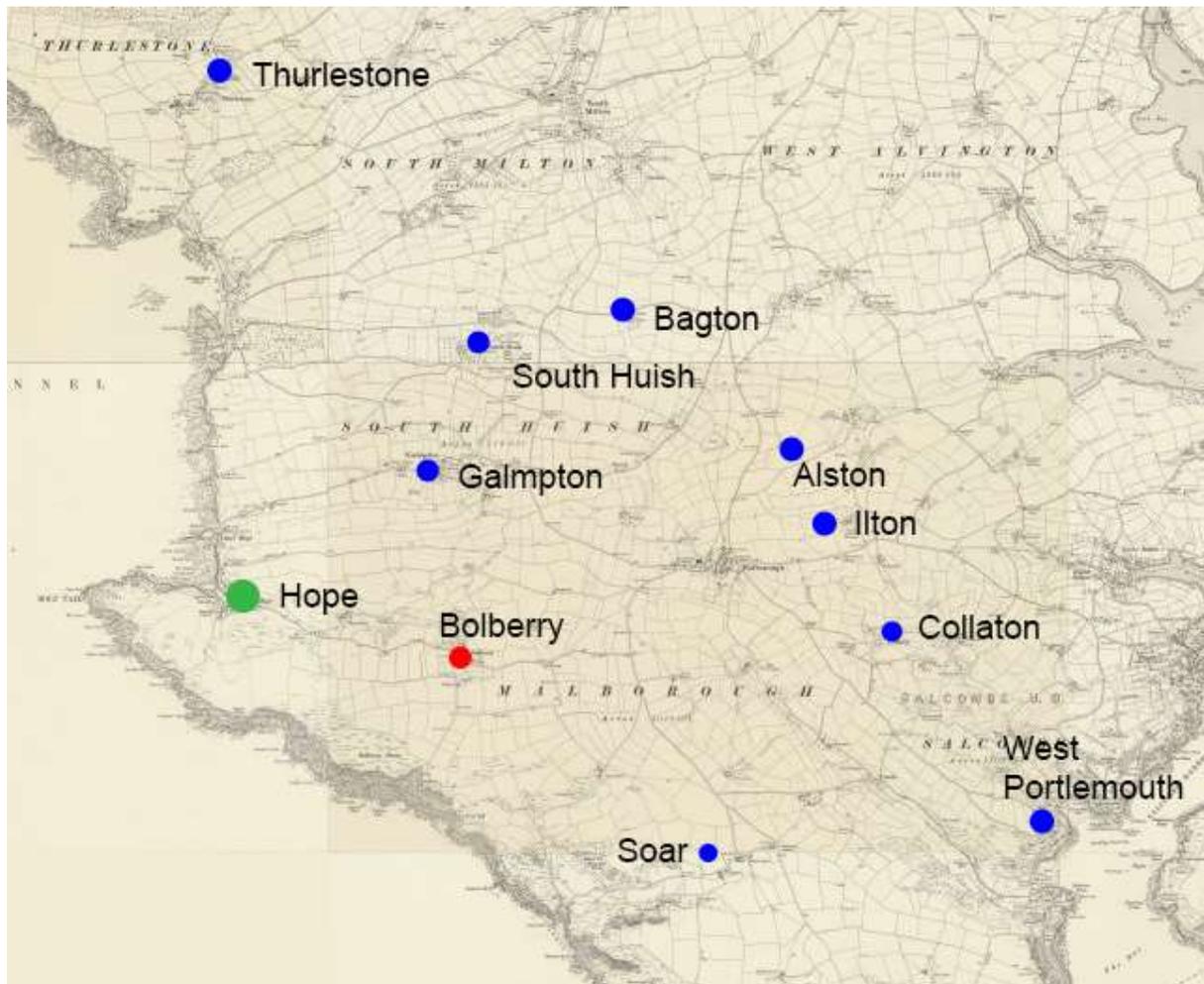


Figure 8 Path of Irish Invasion

Conclusion

The hollow lane suggests the cove has been important for a very long time. Blackdown Rings near Loddiswell shows how a strategic site can be used from the bronze age through to the Norman period. The paper presumes to suggest that it is likely the fort on Bolt Tail also has its origins in the bronze age and that this was the site of the first settlement at Hope Cove. One drawback to this argument is the lack of a fresh water supply. Waterhouse mentions a source in Quay Sands as does the English Heritage Internet page⁹ although this was not seen on a recent visit. One stream is known on the southern coast but it is low down the cliffs. Another is at Waterfern a mile away but if there are two known streams there are likely to be others. In peaceful times the stream at Inner Hope could be used and that is only 400m away – 1000 years ago it would have been closer.

There is an apparent absence of stone hut circles but as the terrain within the whole fort area is mostly sloping it could be that wooden shelters were built.¹⁰ There is one area within the main fortified area which would seem to lend itself to settlement with a reasonably flat space surrounded by some natural protection from winds.



Figure 9 Possible settlement area

Whilst oral tradition should never be ignored it seems unlikely that the Danes built the breakwater at Quay Sands because there is no other evidence for their presence in the immediate area. Furthermore it would be remarkable if 1000 years of storms had failed to destroy the construction when one remembers that the present breakwater – built in 1924 with the benefit of concrete – needed major repairs in the 1950s, 2014, and is currently again in need of urgent repair. The reports of huge amounts of fish being landed at Quay Sands during the sixteenth century suggests this might be a time when a quay or breakwater would be needed. The 1823 map naming the cove “Pilchard Quay” seems to be the deciding factor but it might have been built on an earlier wall.

Whatever the answers are I am sure there are people in the local community with greater knowledge and it would be interesting to see if they have any thoughts on the subject.

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