

REPORT ON A SITE VISIT TO LITTLE HILBRE ISLAND, WIRRAL

By Helen C M Keeley

Little Hilbre or Middle Eye is one of three small islands located just off the west coast of the Wirral, Cheshire. The islands can be reached at low tide from West Kirby, by walking approximately a mile across the sands. The island was visited by the author on May 21, 1979, at the request of Mr B Sheppard (Archaeological Survey of Merseyside). During World War II part of the island was used as a bombing decoy now it forms part of a nature reserve and the cliffs are suffering severely from marine erosion.

The main point of interest was a dark deposit, exposed in the cliff face at several locations and at a depth of about 30 cms. below the present ground surface. At one site this appeared to be associated with burnt sand. Several samples were collected for examination and the results are as follows:-

It was thought that the dark layer may represent a buried soil surface. The presence of large quantities of charcoal and humus tends to confirm this but a sample examined for pollen by Mr R Scaife (DOE contract worker) did not contain any pollen, possibly due to the open nature of the soil. Charcoal from three samples was identified by Mrs C Keepax (AM Lab). All contained Oak, probably from mature timbers, one contained birch and another Alder - again from mature timbers.

It was confirmed by an ignition test that the dark reddish brown sand, associated with the black layer at one point, was burnt. It also contained quite a lot of carbon - probably finely divided charcoal - and some manganese.

Comments

The dark layer and associated reddish brown sand are obviously the result of burning and presumably, constitute some form of occupation deposit associated with an old land surface. As it is not desirable to dig holes in the soil of the island or to cut back the cliff, due to the threat of erosion, little

more can usefully be done to investigate these deposits. However, it might be possible to obtain a more suitable sample for pollen analysis by augering a little way from the cliff edge, or wherever the buried soil is thought to occur. .