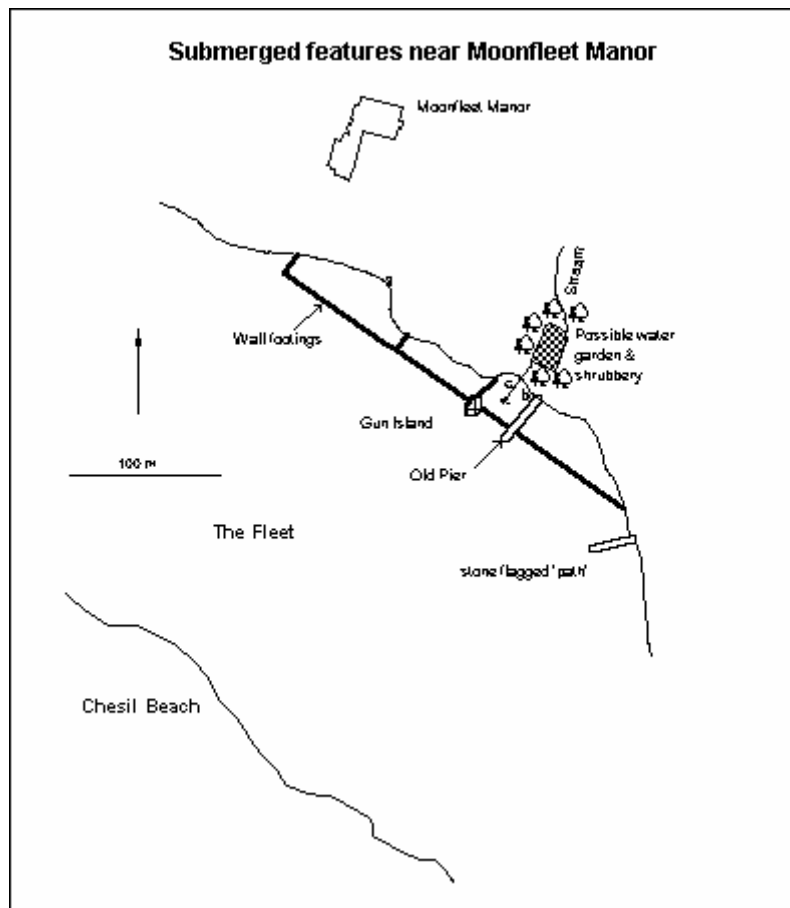


Gardens in the Sea?

Intertidal Structures in the Fleet, Dorset

Gordon Le Pard

The Fleet is a long, narrow, tidal lagoon that lies behind Chesil Beach a fourteen kilometre long shingle spit that connects the Isle of Portland, to the mainland of Dorset. During a review of intertidal and maritime archaeology, undertaken as part of the development of the Dorset Coast Strategy, a complex of walls, banks and an artificial island were discovered in the Fleet. This complex, centred on grid reference SY 6199 8042, is close to Moonfleet Manor Hotel (Fleet manor house).



Wall Footings

These are all about 1.2 metres wide, carefully constructed of squared stone, and laid out to cut off a small bay in the Fleet shore. They have been removed on either side of the old pier, but its course is traceable by the raised bed of the Fleet and by the firmer substrate.

The Old Pier

Now simply a heap of stones, at least 3 metres wide and 35 metres long. In a photograph of the 1920's it appears as a pier with a rowing boat tied up alongside.

The 'Path'

To the south east of the main complex is a section of stone flagged path, or perhaps the footings of a stone wall, about 1 metre wide by 40 metres long.

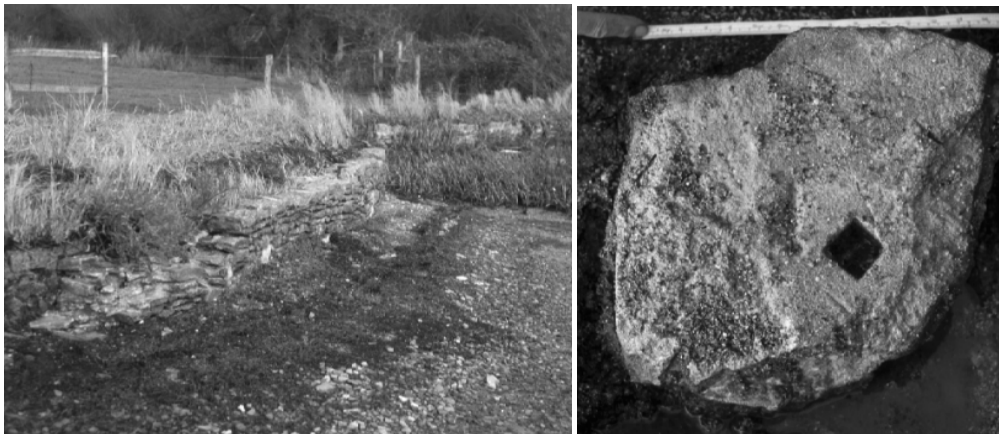


Gun Island

This is a small, artificial, island of an irregular 'comma' shape, about 14 x 9 metres. It is surrounded by a vertical wall (1.2 metres high) of mortared masonry, filled with soil and grassed over. According to local tradition, probably correct, it was a stand for wildfowling from Fleet manor - hence "Gun Island".

Fleet wall.

A section of the present Fleet shoreline has been reinforced with a low stone wall, between a and b. The more westerly sections are in a very poor condition and, in places, only the footings survive.



Finds

Apart from a scatter of modern debris only one object was found, which might relate to the structures. An irregularly shaped piece of stone, one side of which was smoothed, with a square mortise hole about 2.5 cm square and 5 cm deep (c).

Interpretation

The function of the old pier is clear, and it is likely that the stone 'path' may be that remains of another, perhaps earlier pier. However the wall footings and 'Gun Island' do not seem to be explicable in purely practical terms. The Fleet is very shallow beyond the walls (no more than 1 metre deep at high tide) and the land enclosed is hardly sufficient to make the effort of draining it for agricultural purposes worthwhile. If not practical, could they have an aesthetic function? could they be associated with earlier gardens of Fleet manor house.

Fleet manor house was first built in the mid seventeenth century, enlarged over the centuries, and by the mid eighteenth century, was surrounded by formal gardens Unfortunately the surviving views of the house do not include the Fleet shore. It is suggested that the main walls were built at this time. This would have enclosed the bay and

allowed the land behind them to be grassed over, so creating a formal terrace along the shore of the Fleet. This would be very similar to structures known to have been built beside lakes at this period. The stone with the mortise hole could have been the plinth of a statue or urn.

Such terraces would have been unlikely to survive the year 1824 when a violent storm devastated this part of Dorset, and virtually destroyed the neighbouring village of Fleet. It is known that the grounds of Fleet manor were extensively refurbished in the late 1820's and it is likely that, at this time, Gun Island was constructed, the low wall built along the edge of the Fleet. In addition it is probable that a small stream was diverted and dammed to create a pond surrounded by exotic shrubs. This would form a fashionable 'wilderness' with Gun Island as a place for picnics and shooting parties, it is still used for the former purpose.

As far as I know this is the first time that possible garden features have been identified in an intertidal or maritime context. There may well be others, particularly where the grounds of large houses bordered estuaries or large bays.

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