



Prehistoric Coast Walk

Levels Loops & Links

Newport Wetlands to Redwick

Distance: 26 km | Time: 5 hours

Discover Gwent Levels





For more information about this walk visit:

www.livinglevels.org.uk

Our Living Levels

ourlivinglevels

www.livinglevels.org.uk

info@livinglevels.org.uk

CONTACT

The Living Levels Landscape Partnership is supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund. We are delivering a programme of work which will promote and reconnect people to the heritage, wildlife and wild beauty of the Gwent Levels.

The Partnership

The Gwent Levels are an iconic, estuarine landscape of international significance. First reclaimed from the sea in Roman times, the Gwent Levels are a network of fertile fields and historic watercourses, known locally as reens. This special landscape of high skies and low horizons is one of the finest examples of a 'natural' landscape hand-crafted by people in Europe, and one of the largest tracts of bio-diverse wet grassland left in the UK.

About the Gwent Levels



6 Goldcliff Island

➔ Follow the WCP towards the sea wall, past the Sea Wall Tea Rooms. Climb up on to the wall and look out into the estuary.

On your right is an area of high ground, once occupied by Goldcliff Priory. This is Goldcliff Island. The island once projected far out into the estuary, but it has been greatly eroded over the centuries.

Goldcliff Island is one of the best places to fully appreciate how long humans have been actively using the Gwent Levels.

The Severn Estuary is incredibly rich in Mesolithic archaeology. During the Mesolithic, or Middle Stone Age (10,000-6000 years ago), a large amount of the Earth's water was still held in ice and areas of land were inhabited which are now completely under water. Due to the fantastic preservation of organic material in the waterlogged environment, these sites contain information about our coast dwelling ancestors.

Spring tides are the best time to view the prehistoric landscape at Goldcliff. Looking out onto the foreshore you may be able to see tree trunks or stumps. These are from a Mesolithic oak forest that developed in this area during a period of slow sea level rise. The forest was eventually drowned when sea levels began to rise again, but many of the trees have been preserved in the mud.

On the very lowest tides (>1m), areas of Mesolithic activity and footprint sites are uncovered.

The Mesolithic footprints at Goldcliff East are perhaps the most famous prehistoric archaeology on the Gwent Levels and have been featured on a number of television programmes.

Prehistoric footprints are ephemeral in nature, meaning that archaeologists are at the mercy of the tide and shifting sediments. Areas exposed one day may be covered by two metres of sand the next and it is vital that they are recorded quickly and efficiently. Also, once uncovered these same tides will quickly erode the footprints, destroying them completely.

So far over 300 human footprints have been found, along with cranes, oystercatchers, herons, white storks, red deer, and wolf prints.



Prehistoric oak preserved in the estuary mud, circa 5600 BC



Mesolithic human footprint, circa 5600 BC

The crane footprints are the earliest evidence we have of crane living on the Gwent Levels, and some of the earliest evidence of crane from all of Britain. These prints were made around 5,600 BC during the summer months, so were likely made by birds using the area as a safe breeding ground and place for their chicks to fledge.

Some of the human footprints have a similar direction of movement, heading directly towards, or away from, Goldcliff Island. There was a site of occupation on Goldcliff Island, and it would seem that these individuals were walking there. They range from children to adults.

If you look out into the estuary you may be able to see the large wooden weirs of the fish traps near the wall. These are built into the Bronze Age reed peat land surface. To

the left of these traps Bronze Age animal footprints have been discovered, including red deer, cattle and sheep.

Large numbers of animal prints have been found along the edge of an ancient river channel (*palaeochannel*), perhaps caused by animals drinking at the water's edge. The number of juvenile sheep and cattle prints suggests that these animals were being used for milk production, making this some of the first evidence of dairy farming on the Gwent Levels.

➔ Follow the coast path along the sea wall away from Goldcliff, heading towards Redwick. Once you get past the small land projection, meaning that you can no longer see the coastal path at Goldcliff, you will have entered the part of the coastal path in Porton.

7 Porton

The intertidal zone at Porton is covered by a deep layer of mud and there are far fewer finds here than at other areas along the coast.

Finds include a Mesolithic tranchet axe, reed matting, a Bronze Age palstave and a Bronze Age spearhead, as well as a few potential deer



Look out for...

- Consider the local community and other people enjoying the outdoors
- Park carefully so gateways and driveways are clear
- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Follow paths but give way to others where it's narrow
- Leave no trace of your visit, take all your litter home
- Don't have BBQs or fires
- Keep your dog under effective control and pick up after your pet - dog mess can harm livestock
- Plan ahead, check what facilities are open, be prepared
- Follow advice and local signs

Follow the Countryside Code

and cattle hoof prints, and two possible Iron Age human footprints.

➔ Carry along the coastal path heading towards Redwick.

8 Redwick

The coast at Redwick is rich in prehistoric archaeology.

The peat shelves are Bronze Age in date (1691-1401 cal BC) and have preserved a variety of finds, including four rectangular Bronze Age buildings, a thumbnail scraper, a human cranium, burnt bone, charcoal, and heat fractured stone. There are also footprints from a variety of animals, including humans, cattle, sheep/goats and pigs.

The humble selection of artefacts in this occupation area suggests that these buildings were not part of a permanent settlement but may have been used seasonally during the drier summer months.

The buildings were surrounded by a large amount of trampling by cattle, sheep and goats. These animals were likely from a dairy herd, as many

of the footprints were made by young animals. This suggests that the site was being used during the spring/summer to feed livestock on the nutrient-rich salt-grass.

The peat is occasionally washed clean by a good tide. On these occasions, the location of the buildings can just about be seen, though erosion is wiping out this evidence.

➔ Follow the green lane towards the village of Redwick for a final opportunity for refreshments at the Rose Inn. The pub is open daily and serves a variety of foods.

Whilst in the village bear in mind that the English name 'Redwick' means 'settlement where reeds grow', indicating the strong relationship between the village and the wetlands.

➔ Retrace your steps back towards Newport Wetlands.

Where to visit next?

➔ Newport Museum has a fantastic display all about the prehistoric Gwent Levels. It features many of the artefacts from the area, including the skeleton of an aurochs, flints, casts of the footprints, and a replica of the Goldcliff Stone.

➔ Visit the National Museum of Wales at St.

Fagans where most of the estuarine finds from the Gwent Levels end up, as well as all the other interesting finds from across Wales.

➔ Visit the Living Levels website to view digital reconstructions of the Levels landscape at different points in time.

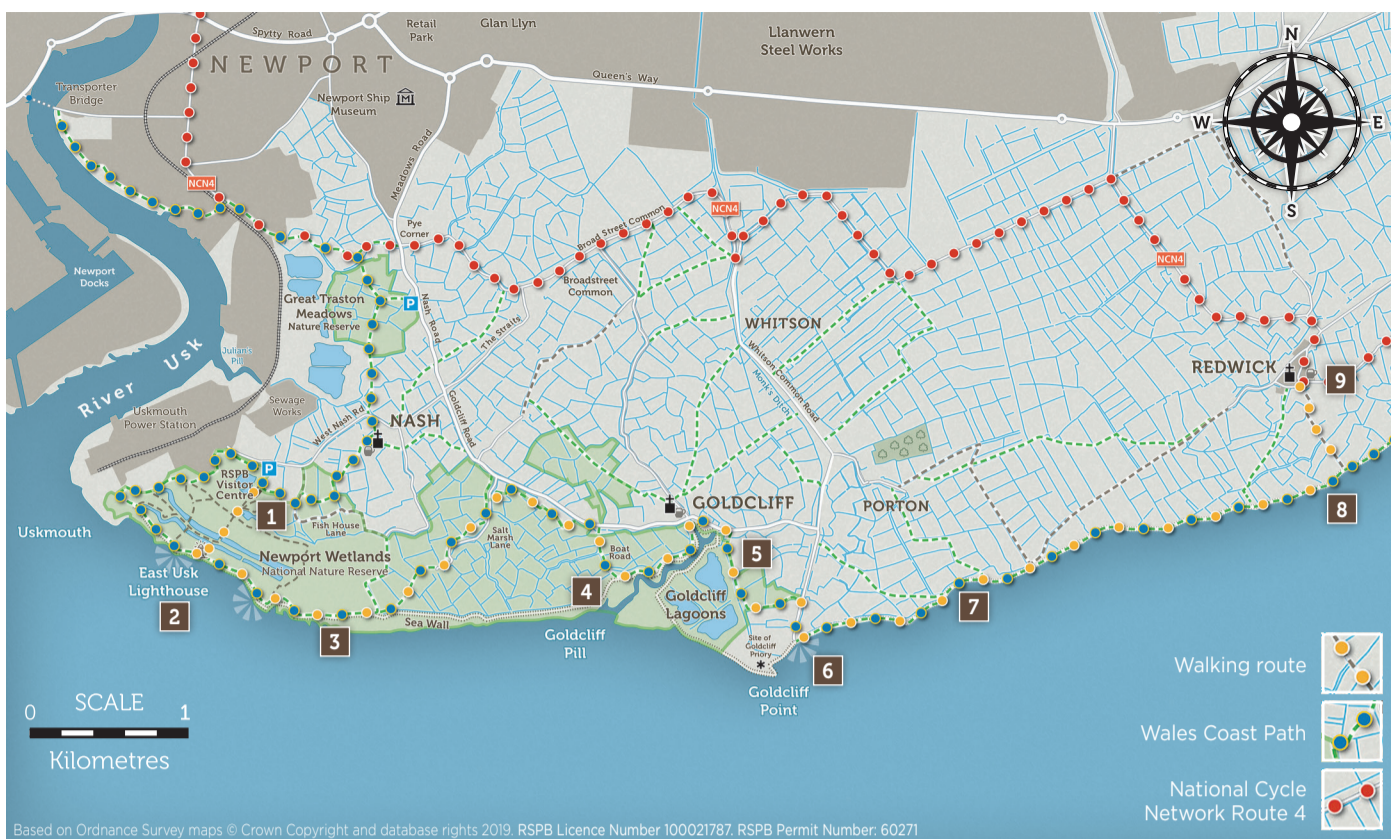


Prehistoric Coast Walk: Newport Wetlands to Redwick

This coastal walk explores a part of the Gwent Levels steeped in archaeology and history, and rich in wildlife. The walk begins at the Newport Wetlands visitor centre and follows the Wales Coast Path (WCP) to Redwick. It is suitable for people of all ages, providing they have a good level of fitness and mobility. There are some steps and areas of uneven ground. The best time to walk the coastal path is at low tide, when the mudflats are exposed and you can see some of the archaeological features.

The history of the Levels begins around 12,000 years ago, at the end of the last period of glaciation when sea levels were about 60m lower than today. As the glaciers melted, sea levels rose flooding the shallow valley south of the Monmouthshire Hills, forming the Bristol Channel and the Severn Estuary. Over many centuries, an extensive wetland formed around the low-lying margin of the estuary, a vast watery wilderness of tidal mud flats, creeks, saltmarshes, peat bogs, reed swamps and wet woodland. Around 8000 years ago, during the Mesolithic or middle Stone Age, groups of humans began to exploit the area, visiting to hunt, fish and gather resources during the dry summer months.

Later, during the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages, there is evidence of more settled activities, including grazing herd animals and the building of more permanent structures and trackways. Roman military engineers were the first to reclaim the land from the sea for year-round use in around AD 100. They built a network of banks, ditches, drains and sluices to control water levels. When the Romans departed in the 5th century, their drainage system failed, and the Levels returned to a wild wetland. Over hundreds of years the Roman landscape became buried under layers of clay, silt and sand carried by flood waters. Six hundred years later, the Normans made a more lasting attempt to tame the Levels. The monks of Goldcliff Priory and Tintern Abbey repaired and extended the Roman network of sea defences and ditches, forming the pattern of reed-fringed reens, small fields and winding lanes that can still be seen in many parts of the Levels today. Today, although the Levels are intensively farmed, they retain many ancient features, such as traditional field patterns and unique wetland habitats. Buried beneath the modern landscape is an archaeological treasure-trove, a detailed and well-preserved record of a series of lost landscapes dating back thousands of years.



1 Start at Newport Wetlands Visitor Centre

The Newport Wetlands visitor centre was built in 2008. It has a shop, a café, toilet facilities, an education room and a conference room. The centre is open every day (except Christmas) from 9am until 5pm. Entrance is free though donations are very much appreciated.

Parking costs £3 for non-RSPB members. The car park opens at 8.30am and closes at 5.30pm. **→ From the visitor centre car park, follow the signs towards East Usk Lighthouse and the coast.**

2 Uskmouth / East Usk Lighthouse

Archaeologically, Uskmouth is very important, and the area contains features and artefacts from multiple time periods. The sediment that covers the area is a mix of silt, clay, sand and gravel. It can make it difficult to identify important areas but has created almost perfect conditions for the preservation of ancient remains. Stand by the lighthouse and look out across the estuary. About 600m from the seawall there have been a variety of prehistoric discoveries, ranging from the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age, circa 10,000 - 6000 years ago), when humans were still hunter-gatherers, to the Iron Age (circa 750

BC - AD43), the period just before the Romans and the start of recorded history. In 1986, Derek Upton, a local steel worker and keen amateur archaeologist, was the first to find prehistoric footprints at Uskmouth. It was through his discoveries that archaeologists became involved in the area and the importance of the Gwent Levels was fully appreciated. The footprints dated from the Mesolithic period and included humans, aurochs (extinct wild cattle) and red deer. A variety of skeletal remains of aurochs, pigs and horses have also been found in this area in an ancient river channel (*palaeochannel*).

3 Newport Wetlands nature reserve

Newport Wetlands may look like a beautiful natural area that has always been here, but this is not the case. This area was once used to dump pulverised fuel ash from Uskmouth Power Station. The land was given to the Countryside Council of Wales as compensation for loss of

wildlife habitat at Cardiff Bay. Since 2000 the area has been completely re-landscaped and now includes salt marsh, reed beds and saline lagoons, a perfect habitat for a wide range of wildlife. Beyond the sea wall is an extensive area of salt marsh. This habitat develops along

sheltered coastlines and helps to protect the coast from erosion. It is important for a wide range of birds, including avocets, oystercatchers and curlew, and for this reason it is not open to visitors. You can safely view the area from the sea wall.

4 Goldcliff Pill

→ When you reach the base of the sea wall climb up for a view across Goldcliff Pill towards Goldcliff Island. The Pill is the remains of a tidal creek that has been adapted to drain freshwater from the Levels. At low tide water drains from the Levels through a gate in the sea wall called a 'gout'. As the tide comes in, sea water pushes the gate closed. During the medieval period, there was a small port on the pill that served the nearby Goldcliff Priory, which sat on top of Goldcliff Island, the high ground on the opposite bank. The priory owned land between Goldcliff and Nash and was responsible for creating much of the Levels landscape we see

→ Follow the signs for the WCP heading towards Goldcliff. The path veers away from the coast following Salt Marsh Lane and Goldcliff Road, before turning towards Goldcliff Pill along Boat Road.

today. It was abandoned in the late 15th century and nothing now remains of the building. In 1878, an inscribed Roman-era stone was discovered near the sea wall at Goldcliff. The stone records work carried out by Roman soldiers based at nearby Caeleon. Although what they were doing isn't clear, they were possibly building an embankment or digging drainage ditches. **→ Follow the WCP towards Goldcliff, along Goldcliff Road for a short section, and then down to Goldcliff Lagoons.**



Goldcliff Stone



Prehistoric crane footprint, circa 5600 BC

5 Goldcliff Lagoons

Goldcliff Lagoons is part of Newport Wetlands and consists of a number of man-made saline lagoons. When the lagoons were constructed, a buried landscape of Romano-British drainage ditches was uncovered. The lagoons were designed so that they did not damage this archaeological landscape. When the Romans came to the Gwent Levels around AD 100, they constructed earthen embankments to prevent the tide encroaching and dug ditches to drain the land, enabling the creation of a farmed landscape similar to the one we see today. When the Empire fell and the Romans abandoned Wales, there was nobody to continue the upkeep of these ditches. Through a combination of sea level

rise and lack of drainage, the Levels reverted to wild marshland and a thick layer of estuary mud covered the Roman landscape. The saline lagoons attract a wide variety of birds, including common crane. Cranes were once common on the Levels and their preserved footprints are often found on the foreshore. They were also a favourite dish on Roman dinner tables and were possibly hunted to extinction on the Gwent Levels, as the Roman period was the last time crane skeletal remains were discovered on the Levels. Now, after almost 2000 years, the cranes are back. **→ From Goldcliff Lagoons, follow the WCP towards Goldcliff Island and the sea wall.**



Artists impression of Goldcliff Priory, circa AD 1250