

Spithead Anchorage

Summary Description

The importance of Spithead as a naval anchorage is a feature that continues to modern day. Situated at the entrance to Portsmouth Harbour, the home of the Royal Navy, it is not surprising that military craft play a prominent role in the area in terms of modern activity and historic shipwrecks. In addition to the marine aspects of this area, there are also traces of submerged prehistoric landscapes preserved on and in the seabed which provide evidence from times of lower sea levels.

Sea Surface

The area is situated in the near shore zone, in between the mainland and Isle of Wight. It encompasses the entrance to Portsmouth Harbour and extends towards the centre of the Solent. This is a densely used area and includes use by shipping and craft from the commercial, military and pleasure sectors.

The entire area is designated for use as a military practice area, this is not surprising considering that Portsmouth Harbour has been the home of the Royal Navy for many centuries and Spithead has been its principle anchorage. The defence of Portsmouth is also demonstrated through the four prominent Solent Forts which were constructed in the 1860's – 1880's and are now some of the most distinctive seascape features in the Eastern Solent.

The presence of more than six individual dredging areas indicates both the use of the area by dredgers and the character of the aggregate rich seabed.

Seabed Surface

The area primarily features a single spit stretching out from Gilkicker Point and a narrow sheltered channel. It is protected from all winds, except those from the southeast. It receives its name from the Spit, a sandbank stretching south from the Hampshire shore for 5 km (3 miles); and it is 22.5 km (14 miles) long by about 6.5 km (4 miles) in average breadth. The extensive sandbanks surrounding the spit are considered high risk navigational hazards (Merritt, 2007). The area has been extensively dredged for aggregate extraction (Future Coast, 2002).

The shallow morphology of the northern extent of the area means it contains extensive shellfish resources, primarily oyster beds. Commercial fishing is represented in the Bass nursery areas and designated fishing areas. Parts of the area have been designated as a Special Conservation Area (SAC).

The area features the designated wreck sites of the *Mary Rose* and *Invincible* with their associated restriction zones. Both of these sites have been investigated, with the *Mary Rose* now one of the most infamous maritime archaeological sites in the country.

Between 100 and 200 other wreck sites and obstructions are located in the area, which has led to a high level of diving activity. The shipwreck resource features numerous examples of historic naval wrecks, such as the *Royal George*, *Boyne*, *Edgar* and *Impregnable*. Other wrecks include examples spanning centuries of merchant shipping and naval activity right up to the 20th century.

Seabed Subsurface

Dredging operations feature within the area. While no further seabed subsurface features are recorded, it should be highlighted that recent research into the development of the Solent and English Channel is beginning to reveal evidence for the potential for survival of submerged prehistoric landscape deposits within the seabed from times of lower sea level. Discoveries of peat deposits and submerged landscape features have been recorded through geophysical survey and geotechnical investigations, the evidence of which is located within 'grey literature' reports which are currently subject to commercial and copyright restrictions.



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Coastal

The commercial concrete harbour constructions are the most visible features of the coastal zone, and provide facilities for commercial and military activity. The coastal strip features areas popular with visitors and tourists such as the Southsea Seafront and its associated Victorian buildings and piers.

Archaeological Potential

The high potential of this area for shipwreck archaeology cannot be understated. The area contains a number of located and identified wreck sites, a number of which should be considered for historic designation. Additional historic wrecks are being regularly located within the area, a recent example is the 'mystery wreck' off Horse Tail Sands which is currently being investigated.

In terms of submerged landscapes peat and associated prehistoric deposits are known to be present in the area. Such deposits can reveal important evidence of sea level and climate change and the development of Britain as an island, the Solent as a waterway and Portsmouth as a Harbour.

References

Mitchell, Garry. *No. 1 Spitbank and the Spithead Forts*. 3rd ed. West Wickham : G.H. Mitchell, 1988. Solent Papers: No. 1

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Patterson, A. Temple. *The naval mutiny at Spithead, 1797*. Portsmouth : Portsmouth City Council, 1968.

Powell, Michael. *Spithead: the Navy's anvil*. Portsmouth: Redan & Vedette, 1977.

Pye, Andrew and Woodward, Freddy. *The Historic Defences of Plymouth*.

Links

The Spithead Forts - <http://www.ecastles.co.uk/seafort.html>

The Palmerston Forts Society - <http://www.palmerstonforts.org.uk/>

Spitbank Fort - <http://www.spitbankfort.co.uk/>



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Images



IoE number:	409897
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	No Man's Land Fort
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