

Cattewater Wreck: Developing the archive

Highlight report

The Cattewater Wreck was discovered in 1973 during channel dredging for air-sea rescue craft in the Cattewater, Plymouth, Devon. The site was the first wreck to be designated by the British Government under the 1973 Protection of Wreck Act and is believed to be of an unidentified armed merchantman of the first half of the 16th century.

The site was surveyed and partly excavated between 1975 and 1978, and the results published. Most of the site documentary archive and much of the material archive were eventually deposited with the Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery ('the City Museum'). The Archive as presently organised does not meet the current recognised archival storage standards and has not been organised for the benefit of researchers.

This Project (Project Number: 5439 MAIN) aims to improve the long term care and management of the Cattewater Wreck Excavation Archive held by the City Museum with improvements to the documentation and storage. The principal outcome of the Project will be a more accessible Archive.

Aims and Objectives

The main aim of this Project is Archive consolidation – a formal audit and indexing of the documentary archive and all associated artefacts to create a formal record of the present archive. A secondary aim is the improvement of the physical storage of the archive to better meet modern physical collection management standards. The principal outcome of the Project will be a more accessible Archive.

Stage 1: Archive consolidation: Documentary Archive

To achieve the project's main aim of Archive consolidation during this stage, the objective is the systematic filing and indexing of the documentary archive, allowing an audit of the current documentary archive to take place. Other objectives are recording of the artefacts, including digital photograph/s of each item, the creation of features/context descriptions, the establishment of plan matrix, an overall site plan and the completion of Harris matrix of inter-relationships.

To achieve the secondary aim of the improvement of the physical storage of the documentary archive, the objective is to replace ring binders and non-archival storage materials (such as staples and cello tape) with archival standard materials (acid-free boxes and folders).

Stage 2: Archive consolidation: Material Collection

This stage mainly involves improvements to the storage of the material collection.

The aim is to repackage and label the finds in accordance with current good practice. A formal audit and indexing will be carried out. This stage will also include the identification of conservation/stabilisation requirements including an assessment and conservation plan for the two composite swivel gun fragments, wooden keelson remains and textile artefacts.

Stage 3: Archive consolidation: Documentary Archive : Incorporating new material

One of the aims of the Project is to trace or locate material relevant to the Archive and to re-unite them with the rest of the Archive in the City Museum.

Archive material has been received from the archives of some of those involved in the original survey and excavation, including Mark Redknap, Berit Mortlock, Martin Dean, Alan Bax and Austin C. Carpenter. These include correspondence and reports, drawings, photographic negatives and prints and digitised photographs, slides and film.

The aim of this stage is to audit, index and incorporate this new material into the present archive.

Postscript: Additional related outcomes

The project has catalysed some new research activity:

Dr Jennifer Harland, University of York, has examined and sampled some of the fish bones to undergo C13 and N15 isotopic testing to determine their place of origin (funded by the City Museum). Dr Harland is a Research Fellow on the Medieval Origins of Commercial Fishing project which has been determining the isotope signatures for different cod populations and have so far been able to distinguish Arctic Norway, the Kattegat, the northern North Sea, southern North Sea, and Newfoundland populations. It is hoped that she will be able to suggest an origin for the Cattewater Wreck material. Plymouth had fishing contacts both locally, with southern Ireland and with Newfoundland in the 16th century.

The project has also facilitated enhanced contributions to the content and design of English Heritage leaflets on the two Protected Wrecks in Plymouth - and to information panels on the Cattewater Wreck which will be erected in public areas convenient and close to the Protected Wreck site (i.e. Queen Anne's Battery Marina and the Mount Batten Centre).

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