

MEDIEVAL & POST MEDIEVAL ARTEFACTS FROM THE RIVER WEAR, DURHAM CITY

July 29, 2011 Gary Bankhead Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2011, Finds, Medieval, Museum Archaeology, Post Medieval Archaeology, Artifact, bi-convex head, Bishop, Bishops river, British Museum, car park, delightful historian, dive site, diver, Durham, Durham City, Durham University, Durham University Archaeology Department, Elvet, Elvet Bridge, Europe, family day, Finds Liaison Officer, Frances McIntosh, Geoff Egan, Germany, Himalayan, Hugh Du Puiset, London, Massachusetts, medieval artefacts, Newcastle, Newcastle airport, Prince, River Wear, rowing, Sarah, South Wiltshire Museum, Stadium of Light, steep bank, sub-aqua diving equipment, Sunderland, trader, United Kingdom, University Archaeology Department, US Federal Reserve, York, Yorkshire Museum

Shakespeare's famous line; '*Once more unto the breach*' taken from *Henry V, Act III*, 1598 captures my #dayofarch 2011 quite nicely! For my *breach* is also associated with a gap in a high city wall or perhaps more accurately a 850 year gap that still to this day forms the main thoroughfare in to the heart of a historical medieval city.

I am actually talking about *Elvet* a medieval bridge built around 1160 by *Bishop Hugh Du Puiset*, once guarded by gate and tower protecting the historic *City of Durham*. Why *once more*? Simply because it has been a three year exploration by me of the *River Wear* as it flows under *Elvet Bridge* and around the stunning peninsular that forms the World Heritage Site. The sole purpose of the explorations many often undertaken in extremely challenging conditions using sub-aqua diving equipment is to recover medieval and post medieval artefacts from the river bed.

My #dayofarch should have actually been much different but for a late cancellation I was due to be some 270 miles south in the study rooms of the *British Museum* in London researching their collection of lead cloth seals. As it happened Friday 29th July started quite early enough as I had to take my daughter Sarah to *Newcastle* airport to catch an 8 a.m. flight. Then followed a 74 mile drive south for a hastily re-arranged family day out in another historic city this time *York*. Fortunately my detour from archaeology was not terminal as I was kindly allocated 60 precious minutes to take in the *Roman* and medieval splendours of the *Yorkshire Museum*.

Arriving back in *Durham City* where I live at 6.p.m. was actually quite good timing as it meant that the bulk of the river traffic – tourists on hired rowing boats, *Durham University* peeps with their torpedo like super fast 8s and the dreaded *Prince Bishops* river cruise boat with its huge propeller should have pretty much vacated the stretch of river I am currently excavating.

Strangely for this time of year I had not actually dived for the best part of three weeks. My previous dive was done with TV cameras following my every move both above and under the water not to mention spending much of the day discussing medieval river artefact's with the delightful historian and broadcaster *Bettany Hughes*! And so as any diver will tell you pulling a diving drysuit on after a prolonged spell of inactivity is no easy nor pleasant task.

My usual entry point in to the river this late in to the summer was now heavily overgrown; *Himalayan balsam* seed pods exploded violently all around me as I picked out a path through the now giant plants down the steep bank to the water's edge. My usual (just submerged) rock clearly visible through the clear water was still in situ, as indeed it has been for the last three years; it's partially flattened upper surface proving an ideal platform to sit and put my fins and dive mask on.

The last thing a diver needs at this point is to realise that their cylinder first stage valve is not open. However, complacency is a real danger and a full kit check had been carried out back at the car park – my demand valve fed me cool air. I spat in to my dive mask and gave it a rub before rinsing it in the river water and shaking it dry and in less than 18 minutes from leaving home I slipped under the water – again!

My first thoughts were *wow how warm is the water* and *great the underwater visibility is superb!* A thin deposit of silt no more than .5 cm deep lay like newly fallen snow on the river bed, its pale brown colour suggesting a peaty origin. Heavy rain fall two weeks earlier in the area of the *Pennines* near the source of the river was almost certainly the culprit. I remember not being too deterred by the silt deposit I had seen it many times before, a few fin strokes around the gully I had planned to continue searching would send it off downstream.

The flow of water at my dive site is unusually slow, the current held back by a series of weirs further downstream. Within 3 minutes of entering the water I was positioned directly above the gully I was looking for. I call them gullies for an obvious reason as they are quite simply a series of narrow channels worn in the sandstone bedrock by centuries of water passing over it. Some gullies are wider, while some gullies are deeper than the others.

Conditions this evening 2 m underwater on the river bed were as good as they probably ever get. Although the visibility is really important much of the work I do underwater recovering the artefact's is very physical; imagine working intensely for an average of around 140 minutes in one single location. Concentration is essential, meticulously picking through pebble after pebble looking for artefact's that quite often can measure as little as 1 cm. You cannot simply drift off in a day dream thinking about what's for supper when I get out or how many goals will *Sunderland* put past *Newcastle* when they meet at the *Stadium of Light* in August. Forget nitrogen narcosis or the bends the one really dangerous threat to diving in the river is the possibility of being struck by the propeller of the *Prince Bishops* boat. However, if you maintain your concentration throughout the dive you will pick up the faint chuk chuk chuk the boats engine makes well before it gets anywhere close, giving you plenty of time to swim off to the safe shallow river edges.

So what medieval or post medieval artefact's did I recover on #dayofarch Friday 29th July 2011 from a single gully formed in the sandstone riverbed? In short tonight's haul was fantastic! predominately from a 16th century origin they were in the main made up of dress accessories, items linked to trade, industry and a few pieces of broken pottery. These ceramics are just as important as they help date the artefact's as they come out of the stratified layers.

The picture below shows tonight's haul – yes from only one dive! I only just managed to capture enough of the setting sunlight to take the picture so apologies if it's not the best. As you can see the haul is predominately made up of small finds. The first artefact that I picked up was nicely decorated 16th/17th century button which was quickly followed by a lovely small copper alloy coin weight with what appears to be 3 fleur-de-lys within a shield beneath a crown. Several pins quickly followed (twisted wire head type) as is the norm for this area, then some nice decorated mounts. The mounts are prolific and appear to be unused. Although the majority of mounts I find are copper alloy like the star shaped one pictured; several are actually lead and the two small lead mounts found this evening show a typical five pellets on the top.



It's my theory that the majority of the dress accessories I am finding are new or should I say have never been used. They almost certainly were items that were once offered for sale by a trader or local merchant very possibly located on *Elvet Bridge* itself. A classic example of these 'unsold' artefacts are the many small 'beaded' mounts, the stems of which remain straight – had they been pushed through a leather strap for example the stems would have been bent at right angles to effectively hold them in place.

Only pausing to remove a small sliver of glass that embedded its self in my finger I continued to recover artefacts at a rate of approximately one per minute (I wonder if anyone else in the world found more artefacts than me today?). The main focus for me on every dive is to try to find more lead cloth seals. The reason is simple as I now have a significant assemblage of medieval and post medieval cloth seals all recovered from the same stretch of the river. Two weeks ago I was at the Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum researching their collection of 177 lead cloth seals mainly recovered from the water channels that run through the medieval city. Prior to this evenings dive my total number of cloth seals stood at 171 – unbelievably I found seven tonight! Who's the daddy now! Two of tonight's cloth seals are really interesting, one seal features a standing man possibly holding a spear and a second seal appears to be a dragon or griffin rampant to the left. Hopefully I can find some parallels in Geoff Egan's Occasional Paper 93!

I should point out that previous to my early discoveries of cloth seals only two others had been recorded on the *Portable Antiquities Scheme* (PAS) database as being recovered north of *Yorkshire* and only one of those was in *County Durham*. Research to date indicates that the cloth seals in my collection appear to have arrived in *Durham City* from as early as the 15th century continuing right through until the 18th century. Arriving attached to cloth from locations across *England* and *Europe* for example *Augsburg* in *Germany*.

The seven cloth seals that I found this evening were clustered in a stratified layer which also contained a really strange lead alloy mount. I am only calling it a mount for the time being as it has a bent stem or pin on the reverse. The front features a face of what could easily be described as a cherub; you may be able to see it third from the bottom right hand side of the picture, (I will add another picture of it tomorrow) any suggestions of what it could be would be appreciated.

Just below this stratified layer the finds as you would guess should be older and this may well be the case with the four or five circular form buckles (see Egan 2002, P.58 (28)) that I found. Although the central iron pins are missing many others similar in style yet complete buckles have been found very near to this gully and they are almost certainly dated from the early 15th Century. A lead spindle whorl was also found at the same depth as the buckles, this singular find bring the total of lead spindle whorls recovered to 32 most unlike this one most are decorated with pellets.

The only distraction to recovering tonight's artefacts was the need to keep checking my air contents plus some crazy person throwing stones at the point of the river where my exhaled air bubbles hit the surface. The stones make a loud plopping noise and fall harmlessly to the river bed around me – I never surface to see who throws the stones for the fear of being hit on the head, strangely it is something that happens more often than not!

Many small pieces of waste lead were found, a few of which were window came, other finds include; tools (possibly for working with leather), a knife, twisted copper alloy loops, lead tokens – one with a nice anchor, a solid cast (bi-convex head) button Circ. 1650, a partial horse shoe, a copper alloy rivet, a circular lead alloy pan-weight, iron nails, a fragment of a jug handle and iron key. It will take me around two weeks to clean the artefacts, bag then record them.

There is a serious side to my endeavours in the river; it is not just a crazy dangerous hobby. For the last three years many artefacts have been loaned to *Durham University Archaeology Department* where their MA students have researched them as part of their studies. In addition and by working very closely with my *Finds Liaison Officer Frances McIntosh* to date 350 artefacts have been added to the PAS database. All being well in 2012 I am set to undertake an MA by Research in to the assemblage perhaps focusing on the considerable lead cloth seal collection.

The finds that have been recovered so far total over 2000 artefacts and will without doubt help to re-write the history books of Durham. If you are a small finds expert and would like to help identify many of the unusual artefacts then please do get in touch garybankhead@360.com plus you can follow news of the assemblage and indeed what my latest discoveries are by following me at twitter.com/garybankhead

I hope you have enjoyed reading about my Day of Archaeology 2011!



Artefacts recovered on #dayofarch