HOW DO YOU LIKE YOUR WALLS, YOUR MAJESTY?

My name is Helen and I am an archaeologist. Some people would call me an amateur, non-professional or volunteer… Whatever, the truth is, I don't get paid to do this.

I am involved with the Thames Discovery Programme (the TDP) – we monitor and record the archaeology of the tidal Thames in London. I actually had a weekend of archaeology, which is why I'm writing this on Monday evening! This year's Day of Archaeology coincided with one of our main events of the year, the Open Foreshore at the Tower of London, and it's left me a bit spoilt for choice for what to write about. But as it was the Tower of London, and I have got a little bit of annual leave to use up, I decided to escape the office on Friday and do some archaeology instead.

So here's what I did on the Day of Archaeology…

The TDP had spent the whole week working on the foreshore in front of the Tower. The whole of the river foreshore is very vulnerable to erosion, and the section at the Tower has had some of the worst damage, in places it has dropped 30cm in a year.
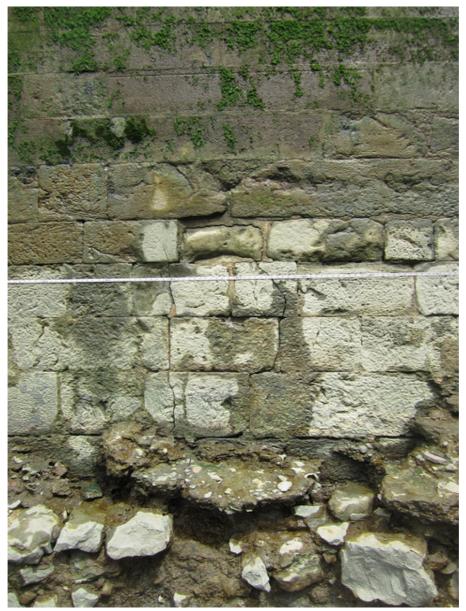

Not a bad way to spend your day off

It's reached crisis point, as the medieval foundations of the river wall are now visible and being undercut, which really doesn't bode well for long term future of the wall. There are plans to cover the whole area with rock reinforcements to stop it falling into the river, but this means that the archaeological features that we've been recording and monitoring will be covered up, so Friday was one of the last chances we'd got to record and take samples of what we've found.

Recording the riverwall. The exposed foundations are at thigh height here.

Cracks are starting to appear in the wall.

As well as recording the wall, we also finished recording and sampling several different timber structures that are on the site, including the remains of a medieval jetty and what possibly, might be an Anglo-Saxon fish trap. Maybe.

And the rest of the weekend? As well as our week long summer fieldwork sessions, Foreshore Recording and Observation Groups (known as the FROGs) also visit various key sites along the river to monitor the archaeology and how it is changing. I coordinate the Greenwich FROG and on Saturday a small group of us met up to visit the foreshore in front of the Old Royal Naval College. Like the Tower, this section is being heavily eroded, and there are a lot of interesting features, including the remains of two large jetties, one 12th century and a later Tudor one, as well as everything from preserved prehistoric peat to the remains of 19th century barge building structures.

The Greenwich FROG recording a mediaeval jetty at Greenwich last month

Then Sunday I was back at the Tower to help steward the Open Foreshore event, the only time in the year the foreshore is open to the public. You can see lots of pictures from the event on the Thames Discovery Programme's Flickr feed.

I don't normally do so much at one time. One of the great things about being a part of the TDP is that you don't have to give up weeks of your annual leave and spend time away from your family to get involved. But the Tower is such an interesting site, and I really like helping in the public outreach work, because it reminds me how much fun there is in what we do!

Walking over the foreshore at Greenwich, a site that I've come to know and love over the years, it can be dispiriting to see the damage that is being caused by the erosion. However, the group have been thinking about our future plans and one thing we want to do more of is raising awareness of the amazing archaeology, and creating a record to share what we've found, and I've spent a lot of time over the weekend talking to people about how we can make this happen. So all in all it's been a really positive few days, even if going back into the office on Monday felt like a nice relaxing break 😉