

DIGGING FOR WEAPONS: ROYAL ARMOURIES TOWER FORESHORE FINDS

July 11, 2014 Kathleen McIlvenna Day of Archaeology 2014, Excavation, Finds, Historical Archaeology, Military, Museum Archaeology, Post Medieval Ordnance, Royal Armouries, Tower of London



Royal Armouries Tower of London dig, 1986. © Royal Armouries 2014

Royal Armouries is the national museum of arms and armour and is more closely associated with Henry VIII's armour and vampire slaying kits than archaeology.

However, in 1986 Royal Armouries commissioned a dig on the Tower of London foreshore. This dig had two aims, firstly, to find evidence of Ordnance workshops that had been situated on the Tower wharf, and, secondly, to prove that the Tower of London foreshore was an important archaeological site.

After two weeks of negotiating mud and the tidal Thames, the exhausted archaeologists put down their tools to assess what they'd found. The dig was deemed successful, identifying a series of compacted sloping foreshores dating from the 15th to the 19th centuries, and uncovering a large number of weapon parts – potential evidence of the Ordnance workshops.

A report was written, over 700 small finds bagged and that was that, until autumn 2013. This was when I started to think about a project to repackage and catalogue this collection. Now, I should insert a disclaimer here, that I am not actually an archaeologist, but a 19th century historian and museum professional. However, like many museum professionals, I have an archaeological collection in my care



Royal Armouries Tower of London foreshore dig, 1986. © Royal Armouries 2014

volunteers normally involved taking a box packed full of finds and repackaging and relabeling them; they would also be catalogued and photographed. After an initial six-week pilot project we rolled out a full 12-week programme that also enabled us to tackle a problem box and allowed one of our volunteers to delve into the dig's paper archive. You can find a full account of our project on one of the volunteer's blogs: <http://mooseandhobbles.wordpress.com/tag/royal-armouries/>

For me, this project has really highlighted the value of archaeology for the history and museum professions. Not only providing valuable historical evidence, but also demonstrating the importance of conservation.



Flintlock Frizzen. © Royal Armouries 2014

and wanted to ensure we were doing all the right things to look after this.

I was very fortunate to enlist the help of the Museum of London Archaeological Centre (proper archaeologists) to recruit volunteers and reassess this dig and its collection of finds. I was even more fortunate that some of the volunteers were also associated with Thames Discovery Programme (also proper archaeologists) and so I felt the collection was in safe hands.

Our days with the



Boxes and documentation from [Mooseandhobbles.wordpress.com](http://mooseandhobbles.wordpress.com)

The 1986 dig was deemed necessary following concern regarding treasure hunters and diggers on the Tower foreshore. Based on the evidence of the excavation, the report asked for permits to restrict the tools used on the foreshore to simply hand-trowels. It's not entirely clear if the dig directly led to changes in regulation but it was probably part of a series of discussions and concerns that have led to stringent regulation that does not allow any digging on

the Tower foreshore.

Furthermore, the photographs and report from the dig show the Tower foreshore at a much higher level, demonstrating the amount of erosion that has occurred on site over the past 30 years. Archaeology is not just a quest for evidence of the past, but records the contemporary conditions of a site.



Pike head find. © Royal Armouries 2014

Since the project has finished, I've been trying to tie up loose ends, the collection will be fully and properly acquired by the museum and the images added to our digital management system. We will also be at the Tower of London Archaeological weekend on the 19th and 20th July and would be delighted to chat to people about the history of the dig, the collection or the volunteer project.

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