

NNAS Lecture at the Auditorium, Norwich Castle Saturday 5th October 2019

***The Thames Discovery Programme: Archaeology of the Foreshore* - by Elliott Wragg**

Elliott started with a background history to the Thames Discovery Programme (TDP) which follows in the footsteps of a large number of distinguished C18th and C19th antiquarians who found swords, spearheads and shields now in the Museum of London. Sir Mortimer Wheeler carried out some work at Brentford on Saxon fish traps but Ivor Noel Hume was the real pioneer of foreshore archaeology. In the 1970s Wandsworth Historical Society carried out rescue archaeology behind the river wall at Putney where there are still medieval fragments to investigate. A number of shipwrecks were discovered by archaeologist Peter Marsden in the Blackfriars: the first vessel was a 2nd century Roman ship found September 1962; the second dated 1660-80 was found June 1969 and two 15th century sailing ships were discovered in 1970. Such work helped bring about recognition of foreshore investigation as a discrete activity and overcame scepticism about stratigraphy. In the 1990s it was accepted as proper archaeology. Initiatives were pioneered by the Museum of London's Thames Archaeological Survey (1993–1999), looking at ships, boats, rudders, Saxon fish traps, plus items of wood, bone and leather from a number of sites, in particular the jetty at Vauxhall. Following on from this and the Thames Explorer Trust's innovative education projects, the TDP was launched in 2008 with generous support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and has been hosted at MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) since November 2011. Other partners include the Museum of London, Historic England and the UCL Institute of Archaeology with the aim of communicating to the widest possible audience an understanding about and informed enjoyment of the historic Thames river.

Elliott took us through a detailed overview of various archaeological sites, activities and findings, well illustrated with maps, diagrams and photographs but sometimes difficult to follow unless one had a knowledge and understanding of London. In 2010 archaeologists discovered the oldest structure on the Thames foreshore just metres from the M16 building in Vauxhall. A survey revealed six timber piles of up to 0.3 metres in diameter thought to be part of a prehistoric structure nearly 6000 years old. Near the timbers, late Mesolithic stone tools, including a fine tranchet adze, were discovered, as well as slightly later Neolithic pottery of two distinct types. The area may have been a significant focal point for millennia and is only 600 metres downstream from the Bronze Age timber-built bridge or jetty (c. 1500 BC) discovered in the 1990s. Evidently there are few Roman structures apart from small finds of pottery and coins. Saxon fish traps are common as well as jetties and causeways leading from the riverbank onto the foreshore to allow access to river craft during low tide. These have been discovered at Chiswick, Tower Hamlets, Southwark and Blackfriars. A Tudor jetty at Greenwich Palace has left rectangular piles and mooring features. At Rotherhithe, investigations have focussed on a large number of warship timbers and gun carriages discovered at the eastern end of the site. These probably represent the remains of ship breaking on the foreshore during the 18th century. A revetment using whalebone has also been unearthed. Timbers on the Charlton Foreshore are thought to come from at least one of four ships, HMSs Duke of Wellington, Hannibal, Edgar and Anson, broken up at the Castle's Shipbreaking Yard during the late 19th / early 20th century. They are

archaeological evidence for one of the most revolutionary periods of naval development post the Nelson era and may well be the only known evidence of vessels from this period in Europe. Also armour plating has been found from the warship Ajax which was broken up in 1905. Many of these exposed sites are often unrecognised and unprotected, and almost all are vulnerable to the twice-daily scouring of the tidal river and the growing river traffic.

The Thames is the largest open-air archaeological site in London, 25 miles either side of the river with up to 60 metres of foreshore when the tide is out, freely accessible to the public. A large amount of miscellaneous rubbish, often material from houses simply dumped on the foreshore, allows so-called Mudlarks to find a wide assortment of artefacts but since these are from a secondary source provenance is difficult. Those who wish to search regularly for artefacts require a Permit to Search the Foreshore (£80) issued by the Port of London Authority and significant finds must be recorded with the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

The TDP leads regular guided walks on the foreshore for adults, and families with older children / teenagers. These walks focus on the history and heritage of the river including those structures and features exposed by the movement of sediment in this dynamic environment, which are monitored and archaeologically recorded by the FROG (the Foreshore Recording & Observation Group). It consists of 600+ volunteers who are fully trained in foreshore recording techniques. FROG works with TDP archaeologists to record the archaeology of the foreshore during the summer season fieldwork, assist with training sessions for new members, participate in outreach events such as talks and exhibitions, and monitors the archaeology of the key sites of archaeological interest, found on the Thames foreshore. Its focus is on the structures and features exposed by the movement of sediment in the dynamic foreshore environment, and how people have used the foreshore in the past, not on collecting artefacts (see FROG-blog on the TDP website).

The TDP has taken a large number of photographs (many shown during the lecture) and has created a series of films about its work on the foreshore. These and much of the information in the lecture can be found on the TDP website - www.thamesdiscovery.org which has external links to Flickr and Vimeo sites and has a Community Map to show the numerous sites.

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Sophie Cabot thanked Elliott for an interesting and informative lecture attended by forty-seven members. A number of questions were asked from the floor about the river, artefacts found, radio-carbon dating, Mudlarking and whether foreshore archaeology was going on elsewhere (unfortunately not enough taking place).

Edmund G. Perry
Hon. General Secretary, NNAS
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