

THE ROLE OF THE HERITAGE AGENCIES IN PROTECTING SHIPWRECKS



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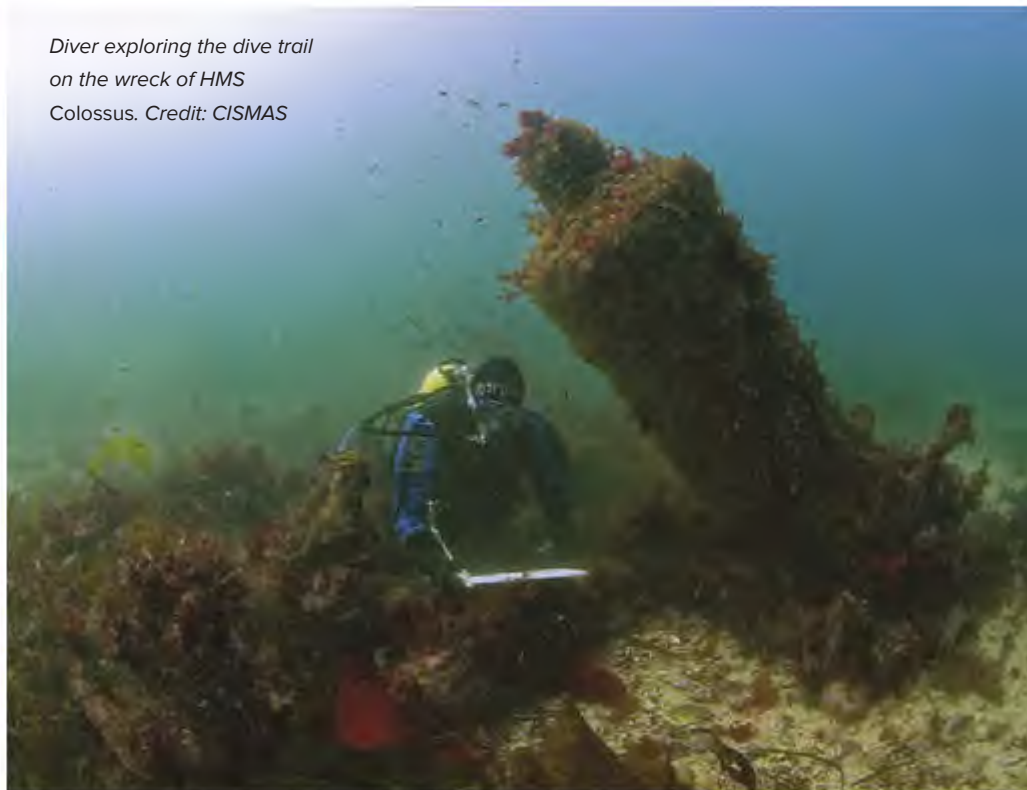


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Historic England has had a role in maritime archaeology since the early 1990s, when we started compiling a record of historic shipwrecks within territorial waters adjacent to England. This record has grown to include over 46,000 shipwrecks, findspots and other seabed features. However, the management of archaeological sites in territorial waters did not become our responsibility until the passing of the National Heritage Act in July 2002 transferred the administrative functions relating to the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973 to Historic England (English Heritage as we were at the time).

Diver exploring the dive trail on the wreck of HMS Colossus. Credit: CISMAS





Archaeologist recording cannon on the seabed. Credit: Wessex Archaeology

This July saw the 50th anniversary of the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973. The anniversary year has provided an opportunity to work with partners to celebrate the exciting discoveries relating to protected wrecks, to engage with new audiences, and to reflect on the past 50 years of heritage protection at sea to draw lessons that can inform the next 50 years.

We're pleased that ClfA has offered this issue of *The Archaeologist* to explore the challenges being faced by the sector, to celebrate the ground-breaking projects, and to show how innovative technology is being applied to the protection of historic shipwrecks.

The Act's origins

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a great increase in the use of diving equipment,

with scuba diving becoming an affordable and accessible pastime. Several high-profile incidents in the early years encouraged the development of the Act, which was put forward as a Private Members' bill, as a relatively quick measure to deliver statutory protection. The Act was brought into effect to prevent damage and destruction of historic shipwrecks as a result of indiscriminate salvage that was taking place, causing public outcry.

The Act is applicable in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Scottish government replaced the legislation in 2010, and now protects shipwrecks as Historic Marine Protected Areas. The Protection of Wrecks Act isn't the only legislation used to protect historic shipwrecks at sea. Shipwrecks can also be scheduled under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. Furthermore, the Protection

of Military Remains Act 1986, administered by the Ministry of Defence, is used to protect the remains of vessels lost while on military service.

There are currently 57 shipwrecks around the coast of England that are protected under Section 1 of the Protection of Wrecks Act, and a further six in Wales and one in Northern Ireland. The earliest designated sites date from the Bronze Age and contain the scattered remains of cargoes, the original wooden hulls of the vessels having long since decayed away. The majority of the protected wreck sites are wooden sailing vessels of the 13th through to the 19th centuries, with a particular concentration around the 17th and 18th centuries. The youngest shipwreck protected under the Act is the *UC-70*, a German minelaying submarine lost off Whitby in October 1918.

How are sites protected?

There are two routes for a site to be protected. The first of these is as a result of proactive thematic listing projects. In recent years Historic England has undertaken projects to assess the remains of wooden wrecks from prehistory through to 1840. We've looked at the remains of submarines from the First World War, and we're currently undertaking a project to protect the best surviving examples of early iron vessels.

The other key route for sites to be designated is when sites are reported to the heritage agencies by the public. Sites are often first discovered by divers, and reporting in this way allows for the sites to be protected before any damage occurs. In 2022 two shipwrecks located on the Shingles Bank, off the Isle of Wight, were protected under the Act after being discovered and reported by divers Martin Pritchard and Dave Fox.

Assessment and monitoring of shipwreck sites

The Secretary for State has enabled a contract for archaeological services relating to wreck sites in UK territorial waters. Historic England is responsible for the English part of this contract. This has traditionally been undertaken by a single

contractor, with Wessex Archaeology being the most recent holder. Following a review of marine services at Historic England, we have now moved to a system with three contractors being allocated work as part of a framework agreement. These three are Wessex Archaeology, MSDS Marine, and Maritime Archaeology Ltd. The move to this framework system has strengthened the sector and provided more opportunities for capacity development and employment.

The contractors will undertake fieldwork to assess new sites being considered for protection. They will also undertake periodic targeted monitoring of protected sites to assess their condition and survival. The works undertaken as part of this framework include desk-based research, remote sensing and site investigation by divers and, on occasion, remote-operated vehicles (ROVs). The budget for undertaking work by contractor is very limited, and as a result only a handful of sites can be visited for assessment and study each year.

The greater part of the monitoring is undertaken by volunteer divers, the licensees. The licensees play a vital role in the management of the sites. They undertake many hours of diving, recording the condition of the wrecks on the seabed

and identifying new discoveries. In 2022 there were over 180 licensees and team members undertaking study of protected wreck sites around the coast of England.

Grant-funded projects

Historic England is able to provide grant support for a variety of projects. These cover a broad range of activities. While these projects do include targeted investigation of shipwreck sites, we also undertake a broad range of other activities in relation to protected wrecks. These include funding the development of diver trails on the seabed to promote public access, as well as developing virtual dive trails¹ to allow those who don't dive to explore protected wrecks. We also facilitate projects to tackle the backlog of research and publication in relation to investigations that took place during the early years of the Act.

Marking 50 years of the Act

We're delighted to have been able to fund a range of projects this year, to mark this important anniversary. Several of these projects are featured later in this edition of *The Archaeologist*.

As part of our call for projects we were eager to receive applications from groups

Traditionally, maritime archaeology outreach has focused on areas that are closest to the sea, and to the wrecks themselves. To address this we funded MSDS Marine to host 50 pop-up events across the landlocked counties of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire.



Public engagement to mark the 50th anniversary of the Act. Credit: MSDS Marine

¹ <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9649c7793bd948b6aedb86180d7dc2f8>

which had not previously received any funding. We were therefore particularly pleased to support a project from the Teign Heritage Centre, a volunteer-run independent museum in South Devon. The museum houses the collection from the 16th-century Church Rocks Wreck. We've been able to facilitate improved interpretive material and the deposition of the site digital archive with the Archaeology Data Service to ensure its long-term preservation and to improve accessibility for researchers.

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Providing support for current and future licensees is a key aim of our projects. We've supported the Nautical Archaeology Society (NAS) in delivering a series of



Volunteers recording the Chesil Beach protected wreck. Credit: Maritime Archaeology Trust and the Nautical Archaeology Society

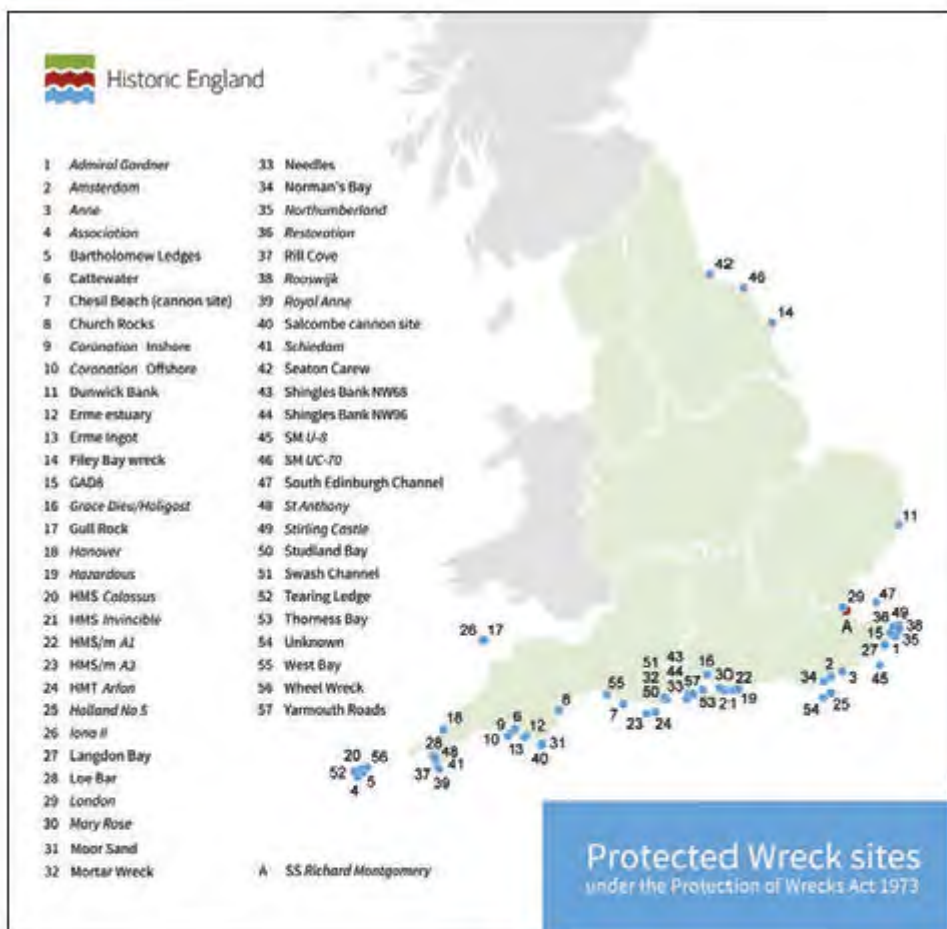
expert-led online training sessions. These sessions provide an excellent introduction to a broad range of topics, such as how to

apply for a licence to access protected wrecks, how to apply for project funding, and many others. These sessions are recorded and are available via the NAS YouTube Channel.²

We're very conscious of the need to encourage more divers to come forward to act as licensees on protected wrecks. A project by the Maritime Archaeology Trust has looked at the engagement of women with protected wrecks, with the aim of encouraging more women to become licensees in future.

Over the last 50 years a large archive of film has been built up relating to protected wreck sites. A large volume of film footage is in the archive of award-winning underwater cameraman Michael Pitts. We provided funding to create a short film to communicate Historic England's work on protecting historically important shipwrecks and to look at the legacy that 50 years of work on protected wreck sites has created. The film was launched at the annual NAS conference and will be available via the Historic England website in the near future.

As well as celebrating the successes, it's also vital that we reflect on ways that things can be improved, so we've supported CIfA in the delivery of a seminar to critically analyse the existing Act and explore how heritage protection at sea could be improved for the next 50 years.



Map of the protected wreck sites. Credit: Historic England

² <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6XkmVTuQ2jQ5UzP5Hx4do49OP9mGFbSe>



Surveying the Wheel Wreck, Isles of Scilly. Credit: CISMAS

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Lady Alice Kenlis, located on the bank of the River Deben, Suffolk. Credit: Historic England Archive

Further reading

Accessing England's Protected Wreck Sites – Guidance notes for Archaeologists and Divers <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/accessing-englands-protected-wreck-sites-guidance-notes/heag075-guidance-notes-for-divers-and-archaeologists/>

The next 50 years

Over the last 50 years there have been some amazing discoveries. We're ensuring that there's a new generation of divers stepping forward to continue the investigation of England's protected wreck sites, and we're working closely with partner agencies across the country to reduce the risk these sites face from heritage crime. The engagement we've seen with the projects to mark the 50th anniversary show how much enthusiasm there is for maritime archaeology. We're looking forward to seeing what the next 50 years will reveal.

Hefin Meara

Hefin is a committee member of the ClfA Marine Archaeology Special Interest Group. He is a maritime archaeologist at Historic England, with responsibility for marine designation casework and the management of protected wrecks. This year he has been involved with several projects to mark the 50th anniversary of the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973. He is also currently working on the redevelopment of the National Marine Heritage Record, and is also preparing a conservation management plan for the wreck of Sir Ernest Shackleton's *Endurance*, in partnership with the UK Antarctic Heritage Trust.



QR code link to *Diving into History*



QR code link to the virtual dive trail story map