

Dealing with a complex international archive from a protected wreck: the repatriation of artefacts excavated from the *Rooswijk*

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A diver recovers an oil lamp from the protected wreck *Rooswijk*, during an excavation. Credit: #Rooswijk1740 Project



Archaeological archives can be complex enough, especially where thousands of artefacts are involved, but add in international requirements and the transportation of objects of historic significance to a foreign state, and it becomes an even greater challenge. Given the very nature of shipwrecks, this is a situation that could apply to many protected wreck sites were they to be excavated by a team of international partners.

The *Rooswijk* was a trade vessel belonging to the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) and in 1740 it was en route from Texel to Jakarta when it sank in a violent storm on the Goodwin Sands. The wreck was discovered in 2005 and was designated under the Protection of Wrecks Act in 2007. In 2016 the site was considered to be at high risk and during 2017 and 2018, excavations took place in a collaboration between Historic England, the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) and MSDS Marine. Artefacts brought up for analysis and conservation included personal belongings, company-issued equipment, and trade goods. These included hundreds of sabres, thousands of silver coins, a chest of thimbles and casks of nails, ship's weaponry and galley ware, as well as personal items including shoes, spectacles and the remains of a trumpet.

The artefacts were taken to the Historic England Conservation Laboratory at Fort Cumberland, where Lead Conservator Angela Middleton took on the epic responsibility of conserving this quantity and variety of objects. Supported by a small team and assisted by volunteers, Angela set out the conservation treatments for each of the artefacts. The conservation treatment for thousands of waterlogged artefacts of differing materials is time consuming but add to this the recording, analysis and documentation of the process and you have a very large and complex set of data. In addition to conservation data, recordings relating to the excavation itself add to an already hefty amount of digital archive. Because of the large quantity of artefacts and data, it was decided to split the collection into tranches. A cutoff date was agreed by all organisations whereby artefacts that were stable by a specified date formed tranche one of the transfer, which was made up of around 2560 objects.

More like guidelines than actual rules

As the *Rooswijk* is a Dutch vessel, the Netherlands maintain ownership, which meant that the material excavated from it was under the remit of RCE and would ultimately be returned to them. There is plenty of guidance available for planning and managing physical

and digital archives in the UK, including many useful resources from ClifA, and these are extremely useful during project planning. Whilst these are great for dealing with excavations that are conducted under a UK remit, there are different standards in other countries that may apply where a collection either belongs to or will be transported to another state.

The project team soon discovered that while in the UK, resources relating to managing archives are generally treated as *guidelines*, in the Netherlands they are seen as *requirements*, and so much stricter policies were in place for how, where and when each step should be carried out. The Dutch Archaeology Quality Standard (KNA) sets out the requirements for all archaeological processes including excavation and conservation and the handling of digital archives which are stored in the Data Archiving and Networked Services (DANS). Many of these lengthy documents had to be translated from Dutch to English, which added an extra challenge.

Ticking all the boxes

When it came to preparing for the transfer of the physical archive to the Netherlands, many different licences were required, both for it to leave the UK and for it to enter another country. It was vital that there was good communication between organisations on both sides to ensure that this went smoothly.

In order to export items of cultural significance out of the UK it may be necessary to obtain an export licence from the Export Licence Unit (ELU) at Arts Council England. This applies to certain cultural goods that exceed a specified age or monetary value that are due to leave the UK either temporarily or permanently. In this case, the artefacts did exceed the threshold and an export licence was required. Provenance must be provided, along with a monetary valuation and photographs of the objects.

Usually export licences are for single items such as works of art or small collections, so the application process is tailored towards this. When dealing with the *Rooswijk* archive, given the large quantity and variety of objects, the process was considerably more complicated. As it was a complex application, I contacted the licensing agencies beforehand to see if there was a more pragmatic approach that could be taken to meet the requirements. The ELU were very helpful and provided advice on how to proceed. They also offered to check the application before it was formally submitted, which assisted in making sure there were no complications or delays during the process.

The monetary value of archaeological material is generally an uncomfortable topic but in certain circumstances it is necessary, either for insurance purposes or in this case for obtaining an export licence. I approached a specialist marine antiques



Conservator Carola Del Mese inspects a box of coins ready for transfer. Credit: MSDS Marine



Lead Conservator Angela Middleton makes final checks on lead sheeting before it is packed into crates. Credit: MSDS Marine

auctioneer whom I had worked with previously at the Receiver of Wreck, to help value the *Rooswijk* collection. Again, this was complex due to the quantity, variety and varying conditions of the artefacts but, working together, we came up with a process that would result in a valuation format that was acceptable for the application.

Certain goods or controlled substances may require additional permits, apart from the export licence. In tranche one of the *Rooswijk* collection there was an ivory comb, which was identified using ZooMS (zooarchaeology by mass spectrometry) analysis. Ivory export is controlled under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and in addition to this, in 2018, the Ivory Act came into force in the UK, which prohibits dealing in ivory in certain circumstances. The *Rooswijk* comb required a permit from CITES to leave the UK and although it was not being sold or traded, I contacted the Ivory Policy Team who administer the Ivory Act to check this, and to obtain written confirmation that an exemption certificate was not required.

Licensing processes are often set up for the sale of objects so words such as 'trading' and 'dealing' are commonly used, but this did not apply in this case. To make sure the process went as well as possible the relevant agencies dealing with the applications were contacted for advice in each instance on what this meant for the *Rooswijk* archive.

Juggling deadlines

Dealing with a substantial archive of thousands of objects and supporting digital records, it was important to allow enough time to get everything in order before transfer. Predicting time requirements relating to conservation can be problematic given the nature of the conservation process, and deciding when objects might be stable enough to package and transport is difficult. Splitting the collection into tranches helped to simplify this and give everyone a date to work towards.

In addition to other project constraints, we had to be mindful of processing times for applications and also, once obtained, the expiration dates of permits and licences, not only for UK regulations but also for those required when importing objects to the Netherlands. The CITES application process can take up to 30 days with export licences taking up to 28 days, but we had to be prepared for this to take longer as the application was complex, and the assessors may have requested further details to make a decision.

As the artefacts were going to be transported by a specialist company organised by RCE, we also needed to provide enough notice to start building specialist crates for carrying the collection and this could take several weeks. Successfully managing all of these time

constraints was only possible through thorough planning and regular and timely communication between all of the organisations involved.

Packing and preparing to move

The Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands had an approved art handling specialist, Hizkia, that was commissioned to pack and transport the *Rooswijk* archive. Hizkia met with us in advance at Fort Cumberland to measure and quantify the objects in their archival packaging, which made the process very efficient. Documents relating to the artefacts, such as permits and licences, along with communications detailing specific agreements made with the regulating organisations, were included in a pack provided to accompany the tranche one items to ensure a smooth transfer.

Two hundred and eighty-three years after it left the Netherlands, tranche one of the archive left the UK in November 2023 and this time, rather than travelling by sea, it crossed the Channel by rail in climate-controlled lorries. We were all relieved when we heard that all 2560 artefacts had arrived safely at the National Maritime Depot at Batavialand in Lelystad.

The successful transfer of tranche one of the *Rooswijk* physical archive was the result of months of work involving a small team from organisations including Historic England, The Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE), the Maritime Archaeology Depot at Batavialand, Hizkia and MSDS Marine. The *Rooswijk* project continues, with ongoing conservation treatment for the remaining artefacts and digital data to be transferred as part of other tranches in the future.

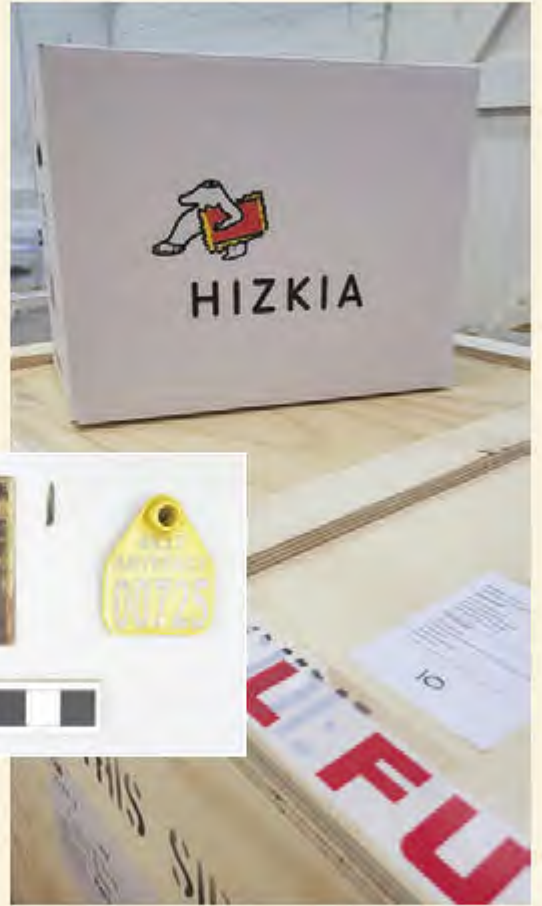


Beccy Austin

Beccy is a senior project officer at MSDS Marine, specialising in shipwreck legislation, marine heritage crime and research. For the last year, Beccy has been involved in assisting with the transfer to the Netherlands of a large quantity of artefacts recovered from the protected wreck *Rooswijk* (1740). Prior to working at MSDS Marine Beccy was the Deputy Receiver of Wreck for the UK for over a decade, where she was responsible for administering and enforcing wreck and salvage legislation, advising government departments on policy and locating museums for thousands of objects from shipwrecks.



Specially designed and constructed crates in a pile, ready to receive Rooswijk artefacts. Credit: MSDS Marine



An ivory comb recovered from the protected wreck of the Rooswijk (RK17 00725). Credit: Historic England

The ivory comb, packed in a separate cardboard box for ease of access for checking by Customs. Credit: MSDS Marine



The Rooswijk artefacts being loaded onto the climate-controlled lorry at Fort Cumberland. Credit: MSDS Marine



Rooswijk artefacts being loaded into the custom-made crates. Credit: MSDS Marine