

Women and protected wrecks: examining engagement

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MAT team on Beaulieu foreshore. Credit: Maritime Archaeology Trust

There are currently 57 shipwrecks off England designated under the Protection of Wrecks Act, meaning any activity on them requires a licence. Statistics show that only 6 per cent of licensees are women. This shocking figure helped inspire a project developed by the Maritime Archaeology Trust and funded by Historic England to better understand the involvement of women with protected wrecks.

The project aims to better understand the apparent low levels of female involvement, analyse the reasons for it and the potential impact this has had, and is having, on engagement with and understanding of protected wrecks. While other initiatives such as the *Profiling the Profession* reports have looked at the gender balance within UK professional archaeology, there has not been specific consideration of the maritime sector, which concentrates on protected wrecks and which includes professional and avocational practitioners.



Christin Heamagi working on the Shingles Bank protected wreck site. Credit: Maritime Archaeology Trust

Preliminary research results show that consistently less than 30 per cent of protected wreck teams licensed to dive sites have been female in the period 2011–2022 (data obtained from Historic England, November 2023). Looking more widely at statistics on women's involvement in

maritime archaeology both professionally and avocationally, we found that the gender balance of speakers at UK maritime archaeology conferences also demonstrates inequity. Some 11 per cent of speakers at the International Maritime Archaeology and Shipwreck Society

conferences from 1983 to 2023 were female, and approximately 30 per cent of speakers at the Nautical Archaeology Society Annual conference over the last three years were female. However, a review of published website information on members of staff in maritime archaeological organisations in England has shown that around 65 per cent are female, yet *membership* of maritime archaeological organisations, as well as roles such as trustees, presidents and patrons, remain male-dominated.

The online survey to understand women's involvement in protected wrecks in more detail and gather information on attitudes to and experiences of involvement has garnered responses from a variety of individuals, including maritime archaeologists, volunteers and those involved in publication and dissemination, as well as those working with protected wreck collections. The survey has shown, generally, that there is a balance in terms of gender in maritime archaeology professionally, but not in the sports diving and avocational archaeology community, with female divers sometimes feeling dismissed and patronised. The survey highlighted that historical gender roles, particularly relating to childcare, have meant many women in the past did not have the free time to get involved as volunteers on protected wrecks.

During interviews we have heard inspiring stories from women who have led projects, pioneered techniques, and fought for the protection of our underwater heritage. However, many of those interviewed said they often had to work harder than their male counterparts to prove themselves, and we have heard stories of sexism, which was often at the time just accepted as the norm.

As well as looking at women and protected wrecks today, we are also looking at stories of women on board these ships when they were lost. Historically, the naval sphere being male-dominated is a clear fact and of course this means many investigations and stories told from shipwrecks are often male-focused. However, women were not absent from ships. The role of women – not only onboard but also as key parts of the supporting network that enabled maritime trade, transport and industry – should not



Divers Heather Anderson and Jan Gillespie. Credit: Maritime Archaeology Trust



Student photographing shipwreck material. Credit: Maritime Archaeology Trust



Working with shipwreck archives. Credit: Maritime Archaeology Trust

be overlooked and more of these stories should be told, a number of which we will be exploring through a series of blogs. There are some parallels here with the *Rewriting Women into Maritime History* project lead by the Lloyd's Register Foundation, which has included a recent exhibition entitled 'She Sees', that tells the stories of several women in the maritime context both past and present.

Early conclusions from the project include the need to create more opportunities for women. In diving this can involve practical considerations such as equipment specifically designed for women and the logistics, timing and frequency of dive trips. On a personal level this can also relate to confidence, making it important to provide a supportive community and celebrate women in diving and protected wreck imagery and communications. It is also important to recognise the contributions of others with protected wreck material, such as researchers, conservators and museum curators; many of these roles are dominated by women and their contribution and roles need to be more well known. Representation is key; we need to have more women represented and increase the visibility of female role models in order to engage more women. The barriers are often subtle, and are much broader than just maritime archaeology, but it is about changing mindsets, challenging stereotypes and ensuring opportunities.

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Lauren works for the Maritime Archaeology Trust and the Honor Frost Foundation on a range of maritime archaeological projects, including research, fieldwork and dissemination. Lauren has a particular interest in the history of maritime archaeology as a discipline and women's involvement in the field. She is also a qualified diver and has worked on a number of protected wreck sites.

