

Valentine tanks and medieval shipwrecks: maritime archaeology at Bournemouth University

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Excavating the Mortor Wreck in 2023. Credit: Bournemouth University

At Bournemouth we've been involved in protected wrecks since 2001 and have been directly involved with 43 per cent of those designated nationally, as well as with a couple of the maritime Scheduled Ancient Monuments. Our involvement has ranged from supporting the work of others to managing large excavation projects and providing advice to government.

We have worked on sites ranging across 3500 years of human history and this has provided us with considerable experience to take forward in our own research and reflect in our teaching. Whilst some of our work has taken us far afield, most of our current work is within our own home waters in Poole Bay and its approaches. We are lucky in the UK to have one of the richest underwater cultural heritage landscapes in the world, and within a short distance of Poole Harbour entrance we have hundreds of underwater sites, including eleven designated heritage assets. This huge range includes shipwrecks, submerged land surfaces, aircraft crash sites, sunken amphibious tanks and even one of the world's earliest aircraft carriers – all providing us with a range of teaching, research, and management issues to grapple with.

Our focus at the moment is working on the 13th-century wreck in Poole Bay that sank whilst carrying a cargo of Purbeck marble mortars, grave slabs and building rubble. Purbeck marble was a major local industry at the time of the loss, with the stone being exported for architectural work around the UK and the near continent. The site is unusual as it has international significance but is also relevant locally. Most shipwrecks connect the beginning and end of their voyage, being less relevant to their place of loss. As this ship was lost at what we assume was the very beginning of its voyage, it gives it gives a significant local flavour.

After a gap of several years where we haven't been able to involve students in our fieldwork, the re-introduction of a diving unit into our undergraduate programme has meant that we can include students as an addition to our core diving team. This gives suitably qualified individuals not only a view of what it's like to work as an archaeologist underwater, but also an involvement in the logistics of setting up a project; that filling eight tonnes of sandbags is as important as mastering the finer points of theory. This experience can give students the opportunity to progress to other things; one of the positives of working at a university is giving people an experience of this kind and then watching them develop as they move on with their career.

Delving into the 13th century hasn't been our only archaeological work this year. In late 2022 we discovered that one of the Scheduled Ancient Monuments in Poole Bay, the remains of an amphibious Second World War Valentine tank, had been significantly damaged. The tank's turret had been struck by a large object and knocked off the vehicle's body, exposing undisturbed material. After reporting it to Historic England we were commissioned to undertake mitigation work, make the site safe and collect evidence, which involved working with the police and the Royal Navy. Investigations are still ongoing.

Working in maritime archaeology in the UK is a logistical and financial challenge. The UK diving regulations, with good reason, are amongst the most stringent in the world, which makes the UK a safe place to work as a diver, but has a considerable impact in terms of cost. This, coupled with the fact that doing anything at sea is done at a premium, means our daily costs just to dive on a single site are over £3000 a day; anything more complicated just adds to the cost. Compared to many other nations, maritime archaeology in the UK is very poorly funded, something made considerably worse by austerity and the Covid pandemic. This makes any work on protected wrecks difficult and because of this, much of our work involves working with partners and our own fund-raising team to generate the funds needed to do much of the work that we undertake. Nearly all of our

work is funded in this way now. While this makes things possible that would otherwise not happen, it does mean that work has to both match the archaeological needs of the site and the interests of those willing to fund it, not always an easy circle to square.

Staff and students of the Mortor Wreck team in 2023. Credit: Bournemouth University



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Valentine tank after the turret had been knocked off. Credit: Bournemouth University



Dave Parham

Professor of Maritime Archaeology at Bournemouth University, Dave has over 40 years' experience of working on a variety of protected wrecks and other assorted sites. He is particularly interested in the sustainable development of maritime archaeology in the UK.