

Searching Mersea:

coastal archaeology, oral history and rising sea levels



Lawrence Northall, CITIZAN Community Archaeologist, Museum of London Archaeology

CITIZAN volunteers on the East Mersea mudflats. Photo: Museum of London Archaeology

The Coastal Intertidal Zone Archaeological Network (CITIZAN) is a community-based National Heritage Lottery Funded project, set up to record and monitor the fragile archaeological remains vulnerable to coastal erosion on England's foreshores. Several sites along the coast of Essex have seen considerable change since the team began monitoring surveys in 2015. This is particularly true of Mersea Island, where a new three-year Discovery Programme tackles the risks that a changing climate is bringing to its rich intertidal archaeological resource. The biggest challenge on Mersea is the speed at which fragile features exposed by the sea are destroyed, often disappearing altogether before they can be fully recorded. Huge mudflats are all that remain of entire landscapes, so large the team have had to target their resources to record as much at-risk archaeology as possible. With over 10km² to explore, new and unique approaches were required to ensure efficient surveys were conducted; Searching Mersea proved to be one such approach. At its heart an oral histories project, Searching Mersea has collated the knowledge, memories and stories of local people who have interacted with the foreshore throughout their lives. In doing so it has allowed the team to recreate the much-changed foreshore of Mersea across the last 50 years, identifying archaeological hotspots in the process.

Several important discoveries, including a Bronze Age trackway and Iron Age human remains, were discovered by local oystermen whose regular activity on the foreshore make finds commonplace. Oysterman Daniel 'Bubbe' French regularly witnesses the changing exposure of archaeological features, buried under silt after one tide and washed out altogether the next. This has resulted in CITIZAN's attention being drawn to many formerly unknown remains. Bubbe's understanding of the changeable nature of mud rills and detailed knowledge of the mudflats are necessary to re-locate such features, find new ones and to map areas of

interest for the team. It only takes one storm surge on Mersea for an entire site to wash away, leaving only the observations and memories of people like Bubbe to go on. Capturing and mapping these memories therefore became a priority for Searching Mersea.

On the northern shores where accretion is obscuring archaeological sites, traditional methods of observation and survey are largely ineffective. Aerial imagery of soft muds is hard to interpret and geophysical survey is impractical. A local former punt gunner recalled a night when a cobbled road



Bronze Age trackway found by oysterman Daniel French (Senior). Photo: Museum of London Archaeology

became exposed on the foreshore in an area now thick with silt. When compared with excavation reports from the early 20th century, the memories appeared to match a location at which a causeway was described on the foreshore, at the time suggested to be an earlier crossing of the Pyefleet channel but long since lost. While memories are malleable and yarns are hardly the fruit of science, they do provide more defined locations in which to conduct further survey when resources are limited.

In conducting recording sessions the team were drawn deeper into the heart of the

community by a network of word-of-mouth recommendation. The connective power of the project to link with the local community has proven considerable. Not only did the project give a voice to many non-archaeologists with strong importance attached to their sense of place and culture, but it also brought together a broad range of people through recording sessions and discussions about their shared history. Critically, it gave a platform for this to be communicated between generations. It was very touching to hear of how one primary school child who visited the Searching Mersea exhibition proudly insisted that all his friends put the headphones on and listen to his father recounting the day he found a Bronze Age trackway. Taken together, the memories and stories of over 15 residents have revealed the locations of sites previously unrecorded, which has helped to focus CITIZAN's efforts in battling the impacts of climate change on the fragile archaeological remains. This has been achieved by creating a memory-based GIS layer charting discoveries, lost landscapes and past coastlines that is being used to inform the next three years of the CITIZAN project on Mersea. Residents continue to contact the project to add their memories to this evolving database and it is planned to keep the project running and expand along the banks of the rivers Colne and Blackwater.

Searching Mersea has also shown the value of oral histories projects for community-led coastal archaeology projects through its unique form of engagement. Its methodology has facilitated a sense of community cohesion and culminated in an exhibition at the local museum. At a time when climate change is not only uprooting our foreshores but also giving rise to anxieties about place and identity through displacement and mass migration, oral history projects give us a positive way to preserve by record our vulnerable and disappearing archaeology. It is also a medium that promotes communication between different groups and facilitates an inclusive approach to local identity.



Lawrence Northall

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Iron Age skull found by oysterman Daniel 'Bubbe' French. Photo: Museum of London Archaeology



Searching Mersea exhibition at Mersea Museum. Photo: Museum of London Archaeology

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