

Wrecks of the Solent

6th February 2014 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

Despite the heavy rain and the poor conditions the Society had a full house to hear Julian Whitewright, from the Maritime Archaeology Trust, give an excellent talk about the 'Wrecks of the Solent'.

Julian started by outlining the development of maritime archaeology, from the primitive diving bells and heavy diving suits to the present day use of technology, which greatly aids the research. The purpose of early diving on ship wrecks was mainly for salvaging and retrieving the valuable items. The introduction of scuba diving changed maritime archaeology and it was found better to train archaeologists to dive, rather than divers to be archaeologists.

Today geophysical surveys which scan the seabed enable investigations without the use of divers. Also intertidal investigations have become more important and GPS equipment enables great accuracy in recording items.

There are 37,000 wrecks around our coast and 47 are nationally protected wrecks. Eight of these protected wrecks lie in the Solent area, including the Mary Rose and the Hamble River's Grace Dieu. The most wrecks on the Hampshire coast come from the Napoleonic war period due to the high naval activity. Around the Isle of Wight, the First World War period produced the most sinking of vessels and deaths.

Julian explained that the investigation of trading vessels was just as important as naval ships. He then illustrated the investigations the Trust had undertaken on two trading ships and a Royal Naval ship. This included videos of divers investigating the wrecks and the follow up documentary research.

He first spoke about the 'Fenna', a Dutch schooner, which sank off the Needles in 1881 with a cargo of iron bars and glass. Julian's video showed the cargo stacked just as it was when she sank.

In 2003 a fisherman caught his nets on something in the eastern Solent and subsequent investigations found it to be a sailing barque the 'Flower of Ugie' which sank in 1852. Julian explained the process of identifying the vessel and the remarkable voyages it undertook. Although a three masted barque of just over 100ft long it undertook a voyage that lasted three years, initially taking beer out to India and then carrying various other cargos. From newspaper reports he illustrated what led to her sinking in the Solent.

The last vessel Julian talked about in detail was 'HMS Pomone' a 38 gun frigate which sank in 1811 after hitting the Needles and now lays in Alum Bay. The majority of her naval service was in the Mediterranean. When returning home from one voyage with dispatches and some racehorses, the ship's master mistook the lighthouse at the Needles for the light at Hurst Castle, on the north side of the Solent which led to her demise.

Julian concluded by updating the Society about the latest projects the Trust is undertaking on the Hamble River. He spoke about the investigations he has undertaken alongside the dinghy slipway on Hamble foreshore regarding the former oyster beds. He also talked about a hulk off Hamble Yacht Services. It appears to be a flat bottom vessel used for trading locally and similar to those found at Forton Lake and Langstone. If anyone who worked at Port Hamble has any photos or information about this wreck Julian would very much appreciate your help.

This was another very successful talk from the Maritime Archaeology Trust, which was previously known as the Hampshire & Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology.