

Dover's Bronze Age Boat: a Progress Report

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IT IS just over a year since the dramatic discovery and excavation of the prehistoric boat took place deep below Dover's Townwall Street. teams from Canterbury Archæological Trust, Dover Museum, English Heritage and London University worked long hours in cold wet conditions to successfully raise more than nine metres of a very well preserved wooden vessel provisionally dated to the Bronze Age, around 1300 BC. Indeed, the boat's recovery really represented the culmination of over a year's archæological field-work on the line of the new A20 being built through the town. Once lifted, the water-logged remains were immediately taken for storage in two large water tanks provided at short notice by Dover Harbour Board in one of its store buildings adjacent to the Wellington Dock.

With the recovery phase over the exhausted excavation team took a few days well earned rest before returning to carry out a more detailed consideration of just what had been found and the significance of it all. An open day was held for the country's leading experts in prehistoric and maritime studies and by the end of that day it was abundantly clear to all that a crucial find of international importance had been recovered. It soon became obvious to the excavators that the safe recovery of the vessel represented not so much the successful conclusion of the large-scale A20 project as the start of a massive study in prehistoric nautical archæology. A detailed programme of research had to be devised and its funding agreed with English Heritage. Such an important find is naturally worthy of display but the stabilization of water-logged wood is a notoriously long and difficult undertaking, thus a scheme for the treatment of the timbers and their eventual display to the public had to be considered. The full extent of the Dover Boat Project thus became all too clear.

Before anything could be done about conservation and display, however, a detailed study of the recovered timbers was required in case they started to deteriorate and this has been our main task over the last nine months. Based in the Harbour Board's store building with its two water tanks, a team of specialists has spent many hours examining and recording every detail of the boat's structure. Led by Mrs Valerie Fenwick, one of the country's leading nautical archæologists, experts have examined the ancient wood for tool marks, details of the construction techniques and evidence for later repairs. Detailed full-size drawings of the remains have been prepared and numerous photographs taken.

In order to recover the remains of the boat it had been necessary to cut it up into manageable sections and although this decision was somewhat reluctantly made, it has made the subsequent handling and examination of the vessel considerably easier. The boat was lifted “right way up”; as a consequence no one had ever been able to examine its underside. Another aspect of the work, therefore, has been to prepare special supporting cradles to allow the individual timber sections to be turned over and their underside drawn and examined. Still covered by an inch or two of original undisturbed river sediment, the cleaning of the bottom of the vessel has yielded further samples of the material that was trapped under the boat when it was beached and one of the most interesting finds has been the articulated skeleton of a fish, provisionally identified as a salmon. Special new cradles of fibre-glass have also been constructed to replace the wooden boards used in the original lift. These will support the timbers after their re-inversion.

As all this work begins to draw to a close the next stage of the project – conservation – must be carefully planned. This work is likely to take around eighteen months, which will we hope give us the time to sort out future requirements for public display and allow the specialists to pull together their individual studies to produce a detailed account of every aspect of the boat and its associated prehistoric landscape.

We have thus made a good start on what will be a long and complex programme of work that promises to culminate in the exhibition at Dover of one of the most spectacular displays of prehistoric archaeology anywhere in Britain. In the meantime, it is hoped to hold a public open day in early December to allow the public a chance to see the remains of the vessel before the start of the preservation programme. All members of the Dover Society will of course be most welcome at this event.

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This organisation, to which the Society is affiliated, is rather like a parent to us and to other amenity societies. It offers advice and support. For example, the Trust has provided a financial award which has contributed towards the Lydden Pond Project.

Now the Civic Trust is itself seeking new Friends in order to maintain its work. Under a new scheme the Trust promises to donate £4 to the Dover Society for every new Friend that we recruit for it. Such Friendship costs £15 p.a. In return, one receives a quarterly copy of the magazine “Urban Focus”, use of the Trust’s libraries and entry to excursions and visits it organises. In order to take advantage of the scheme members need to make an application through me, Sheila Cope, *Membership Secretary*, at 0304 211348. I will be pleased to give further details to anyone who is interested.