

DOVER BRONZE AGE BOAT:

Latest Update

From CHRISTINE WATERMAN

The most frequent question posed to myself and the staff of the museum these days is "what's happening to the boat?"

Well, those of you who have visited the new Bronze Age Boat gallery since August last year will have a pretty good idea, and I'm pleased to say that by the time this article goes to print we should be entering the final stage of a project which began over six years ago when the boat was discovered at the end of Bench Street in September 1992, and which has since involved about 100 people on different tasks.



REASSEMBLY AND PUBLIC VIEWING

Since late August, when the pieces of boat were returned after preservation treatment at the Mary Rose Trust, the Canterbury Archaeological Trust (under English Heritage and Mary Rose staff supervision) have had the unenviable task of putting back together a very large jigsaw of over 30 boat timbers and fixings.

As with many of the activities associated with the project, this reassembly has been ground breaking stuff with the added frisson for the reassembly team, led by Peter Clarke, Deputy Director of Canterbury Archaeological Trust, of being carried out in full public view.

If you haven't been into the museum recently you may not know that you can come and see how work is progressing in the boat gallery through glass viewing panels cut into the temporary working area structure, and also view a small exhibition on the boat and the new gallery.

This part of the work is due to finish in mid-April when public access will finish for a few months to let us build the displays, so please ring if you are making a special visit to ensure there is something to see.

FINDING OUT WHAT PEOPLE WANT TO KNOW

Public reaction to the gallery has been recorded in a visitors' book and through surveys. Many thousands have seen the boat since August and most have been very positive about it and say they will return to see the finished gallery.

Comments include:

"Keep it simple, factual, informative. It is a stunning, exciting discovery it speaks for itself."

"Make it educational and fun for kids."

"We in the States have only 200 years of history to admire. People here should be grateful".

The Bronze Age is a difficult subject for most people. In 1996 a survey of our visitors showed that only 8.5% knew when the Bronze Age was and 38% frankly admitted they had no idea when or what it was. We have used such research to plan our displays whilst still trying to bear

- 18 in mind that some visitors will want more than the basics. We will achieve this through a mix of touch screen computers, information panels, models and real objects.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: THE BOAT EXHIBITION

Running alongside the reassembly and exhibition work is a separate research project funded by English Heritage and also led by Peter Clarke. The team is made up of over a dozen specialists in the Bronze Age, maritime archaeology, wood technology and archaeological sciences. Their research papers will ultimately be published as an academic report and they will underpin all the exhibition texts whether on panels, computer or video.

On the exhibition team we have a museum designer, an interactive computer company, a number of model makers, a graphic designer, a figure maker, a prehistoric hut specialist, a scriptwriter, a wood technologist, a hands-on interactive model maker and a video company. My main role, with our project manager who has overall responsibility for the whole project, is to co-ordinate this team's day to day work and make sure we end up with the quality exhibition we expect, on time and to budget.



WHEN WILL IT BE OPENED?

All the main funding, amounting to over £1.5 million, from the Heritage Lottery Fund, English Heritage and the Wolfson Foundation has now been raised by the Dover Bronze Age Boat Trust who own the boat. Dover District Council has agreed to run the gallery and fund its operational costs for the next twenty five years.

It is hoped to open fully in September this year. This might be delayed if the timber reassembly takes longer than anticipated but at the time of writing (February), all is on schedule.

We look forward to welcoming the Dover Society to an early viewing!

