



Alderney Discovery

WHAT IS possibly the most important wreck discovery in British waters in recent history has been revealed to the public after some 20 years of secret excavations. The wreck, which was found off the coast of Alderney in the Channel Islands is from the Elizabethan era and as a result is of great historical interest, being the only ship from this pivotal period to be found and excavated in UK waters.

Excavation Director Mensun Bound (of St. Peter's College, Oxford) says:

"The Elizabethan period was when England truly took to the seas, beating off the Spanish Armada and establishing a maritime empire. The range and quality of the finds give us this wonderful key-hole size view of the Elizabethans; how they lived, ate, fought, stratified their society, and of course, how they designed, built and navigated their ships."

The wreck dates to the war with Spain that immediately followed the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. In truth, the naval events of this period were a side-show, for this was a struggle for western Europe; it was a continental war the storm centre of which was France. In order to avoid invasion in October 1592, Elizabeth sent an army to Brittany it was in the service of this campaign that, a few days or weeks later, the Alderney ship was lost.

The project, which has Prince Andrew as its patron, has been working since the 1990s, but has deliberately stayed out of the spotlight in that time. Sir Norman Browse, President of Alderney and chairman of the trust that has been set up to oversee the wreck, says:

"Until this summer, for mainly security reasons, but also because we did not want the pressure that comes from people peering over your shoulder, we have deliberately kept our discoveries quiet, but now we require major funding for equipment and conservation, and so have been forced to go public."

Unfortunately, because the find is located in the Channel Islands, the project is not eligible for support from the lottery fund or most other grant-giving foundations.

The finds from the wreck give a fascinating insight into how people lived at sea and fought on land. The ship contained a cargo of early muskets (or arquebuses), swords, hand grenades and armour. Particularly interesting were the peascod breast-plates and helmets.

Of special significance were two lead pan weights that had been stamped with the crowned monogram of Elizabeth (EL) and the so-called 'Guildhall dagger', the symbol of the City of London. These artefacts were important in the dating of the wreck, as this particular monogram was introduced by royal decree in December 1587, but was not fully enacted until after the Armada year of 1588.

Numerous timbers have been seen, but because of the difficult nature of the site, not enough excavation has taken place to reveal any coherent structure. The main problem that the excavators are faced with is the site itself; the wreck is situated at a depth of 26 to 30m, half a mile out to sea from the Island's light house.

Alderney is notorious for its numerous ship-hungry reefs and fearsome currents which, at maximum tidal flow, reach 7.5 knots. This means the team can only dive during brief windows of sometimes less than an hour between tides.



Group of objects from the Alderney Elizabethan wreck, including a pewter bowl, spoon and tobacco pipe

The other unusual feature of the site is the sandbank within which the wreck came to rest. It is in a constant state of flux; sometimes the wreck is buried under two metres of sand, at other times parts of the artefact field are completely exposed.

This is particularly frustrating for the archaeologists as it means that any trench they open can be back-filled in hours. Also, the fluid nature of the sand means that artefacts are in a constant state of movement, so even when an area has been trenched, it will by the following season, again contain artefacts.

The team do not yet have a name for the ship, but they are hopeful that this will be found during the course of research currently being conducted by Professor David Loades, a trustee of the project and the foremost authority on the Tudor navy.

If you would like to see some of what they have found then a large selection of conserved artefacts from the wreck (which are owned by the States of Alderney) are on permanent exhibition at the Alderney Museum.

For further information you can visit the project's new website - www.alderneywreck.com

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