

7th Annual Public Lecture - 1998

A MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE - THE POWER OF MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE HI-TECH WORLD

Mrs Valerie Fenwick

Mrs Fenwick, Editor of the International Journal for Nautical Archaeology, a former Vice-President of the Council for British Archaeology and a founder member of the Trust, chose the intriguing title of 'A Message in a Bottle - the Power of Maritime Archaeology in the Hi-Tech World'. Addressing an audience of over 250 people, Mrs Fenwick began by saying that, as Editor of the IJNA, she got to hear about the new developments abroad and would take in Portugal, Turkey, Australia, America and the south coast of England during her lecture.

The pioneer American archaeologist, George Bass, had likened historic shipwrecks to stars in the sky which were going out one by one as they were destroyed by treasure hunters. Most wrecks were destroyed uselessly since they did not contain any treasure - what they had contained was a wealth of information. Now gone forever.

Dramatic images were necessary to show people what was happening in a medium as removed from them as stars and to correct the mistaken view that shipwrecks could only be seen or enjoyed by divers. Museums, TV, film, exhibitions and experiences all had a role to play.

Mrs Fenwick went on to observe how the Portuguese government had done something amazing by passing protective legislation and creating a National Centre for Nautical and Underwater Archaeology only last year. Their whole Expo pavilion had been devoted to a nautical archaeological research project.

The Texas Historical Commission had pioneered use of the Internet as a means of education and public involvement in the excavation of a shipwreck. A website had been set up to provide regular updates and rapidly reached the top 5% of sites on the Internet in terms of content, presentation and overall visitor experience, being seen by schools all over America.

Books and magazines were a mixed blessing in the form of tabloid tactics by dive magazines or professional publications full of jargon. There were, however, some excellent popular books by archaeologists.

Many of the UK's historic shipwrecks lie close to the shore yet most of them are unmarked. Public enjoyment and sense of involvement in the underwater heritage would be helped by illustrated interpretation panels such as those for the Hazardous and Invincible sites. Replication and experimental archaeology also had a part to play and assemblages supplied much detail of everyday life. The interest in the replica of the brig Endeavour and the recent Portsmouth 1998 International Festival of the Sea ably demonstrated the strength of feeling, of love for the sea, ships and the seashore.

Mrs Fenwick described how maritime archaeology was full of surprises such as the extraordinary diversity of rich artefacts packed into a Mediterranean wreck which had undergone the longest and most careful excavation. A Bronze Age ship exposed deep in the silts of Dover's former harbour was no crude dugout, stone anchors found off the Dorset coast were of a very sophisticated shape and finely sculpted.

In conclusion, Mrs Fenwick said that shipwrecks could transform our knowledge of the past but only now is that potential beginning to be appreciated and it came at a time that the oceans themselves were at risk. Global measures were needed to protect historic shipwrecks from commercial salvors, just as protection was required in respect of overfishing and pollution. Her message in a bottle had to be 'The oceans hold the world's greatest museum. The future of that past lies with all of us. HELP!'