8th Annual Public Lecture - 1999

The Itchen River Project

Dr Andrew Russel and Mr Garry Momber

The Trust's eighth annual public lecture was given on 18 November by Dr Andrew Russel, Southmpton City Council and Mr Garry Momber, the Trust's Archaeological Officer, at the Avenue Campus, University of Southampton, in conjunction with the Department of Archaeology. Once again we are most grateful to Professor Peacock and his staff for their assistance.

Addressing an audience of over one hundred people, Dr Russel described how the Itchen River Project started as a venture between the Trust and the Southampton City Archaeology Unit in response to local interest, and had grown to involve groups and individuals from the local area and nationally. He then put the river into the wider context of its place within the city.

The mud of the Itchen holds evidence of periods from the Palaeolithic onwards, the landscape has changed dramatically since this period but the stone tools produced by these early people remain as evidence. Remnants of these prehistoric environments are captured in the layers of the tidal system trapped under more modern build up.

Evidence from the Neolithic period and artefacts from the Bronze Age have been discovered close to the river. It was the Bronze Age that saw some of the first known boats and we have evidence of their use in trading through tools and hoards found around the area.

In the Roman period river use was intensified. Evidence from the 1st Century onwards is found in many places along the banks, but especially at the Roman centre of Clausentum, which is situated on the defensible peninsular at Bitterne manor. Here a warehouse complex has been excavated giving a glimpse of the extensive trade that passed up and down the Itchen. Recently, metal working remnants have been found over the river nearby, necessitating a crossing point to ease transport to the town. A series of posts in the inter-tidal zone dating to the Roman Period have been found to the north on the other side of the river opposite the Bitterne peninsular. This may have been a jetty for the river crossing. Work on the posts has been the focus of both the Trust and the City Archaeology Unit over the last year and has involved many members of the local community, including the Young Archaeologists Club, interested volunteers, and university students.

In the Saxon period the old Roman settlement was again inhabited, this preceded a move to the opposite site of the river in the 8th century. The Saxon town of Hamwic developed relatively peacefully and grew into one of the largest centres in Britain. Maritime trade was extensive in this period but a Saxon boat find in the area remains illusive.

Through Medieval times the river was still a busy thoroughfare, the trade in wine and wool saw a rise in the prosperity of the town. As the port infrastructure grew there

was a shift towards the River Test, where the focus remained until the 18th century. It was not until this period that the Itchen once again became used more intensively. Industry became based around the river, such as that of Walter Taylor whose patented blocks a seven year guarantee earnt him a substantial fortune. Southampton continued as a centre of maritime innovation in the 18th and 19th Centuries, including the production of iron-clads.

Until the 1930's many people were employed in the boat building industry, but since this time there has been huge change. Numerous hulks have been left to rot in the mud of the Itchen, and all around its banks there is evidence of past maritime industries. It is vital that these remains are identified and recorded before they are lost. Through the efforts of the Itchen River Project a start has been made towards this immense task.

Garry Momber then talked about the more practical side of the Itchen River Project, highlighting the sheer number of hulks and old structural features remaining along the river. A number have been surveyed; this has proved to be a productive training ground for archaeological enthusiasts and also a vehicle for raising public awareness of the maritime past. The results of such work have been published via the internet on a site developed by Portsmouth University and information has been disseminated by lectures. Further reports are planned at the conclusion of the project and it is envisaged that display boards will be erected at appropriate points along the river.

The recording of vessels along the shoreline has taken us a step closer to quantification of the visible archaeological resource and can aid in the prediction of further material. During the survey it became apparent that the hulks tend to lie in clusters along certain stretches of the river. This suggests such sites contain characteristics that lend themselves to such groupings, and it is highly probable that the river mud has preserved older archaeological material buried beneath the modern hulks which are no longer visible from the surface. It is vital that management plans are formulated to protect remains both above and below the silts.

The lack of a comprehensive management plan for archaeology along the shoreline contributed to the destruction of a 19th Century vessel which lay in the mud 100 metres north west of the Cobden bridge. Here, the stern section of a 30m long hulk was being dismembered with a chain saw at the request of the adjacent land owners, as it was obstructing their view. Fortunately, the work was noticed by Dr Russel during a chance drive over the Cobden Bridge. He brought it to the attention of the Trust, which mobilised a small team to work around low water and record the structure before it was lost. Further survey was to be conducted of the remaining 25m of wreck, but on visiting the site a month later, a digger was found pulling it from the foreshore and dumping it in a skip. Little could be done to save the well preserved hulk as it was excavated from the mud but liaison between the Trust, the City Archaeology Unit, the Centre for Maritime Archaeology at the University of Southampton and Itchen Marine brought about the rescue of two stern portions. They were transported first by barge, then by lorry to reside outside the Centre for Maritime Archaeology where they will be used for training maritime archaeologists of the future. This is the only encouraging outcome following the destruction of a piece of maritime history. The final irony was presented by the site foreman who declared he was being paid '£7 per ton by Customs and Excise' to remove the 'obstruction'. Is this

how we see the future management of a diminishing resource which represents the last remnants of a maritime era?

On the other side of the Itchen at Holdens Yard, a former shipbuilding site is being investigated. A rescue survey was undertaken to record barges and parts of the water front revetments. This is potentially a very important site where evidence of a Roman wall was identified behind the present water front, making a prime site for possible Roman maritime finds.

Such developments present the archaeologist with a dichotomy. On the one hand, if the archaeology is left undisturbed, it will be preserved and could reveal valuable information about past society, at a time when we are able to assess it fully. On the other, to try and prevent human development and any form of technical advancement would be undermining the creation of the source material for future archaeologists to study. Perhaps one would be too negative towards development if adequate safeguards were put in place for the study of marine archaeological material prior to its destruction.

A consequence of riverside developments can also be seen at the site of the Roman post alignments opposite Bitterne Manor (see above). The exposure of these structures after over 1500 years suggests a change in the river hydrodynamics. Changes of this nature would be brought about by adaptations along riverbanks such as reclamation, development or the construction of riverside defences. All these have occurred along the Itchen, resulting in a narrower river, thus bringing about increased water velocities. Further evidence for erosion is seen at extreme low water where a submerged landscape immediately offshore from the Roman site has become exposed. Core samples have been taken through the river silt nearby, which have yielded evidence of past land surfaces. Peat layers within these samples hold evidence of datable environments and climates over thousands of years. There may also be a wealth of important archaeological artefacts distributed within these deposits.

The work conducted to-date along the shores of the River Itchen has demonstrated the vast potential of archaeological material in an urban river not untypical of other river systems around the country where substantial segments of the human past are represented.

The Itchen is only one of the local rivers which holds unlimited potential. The Test and the Hamble are yet to be fully investigated and these will offer more clues to the maritime development of the region. As the pace of redevelopment grows the threat to these sites increases, making the need for a management strategy an immediate issue.