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The Thames Discovery Programme: Public Engagement and Research on London's Foreshore

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The Thames Discovery Programme (TDP) – a community archaeology project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (from 2008–2011) and now hosted by Museum of London Archaeology – has maintained close links with UCL throughout the lifetime of the project. This continues the association established by our predecessor project, the Thames Archaeological Survey (Milne *et al.*, 1997: 130–146), which was directed by Gustav Milne (from 1995–1999) and encouraged participation by UCL Institute of Archaeology students in foreshore fieldwork and research. This paper summarises initiatives undertaken by the TDP, with the support of UCL's Public Engagement Unit, and further research by Institute students.

Introduction

The Thames foreshore, exposed twice a day at low tide, is a remarkable archaeological resource. Our surveys of the intertidal zone within the Greater London area have revealed submerged prehistoric forests, human skeletal remains and artefact scatters, a possible Mesolithic structure and the remains of a late Bronze Age bridge or jetty. There are also at least eight Anglo-Saxon fish-traps, a medieval timber jetty and the footings of a 14th- or 15th-century masonry river wall. From the post-medieval period, we have recorded the baseplates of Tudor waterfront structures, the footings of the 18th-century Putney Bridge and many examples of waterman's causeways, used by the once ubiquitous Thames ferries. For nautical archaeology, there is significant evidence of the shipbreaking industry, as well as shipbuilding sites such as the launch slips for the SS *Great Eastern*. There are also vessel remains in quantity, representing everything from ballast barges to the 131-gun HMS *Duke of Wellington* of 1852. Our studies have even taken us into the 20th century, with a survey of river-wall repairs from bomb-strikes in the Blitz and a complete mine-watching observation post from the 1940s. Most of these sites are under threat from increased river erosion, as well as from waterfront redevelopment, and therefore demand regular monitoring and re-survey; there is no guarantee that they will still be there tomorrow.

The Thames Discovery Programme (TDP) aimed to create a model community archaeology project, through the development of the Foreshore Recording and Observation Group (FROG) – a volunteer body trained to record and monitor the archaeology of the foreshore – with membership drawn from the widest possible constituency. This

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group included over thirty undergraduate and postgraduate students from the UCL Institute of Archaeology (c.12% of the total team membership); in addition, all of the project staff were Institute alumni. The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) project was managed by the Thames Estuary Partnership (based in the UCL Environment Institute), and all the training sessions for the FROG members were held on campus, usually at the Institute. During the period from October 2008 to September 2011, forty-five archaeological foreshore zones, from a total of over 200 possible sites across Greater London's riparian boroughs, were investigated: these included the TDP 'key sites' and a number of other zones visited and/or surveyed as a part of the participatory archaeological programme. A summary of the fieldwork results has recently been published (Cohen, 2011c: 66–69).

The Riverpedia Project

In 2009, the Thames Discovery Programme received Innovation Seed Funding from the UCL Public Engagement Unit to create the Riverpedia Project, which provided the opportunity to extend the scope and depth of the programme, moving from the HLF-funded *community fieldwork project,* through the development of a complementary *community research project*. The key objectives of this project were:

- To develop the research skills of Londoners, by providing a constructive focus for their efforts;
- To increase the general awareness of Thames-related heritage and history;
- To empower the community to take ownership of the ever-expanding knowledge-base they generate;
- To raise UCL's public and professional profile outside the HE sector;
- To provide a new approach to university-led public engagement that can be readily expanded and developed for other fields;
- To benefit university research programmes, through the harnessing of knowledge by the community; and
- To create social and intellectual benefits for UCL through meeting, interfacing and collaboration with a wider, interested and interesting public beyond the campus walls.

Digital engagement

Creation of the Riverpedia webpage (a section of the main project website), was structured by the production of the *TDP Research Framework* in March 2010, which outlined a series of Thames related research questions. Together with the ongoing FROG training and fieldwork and the events programme described below, this was designed to encourage public contribution to the project and to disseminate archaeological information online. Thirteen research articles within this section have so far been written by eight members of the public, covering a wide range of topics, including studies of sites at Isleworth, Charlton, Hammersmith and in the City of London, as well as thematic articles on the Thames at War, Art and the River, the Crown Estate and modern votive deposition. The remainder of the articles, which include information about the Public Engagement Unit, the twenty 'Key Sites' (with links to site-specific photo galleries, map information and the 'FROGblog' – a separate page of the website which also includes numerous public contributions), a history of archaeological investigation on the foreshore and information about research resources, were produced by members of the TDP team and staff from LP Archaeology. Information presented and created during the Riverpedia events programme has also been made publicly available online by using Slideshare to upload powerpoint presentations and other information, and through using social media, such as Facebook and Twitter to advertise events and circulate data. Finally, funding from the Riverpedia budget was also used to make video content, held on Vimeo, UCLTV and 360 Productions on YouTube,

more widely accessible through the addition of subtitles to all episodes. Additional educational material is available as downloads from the 'FROG Network' (a members only area of the website), the 'Discover' page, and via a community map, recently developed with UCL's Mapping for Change.

The creation of an interactive, 'multi-voice' online presence, and the use of social media, was an innovative way of both disseminating information and encouraging further participation. In July 2010, the TDP website won the British Archaeological Award for the 'Best Representation in the Media' and, in early 2011, the project was one of five from across Britain nominated by *Current Archaeology* as 'Best Research Project of 2011'. In 2012, the TDP won the award for 'Best Community Archaeology Project' at the British Archaeological Awards. The project has also featured in 'Inside-Out' (BBC1), 'Digging for Britain' (BBC2), 'Peter Ackroyd's Thames' (ITV), a Time Team Special (C4) and, most recently, in a BBC programme on 'London's Bridges', presented by Dan Cruickshank.

Events and activities

All events and workshops were publicly advertised on the Thames Discovery Programme website, in addition to the websites of partner organisations and social media platforms. All Riverpedia events were free; over 200 people attended a range of different activities across Greater London, including events held in two different departments on the UCL campus. Links to galleries of images from events held during the period October 2009 to July 2011 were also uploaded to the TDP Flickr collection. These included a guided public walk of Deptford and a lecture about the history of the black community in riparian London, by historian and author S.I. Martin (as part of 'Black History Month'), and a 'Discover Archaeology on the Isle of Dogs' event, focusing on the building of Brunel's SS *Great Eastern*. Several full-day workshops were held at UCL, working with a variety of partners, including 'Digging Dad's Army', the Institute of Archaeology and the National Maritime Museum on 'The Thames at War' (**Fig. 1**), one of the main themes of our continuing research programme, another on 'From Sail to Steam', a study of the changing maritime industries of the Thames, and a third on 'Place Names'. Working in collaboration with the Museum of London's Archaeological Archive and Research Centre, a 'Human Skeletal Remains' (**Fig. 2**) workshop (taught by osteoarchaeologists from Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA), the Centre for Human Bioarchaeology at MOL, Birkbeck University, English Heritage and the Sedgeford Historical and Archaeological Research Project) proved very popular and instructive, as did an ambitious seven-day 'River Archaeology Project' course (**Fig. 3**), incorporating foreshore site visits, specialist seminars (including a visit to the Institute's Conservation Laboratories),

Fig. 1: 'Thames at War' workshop (photo N. Cohen).

Fig. 2: 'Human Remains' Workshop (photo N. Cohen).

Fig. 3: Artefacts from the 'River Archaeology Project' (photo N. Cohen).

archive work with artefacts in the museum collections, and creative projects involving art, photography and sound.

The Riverpedia Project has provided a solid foundation upon which a viable community research project can develop. The workshops covered a diverse range of issues and the developing themes, we would suggest, are a stimulating series of research avenues. This is demonstrated by the overwhelmingly positive feedback collected through a range of evaluation methods at the events, which also suggests participants would welcome further workshops and events along the model developed for this project. Linking community research to wider thematic research currently being undertaken at a range of institutions, and direct engagement with those organisations has proved mutually beneficial to the professionals involved in delivering the workshops/events and the members of the public attending them. As discussed above, several of these events have been supported by UCL staff and attended by UCL students, and the Thames Discovery Programme looks forward to developing these links further through future partner events, attendance at the UCL Institute of Archaeology Public Engagement departmental meetings, and through its Centre for Applied Archaeology. Involvement with the IoA/CAA offers the opportunity to address public engagement at a departmental level.

Public dissemination of the project aims, research themes, forthcoming events and resources available has been presented via lectures by TDP staff members at venues and institutions across Greater London. These have included lectures to local archaeological and historical societies, in community centres, at academic conferences and universities, and at museums and heritage centres, including the British Museum. The TDP Project Director, Gustav Milne, addressed the UCL Public Engagement Symposium in June 2009 and also gave a UCL Lunch Hour Lecture in February 2011.

Thames related research

A number of BA and MA dissertations were produced by University of London students, and four case studies from the UCL Institute of Archaeology (by Josephine Warren, Alice Gibbs, Eliott Wragg and Lisa Gray) are summarised here:

The Tower and the Thames

The aim of this study (Warren, 2011) was to develop an interpretive framework for the assessment of waterborne access to medieval high-status properties, particularly those that were urban in nature. Recording of standing structures on the wall of the Wharf of the Tower of London (**Fig. 4**) showed how the careful study of a specific access point can allow for a much more detailed interpretation of a single access point than would be allowed by the study of historical maps and documents alone. The application of theoretical access analysis techniques to the Tower complex showed how private waterborne access to the most high-status areas became increasingly important at the Tower through the medieval period. The study of other properties within the wider urban context of the Tower demonstrated that this was not a unique phenomenon, with the increase in private access also being seen at both the palace of Westminster and the Bishop of Winchester's palace in Southwark. The study of the Tower in detail, and within its urban topography, provided a case study for how these methods may be applied to residences in a wider region, whilst highlighting some of the problems encountered when assessing and analysing access.

Ford, Bridge or Ferry?

During significant economic political and social developments in England during the medieval period, a new transport infrastructure of roads was adopted. As part of this, a new form of river crossing appears (bridges). This study (Gibbs, 2011) considered ten crossing sites from the middle and lower Thames in detail, from Oxford in the west to Gravesend-Tilbury in the east, in order to assess how the old forms (consisting of fords and ferries) were maintained, discontinued, or adapted for different purposes, and what crossings might signify about the agendas of local communities, travellers and institutions. This included an assessment of known and possible crossing sites using place-name and documentary sources, proforma recording of selected sample sites and further research encompassing the related topics of trade, transport, water technology and urban growth in the Middle Ages.

Fig 4: Recording at the Tower of London (photo P. Baistow).

Nautical Remains

The foreshore at Charlton (**Fig. 5**) lies below the site of Castle's shipbreaking yard which is known to have been in operation from the 1850s to the early 20th century. A number of structures have been identi-

Fig. 5: Cleaning the working platform at Charlton (photo N. Cohen).

fied as comprising re-used ships' timbers including two revetments, a crane base, a slipway and a working platform. One of the revetments appears to contain deck-beams from either a third-rate ship of the line or a 19th-century large frigate, the crane base contained deck beams from a first rate, the slipway appears to comprise frame timbers from a vessel of brig, sloop, corvette or small frigate size, whereas the working platform seems to be predominantly constructed of frame timbers from the 1852 first-rate HMS *Duke of Wellington*, the largest warship in the world at her launch, along with smaller frames from a second rate – one of HMS *Hannibal*, *Edgar* or *Anson,* launched in 1860, 1858 and 1854 respectively. The structure also appears to contain large fragments of armour plate from the iron proto-battleship HMS *Ajax* launched in 1880. This assemblage of nautical timbers and iron from such a wide variety of types of vessel is believed to be globally unique; moreover, archaeological evidence for any mid- to late 19th-century first-class warships is extremely rare, if one discounts underwater wreck-sites (Wragg, 2009).

Intertidal Archaeobotany

The aim of this paper (Gray, 2009) was to explore the methodologies employed to carry out archaeobotanical work in prehistoric landscape remnants surviving in the intertidal zone and to examine the potential and value of this resource, through sampling and analysis of material from prehistoric deposits at Cheyne Walk Moorings (**Fig. 6**), on the River Thames foreshore, and comparison with methodologies of plant macrofossil sampling and sample processing during intertidal projects at Hartlepool, The Stumble, Langstone Harbour, the Isles of Scilly and Goldcliff East. Through reflection on each case study and the methods used by the different projects, suggestions for future archaeobotanical fieldwork along

Fig. 6: Sampling on the foreshore at Chelsea (photo N. Cohen).

the Thames foreshore were outlined. The value of archaeobotanical analysis of plant macrofossil in intertidal and offshore prehistoric landscapes was explored, arguing that they can 'ground truth' the pollen record, give prehistory back its landscape and give a human scale to environmental reconstruction. It was suggested that it is possible, within these remnants, to find 'analogues' for ancient ecologies that are currently only theoretical.

Conclusions

Further information about the Thames Discovery Programme is publicly available via the project website (www.thamesdiscovery.org), which is hosted by LP Archaeology. This includes background archaeological and historical information and short field reports (films created by Tollan Films, journal entries uploaded as FROG Blogs, papers in the Riverpedia section and as articles in TDP *Newsletters*). TDP staff have also produced and/or contributed to a number of published articles on a variety of subjects (see 'References' below). Archaeological data for the key sites has been deposited with the Greater London Historic Environment Record (GLHER) and with the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC), and a report detailing the fieldwork, events and outreach activities of the 3-year HLF project are also available online (Cohen, 2011a).

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