

The Newport Ship

The discovery of the remains of a medieval ship at the mouth of the river Usk in south Wales is one of the highlights of the archaeological year. Following the News item in CA 181, with its fine photographs of the Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust in action, Project Officer J. Kate Howell gives more details of this brilliant but difficult excavation.

In June 2002 we began a watching brief for Newport City Council during the excavation of an orchestra pit for a new Theatre and Arts Centre. The site is on the west bank of the river Usk in Newport city centre, 300m downstream from the ruins of Newport castle, and east of the site of the medieval Austin Friary, both of which were founded by the Earls of Stafford. The place-name Friars Fields, shown on a map of 1750, suggests the area was under monastic control during the medieval period. The site of a post-medieval quayside at Town Pill is 100m to the north (pill is a local word for a tidal creek).

The great depth of the excavation needed for the orchestra pit required a coffer dam. A wall of eight metres long sheet piles was installed, secured with cross-braces for safe working. Some 4-5m below present ground level, beneath layers of modern building rubble, waterlogged timbers were found preserved in the alluvial clay of the River Usk, and archaeological excavation was quickly organised. The first features encountered were post-medieval: a timber-lined drain and a stone slipway. Beneath these, a vertical timber protruded from the clay, which had overlapping planks attached. As the area was cleaned, more timbers appeared. This was our first glimpse of the Newport ship.

As the team worked relentlessly to excavate and record the exposed timbers, Newport City Council convened meetings with the Trust and with Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments, to discuss the best course of action. Preservation *in situ* was not an option, so it was decided that a full programme of excavation should be undertaken.

A fine medieval ship was excavated at Newport, Gwent. Sandwiched between a main road and the River Usk (top right) is a coffer dam (behind the crane). Here the ship lay five metres below the modern surface.

Photos courtesy of GGAT, Phil Jacobs, and Newport Museum and Art Gallery (finds).