

**Creating a museum resource – A case study:
Excavating and raising a warship from the seabed –
Henry VIII's Mary Rose from 1545**

Christopher Dobbs

Introduction

The *Mary Rose* is a warship, built in 1510 on the orders of one of the most well-known English kings - Henry VIII. It had a successful career for 34 years before sinking 2 kilometres off the south coast of England during a battle against the French in July 1545. A modern search for the ship was started in 1965 by a historian called Alexander McKee, but the first timbers of the ship were not seen until 1971. The outline of the ship was then carefully exposed by divers and in 1979 it was decided that the ship was important enough and complete enough to excavate and raise it.

So in 1979 an independent foundation, The Mary Rose Trust, was formed with objectives including to find, record, excavate, raise, bring ashore, preserve, publish, report on and display for all time in Portsmouth, the *Mary Rose*, all for the education and benefit of the nation.

It is very important to stress that at the very start of the process, two meetings were organised. One discussed the question 'Could the *Mary Rose* be excavated at the bottom of the sea and then raised and brought onto land and displayed in a museum' and the second meeting discussed 'Should the *Mary Rose* be excavated and raised...' These meetings were attended by different groups of experts to discuss the two issues and it was only when the answer to both questions was 'yes' that the project went ahead. Even then, the conservation laboratories ashore had to be established before work could start in earnest. The question of 'Should it be done?' is the harder one to answer and the one that is perhaps often forgotten when people consider projects of underwater archaeology. The *Mary Rose* from 1545 is a very significant wreck in many ways whether for the study of History, Naval Architecture, Material Culture, Social History, Human Remains, Ordnance – the list is endless. In addition the project was instrumental in raising standards in maritime archaeology, the conservation of waterlogged wood and many other aspects of our disciplines.

It must be realised that since the adoption of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage in 2001, there has been more emphasis on preserving heritage '*in situ*' – or at least considering that course of action as the first option. Hence the consideration on whether to raise items has an ethical dimension as well as a financial dimension. It is important to seriously assess the significance of any archaeological remains before raising them. There are certainly never enough resources to excavate all that archaeologists would like to, and only the most significant shipwrecks could ever warrant the expense of preparing for public display.

Excavation

Between 1979 and 1982 the world's largest ever underwater archaeological excavation was carried out on the *Mary Rose*, as judged by the statistics of 28,000 dives being made by over 500 divers, uncovering over 29,000 registered items. The work



The excavation of the *Mary Rose*. Drawing: Jonathan Adams

raised standards in underwater archaeology and part of the

ethos for the project was to show that archaeology could be done underwater to as high a standard as on land. New techniques were invented, new technologies used and a new generation of divers was trained to work as archaeologists underwater.

Salvage

After the enormous achievement of the underwater excavation, the next task was to attempt to raise the hull from the seabed. The remains of the hull were finally raised to the surface on October 11, 1982 with an enormous amount of publicity. It was estimated that over 60 million people saw the raising on television that day around



The raising of the *Mary Rose*, 1982. Photo: Christopher Dobbs

the world – a massive audience for the early 1980s. So the *Mary Rose* raised awareness of the underwater cultural heritage amongst the general public as well as amongst politicians, museum professionals, archaeologists and special interest groups.

Conservation of the ship and the thousands of objects has been a long and challenging

programme of work. Key stages in the conservation of the ship were the programme of scientific trials and the spraying phases - with chilled fresh water from 1983 to 1994, with the water-soluble wax polyethylene glycol (PEG 200) from 1994 to 2006 and with PEG 2000 from 2006 to 2013. This was followed by an intensive air-drying phase from 2013 to 2016. The ending of that phase during the winter of 2015 - 2016 allowed us to remove the insulated walls from around the ship and fully reveal the *Mary Rose* in the centre of the museum in July 2016.

Publication and display has been a vital part of the work, and a major programme of research and writing between 1997 and 2011 resulted in the publication of five large volumes reporting on our work, as well as several smaller books in more popular formats.

Another form of disseminating the results of our research to the widest possible audience is through museum display, and for the past 10 years this has been the focus of my own work, developing the interpretation for the hull and objects – deciding what stories to tell and how to tell them. To me, archaeology is about people, and what we have done in the *Mary Rose* Museum is to interpret the collection through stories about people - the sailor and gunners who died on the *Mary Rose*, the King who ordered the building of the ship and owned it, or the divers such as Alexander McKee who searched for and found the ship, and the archaeologist Dr Margaret Rule, who directed the team during the excavations. This will be discussed in more detail in the next paper.

In conclusion, in this brief paper, I hope I have given you an insight into one example of a project of Maritime Archaeology in England and would like to thank you for inviting me here to your Forum. I agree the importance of cooperation and exchange in the field of Underwater Cultural Heritage and look forward to our institutions and countries working together, both now and in the future.

SPEAKER PROFILE:

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Christopher Dobbs has been a leading practitioner in the field of maritime and underwater archaeology since leaving Cambridge University with a degree in archaeology in 1979. He has worked on many sites both in the UK and internationally, but much of his career has been devoted to the excavation, raising, research and public display of the sixteenth-century Tudor warship *Mary Rose* in Portsmouth, England. He is a past Chairman and currently a Vice-President of the international organisation the Nautical Archaeology Society. He is the UK's representative on the ICOMOS committee of ICUCH (the International Committee for Underwater Archaeology). He is also Chairman of the Maritime Archaeology Committee of ICMM (The International Congress of Maritime Museums) and is a co-opted member of the Council of ICMM. He lectures on aspects of both Museum Studies and Maritime Archaeology in a number of countries and universities.