

Before the talk, SAS chair John Langran introduced Stephen, whom he first met undertaking research at the National Archives at Kew, regarding the invasion known as Operation Overlord. He also remarked that Stephen's presentation included a total of 240 slides – which he completed in little over an hour!

Many of the images showed remnants of WW2 infrastructure in Southampton, one of the main embarkation points for troops and vehicles on D-Day, 6th June 1944. For instance, at the site of the Cross House on the west bank of the river Itchen, north of the 1970s Itchen Bridge are WW2-era concrete blocks, listed in the Historic Environment Record (HER). The concrete slipway nearby was used to haul landing craft (LC) out of the water for repair, and the blocks were bases for the crews undertaking the repairs. Although most of the structures were temporary, along the south coast are remains of many D-Day 'embarkation hards' and associated infrastructure for loading, unloading and repairs.



Cross House, showing slipway down to River Itchen. The bays for landing craft repairs are still visible at low water. Photo: S Hanna

Preparations began as early as 1940, with designs for landing craft able to transport several tanks (LCT), military vehicles and personnel: numerous models were involved – up to MK 84 – and over 800 LCT were produced altogether. Landing ships were built to accommodate up to 40 motor vehicles. By 1942 a building programme for embarkation sites was underway under Lord Louis Mountbatten: starting with six sites from Swanage, Dorset and Newhaven, Sussex, eventually they stretched from Plymouth round to the Thames estuary and Essex; in Wales at Port Talbot, Swansea and Milford Haven, and others in Scotland. In Southampton there were three embarkation points, at Mayflower Park, the Royal Pier and Town Quay.



Dolphin mooring posts at Lepe, with remains of concrete beach hardening mats (centre right) and winch bases. Photo: S Hanna

Landing craft were designed for loading and unloading via retractable ramps direct on to the beach, but there was a risk of vehicles becoming bogged down in soft sand, clay or gravel. A large embarkation hard was built at Lepe where prefabricated concrete 'beach-hardening mats' created a strong base for use at any time of the tide (remains of which are still visible). They were designed to allow a wide turning circle for vehicles to reverse on to the landing craft. Still surviving at Lepe are the last Dolphin mooring posts in the water (see left), and areas of beach

hardening mats with concrete aprons, now breaking up and eroding, as well as supports for

Mulberry harbour construction. All these have been recorded by the New Forest National Park Archaeology service and may be viewed online, together with reconstruction drawings.

In many villages roads were widened and buildings demolished to allow convoys to pass through, and evidence for this can be seen near Southampton, for instance Jacobs Gutter Lane near Marchwood, and at Beaulieu and Lepe. An access road was built running along the coast to Lepe, where traces of macadam reinforced by 'tarmacadam' reveal its route (see right).



Roadway for access to embarkation beach at Lepe, note concrete laid in segments. Photo: S Hanna

Access roads were designed with parking places ('PP') at regular intervals, where vehicles could pull in to allow others to pass. Construction continued to the end of May 1944, only days before the invasion. No master list exists of routes for convoys to all the embarkation points, but between 1st and 5th June all the men and vehicles were assembled and departed from their designated points – 59 points, most of which had been built from scratch in the last two years. Stephen has managed to reconstruct the timetable for Lepe, from where troops landed on Gold Beach. For three months after D-Day landing craft continued to ferry men and vehicles across to the invasion beaches in Normandy: they made numerous trips and many were damaged, and kept going by repair facilities such as those at Cross House. Between 6th June and 31st July at least 418 LC were repaired, and LCTs took part in over 3500 total voyages. Repair facilities in Portsmouth can be seen from the M275 into the city – these are now scheduled monuments.

Larger ships such as tankers, hospital ships and merchant supply ships required temporary quays on the other side, in the form of Mulberry Harbours and large Phoenix caissons (breakwaters), many of which were built in the dry docks at Southampton. Concrete 'beetles' were made at Dibden Bay and Beaulieu, and used to support the 'whale' sectioned roadways across the water (they could move up and down with the tides) for embarkation of vehicles in France.

Southampton

This was the largest embarkation point on the South coast, as the Solent area is nearer to Normandy than to Calais. Two armies set out from the port, bound for Juno (British) and Gold (Canadian) Beaches. Four marshalling camps were set up on Southampton Common, and in dry summers parch marks from the building foundations are visible. Paths on the Common were reinforced and widened as roadways, such as the 'concrete path' still in use at the Warwick Road entrance from Hill Lane, with a parking place near the Ornamental Lake. Other entrances were enlarged to enable vehicles to turn, for instance at the Cemetery Road/Hill Lane junction; and the junction of Hill Lane and Commercial Road at Four Posts Hill was also widened to allow access to the docks. On Western Esplanade the



Above: Training session at the 'D-Day Wall' – Helen Wallbridge left, with the name 'Hill' just visible on a central brick.

Right: Detail showing the name 'Jewett A Callaway Miami, Florida'. Photos: S Hanna

'D-Day' or American Wall bears the names of many GIs who queued there to embark for France in 1944 and later. This graffiti has been recorded by volunteers supported by the Maritime Archaeology Trust (MAT), see maritimearchaeologytrust.org, with stories of some of the individuals and their units.



The embarkation hard at Town Quay and Royal Pier were removed after the end of WW2, and also another hard created at the last minute at Northam; in the process revealing older archaeology in the form of medieval timbers. But a stretch of concrete approach road still exits at Mayflower Park, and Stephen suggested it had been modified for rails, to allow rolling stock to be loaded onto landing craft.



Southampton Common: The junction at Cemetery Road, Hill Lane & Raymond Road, enlarged and reinforced with concrete. Photo: S Hanna

The remains of embarkation and construction sites, the concrete reinforced roadways and parking places (lay-bys), all created for the D-Day invasion are significant archaeological monuments of this era. More than 75 years after D-Day, and with fewer veterans to remind us of that time, it is important to preserve these remains for the benefit of future generations.

There were some questions: regarding the use of so much concrete, nearly all of which was made on site by civilian labour; it is believed that only one site, in Torquay, was built by the Royal Engineers.

Hospitals near Southampton were taken over by the US military administration, including SGH and Netley RV Hospital. Odstock Hospital, Salisbury (now SDH) was first built in WW2, where a specialist Burns Unit was created, and since replaced by a modern facility.