

Stories from the Walls – American WW2 graffiti in Southampton: Helen Wallbridge

Helen Wallbridge was the speaker for our first lecture in September, attended by twenty five members at St Joseph's Hall. Helen works with the Maritime Archaeology Trust (MAT) as leader of a volunteer-based project funded by the National Heritage Lottery Fund, from April 2019 and now extended to April 2021. The aim was to fully record and where possible identify the names of individual American service personnel who left their names on the 'American Wall' (aka 'D-Day Wall'), and nearby brick walls in the Western Esplanade, Southampton. Helen explained the background to the project from the outbreak of WW2 in 1939, with the earliest evacuations and the despatch of the British Expeditionary Force to Europe late in 1939, and their return from Dunkirk after the fall of France in May 1940. Following the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, which hit Southampton hard and led to closure of the Docks, the USA joined hostilities in 1942 after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour. Southampton's Docks re-opened with help from the USA, to receive military equipment under the 'lend-lease agreement' which continued to 1944. By 1943 the Allies were planning an invasion of Europe to take place in mid-1944, initially based at South Western House in Southampton.

South Hampshire became a centre for the manufacture of Mulberry Harbours, concrete jetties to be floated over to the invasion area to provide docks for the import of troops and equipment. Southampton was one of the main embarkation ports for troops to fight in Europe from June 1944 (and for the return of wounded men and prisoners of war). The US Navy established the '14th Major Port' at Hoglands Park, and there were huge numbers of troops and vehicles in the streets of Southampton in the build-up to D-Day (6th June 1944), with many having to embark three days before to await the signal. It is estimated that during 1944/5 about three and a half million men left from Southampton to fight in Europe.

The Wall Whilst waiting to embark, around 100 men passed the time by inscribing their names and personal information on walls close to the docks near the Westgate: on the wall of a compound opposite and a row of terraced houses (now demolished but the marked bricks said to have been saved) near to the Arcades. The names are shown 'in situ' among photographs from Gill Child's collection of 'Old Southampton Photos', and the significance of the graffiti was recognised in the 1970s, after one of the named men (Walter Wells) was contacted following an appeal to a newspaper in his home town. The project's work to record the graffiti on the Wall began with a search of the local Heritage Environment Record (HER), contact with Southampton Archaeology Unit and its Heritage Collections, and local information obtained from Southampton Archives and online.



*"Eddie Meyer Illinois", within landing craft. Date 7/21/44.
Photo S Hanna*

An initial list of identifiable names was compiled and online searches undertaken using US military records, also local newspapers both here and in the US, and a breakthrough was made with one man, Curt Hodges, whose obituary was found and posted on Facebook. This prompted a reply from his daughter, and from this volunteers were able to identify seven other names belonging to the same unit (according to a Roster published online). They followed this group from being drafted from College in 1944, landing in the UK, to training in the Cotswolds until December when they embarked for France. On arrival there they could not disembark for four days but ended up in snow in the Ardennes. They were short of food and weapons in the midst of the Battle of the Bulge wearing only summer uniforms, resulting in some men suffering frostbite. The project also came across other Rosters such as eight men who left their names, from a QM Gasoline Supply company: they were all coloured soldiers and tracing them proved more difficult. There is a similar wall in Weymouth where many US units embarked for the D-Day invasion, and in several towns in Europe where American troops were fighting, and it seems to have become a tradition for them to leave their marks, which might be recognised by later units passing through during the invasion.

The survey was initially able to follow up the stories of 39 individual names in depth, but could find little information about many more, while other marks had become eroded or obscured over time. The visibility of the marks is affected by the weather, for instance names appear more clearly after rain, and by using photogrammetry 58 more names were recorded, and a total of 60 now followed up. The project enlisted help from archaeologist James Miles of Archaeovision using an advanced technique of 'Reflectance Transformation Imaging' (RTI) which they hope will enable them to decipher more names.



*Workshop demonstrating use of RTI at the American Wall, (Helen Wallbridge centre)
6th March 2020. Photo M Garner*

The Wall can be visited at any time, almost opposite the Westgate and it includes a smaller wall directly behind, made up of marked bricks reclaimed from demolished buildings nearby. See the archive at: maritimearchaeologytrust.org, which includes an updated version of this talk, a 3-D model of the walls, with images of the graffiti, lists of names, and documents. An outreach programme includes a free exhibition 'In the Footsteps of Pilgrims and Soldiers' displayed in the foyer of the De Vere Grand Hotel (who own the Wall); also Walking Tours (guided and self-guided), School Education Packs and geo-caching.

Sarah Hanna