

PS Visit to Fort Cumberland 11th November 2018

I went over for Historic England's open day *Rooswijk 1740* on Sunday 11th November at Fort Cumberland in Eastney, Portsmouth. This is a former 18th century military fort built to defend the Royal Navy dockyard from land attack. It was used by the Royal Marines until the 1970s and handed over in 1975 to English Heritage (now Historic England – HE). A video on a loop showed conditions on the wreck in situ on the Goodwin Sands, and some of the MSDS Marine archaeological team were on hand to explain the use of the equipment and how they work to bring artefacts up to the surface.

The HE conservation team showed methods of identification for items such as plant seeds and wooden artefacts, an essential step towards conservation. Plant seeds could include food items such as grains, or others brought on board attached to goods or clothing, so they keep a varied type collection. Using a microscope you could see broken and waterlogged seed fragments of buckwheat for instance, and compare them with modern examples. The section of a large oak trunk was also displayed, marking dates such as the Armada 1588, Armistice 1918 and May 1945 among others, illustrating the process of dating by the use of dendrochronology.



Above: wooden barrel reinforced with metal. Note concretions at rim and base.

After touring the lab. we were able to visit the storeroom housed in one of the 'casemates' built into the fortifications, where large tanks of fresh water held artefacts awaiting conservation. The photos show a small selection, and note the images of bricks reflected on the water surface. There was also a well-preserved wooden rope block



Left: Copper alloy oil lamp with 'gimbal', to keep flames steady as the ship moves in heavy seas.

Below: wood and metal chest containing stacks of silver thimbles (right of photo), and cylindrical objects, possibly cartridges.



with its parts in working order, and larger items such as sheets of copper alloy and lead for building, copper alloy cauldrons and containers with lids, building stone, a huge number of iron nails, armaments and many other items.

This was a fascinating insight into the work of the diving and conservation teams and the complex tasks involved in rescuing artefacts from deep sea wreck sites, and many thanks to Historic England and MSDS Marine Archaeology for giving us the opportunity to visit. Most of the visitors seemed to come from the Portsmouth area but at least one other SAS member was there, and I would certainly recommend going. Fort Cumberland is regarded as the finest example of a 'bastion trace fort' in England (Wikipedia), and both the fort and its buildings are Grade II* listed. It's open each year on Heritage Open Days in September for pre-booked guided tours, so make a date for next year!

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