

An Introduction to Nautical Archaeology

If like me the nearest you've come to archaeology is sitting on the sofa on a Sunday night with a glass of red and watching Tony Robinson and Time Team then this introductory course to nautical archaeology is probably the ideal venture to wet your taste buds for further study.

Our first evening was spent discussing a broad range of subjects each in turn building upon the others to give a good idea of the why's, what's, when's and where's of nautical archaeology. Our lecturer, come lion tamer, for the course was Mary Harvey and would answer our testing questions, always with a smile, sometimes with a laugh, but always in an informative manner.

I came away from this first evening session having hardly noticed the time fly by and looking forward to the following week where we would be let loose with a tape measure and a clip board. I could only begin to dream of the chaos and confusion that I would endeavour to unleash upon my fellow students.

The second evening began with a quick recap of our previous discussions and then onto our task for the evening and descriptions of the techniques we would be using in the dry this evening and then onto the pool the following week. It should be second nature for a 30 something male to be able to handle a tape measure and count from 1 to 10 but as we were about to find out even the simplest things can escape you at times!

We learned 2 techniques for 2 dimensional mapping of a small site, personally I think it felt at times like we were trying to map the 8 dimensions of time and space, my buddy and I managed to confuse even the simplest of tasks, like counting, which end of the tap to use and that you can't move the object to make your measurements right.

Our first task was to draw a quick and simple sketch of the site in front of us and making quick notes, type of object and colour etc so when it came to using the surveying techniques we would have an idea of which object it was we were surveying and its relation to the other objects around it.



The first technique to be put into action was offset, a simple process of length and distance on a known baseline. Simply measure from the object to the baseline and make sure you are at right angles to the baseline and then you're able to take the 2 measurements, simply put - along and up. Larger objects could be measured from either end with an object length added to give a cross check for the other measurements.

The second technique was trilateration, a term only known to nautical archaeologists apparently and simply involves measuring out the distance of an object from each known base point. This is then translated to a scale drawing with protractors, it sounds easy but you soon get the impression that again accuracy is the key to everything.

We finished our evening drawing our plot onto paper and it began to bring home the realisation that it wasn't all that easy and a little more accuracy and precision would be required. Putting both techniques over the top of each other and then scratching our heads wondering why the 2 sets of measurements didn't exactly add up, I mean how hard could it be. I could only leave the hall giggling to myself as I contemplated an evening in the pool, 'oh here comes the fun'.



Evening 3 had us given a review of the past couple of weeks and then an outline of further training that we could undertake with the Nautical Archaeological Society. Then it was off to the pool for some fun and games with a tape measure.

I think the pool part is the most enjoyable. All the techniques we'd been taught on land we would transfer to underwater. Our sites were set out for us and after a buddy check on the poolside and some discussion between buddies we leapt deftly into the water. Initially we would survey the site with a brief sketch and noting anything of interest, not difficult to find the 4 items of interest on the bottom of the pool but we persevered and got there in the end.



Next we used the first of the techniques we'd been taught which was the offset technique, now this is really easy when you're able to talk to your buddy but even lots of mumbling through regulators and pointing at the notepad couldn't always get the point across that you were trying to make. Luckily enough my buddy and I had agreed a simple process of who went first and which object from our sketch we would measure.

Quickly we moved onto trilateration and our discussion after we'd taken our initial sketch came good and it went relatively smoothly. One of the big things you find when trying skills underwater involving tape measures is the ability of the tape measure to float and catch itself on any object or human in the vicinity and make your measurement look rather foolish. I remembered back to my craft and design teacher at school "measure twice and cut once" so repeating the measurements while checking the tape helped a lot.



Finally we were given a frame with some articles below for us to draw, we were instructed to hover above the frame and draw what we saw below us. Of course simply hovering in 2 mts of water is easy and then adding in drawing and lining yourself up perfectly with the frame is simplicity incarnate. Actually it's a game of move draw, move and draw but my buddy and I got there in the end and our drawings vaguely agreed so we must have done something right.

After our eagle eyed tutor had checked our attempts at measurements we were congratulated on our newly found skills and issued with our training record booklets. I felt like Kate Winslet picking up an Oscar!

In conclusion I can definitely say I thoroughly enjoyed the introductory course, we were taken through the subject by an obviously enthusiastic nautical archaeologist who had an easy and engaging manner. I took a lot away from the course and will certainly be using some of the techniques when I dive, even something as simple as a sketch of the wreck will give a dive an added dimension afterwards.

It certainly leaves one with a taste for more and it's definitely on my 'to-do' list now for the coming years, to complete the next course.

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