

“Wrecks of the River Hamble”

Talk by Valerie Archibald, March 2025

The final talk of our 2024/25 programme was a live event by Valerie Archibald on the wrecks of the River Hamble. Valerie is a local and has been involved with the Hampshire Field Club for over 50 years and is a volunteer with the Maritime Archaeology Trust.

The River Hamble is navigable for eight miles and has four tides daily. The west side of the entrance was defended by an Iron Age hill fort, indicating that the river's importance has been recognised for many centuries. The river contains about 140 known wrecks so Valerie could only talk about a small selection, which she spoke about in a reverse time span (most recent first). The Maritime Archaeology Trust has designated the wrecks of the Hamble with a “HAM” prefix.

We first heard about HAM064, near Bursledon, which is the remains of the “Norseman”, a 132 foot long American ship built in Brooklyn in 1881 for an entrepreneur. It was later converted into a houseboat and was occupied until the 1950s, when it caught fire and sank.

HAM050 at Bunny Meadows was a motor minesweeper. Little of this wreck remains and why it was left to decay in the Hamble remains a mystery.

HAM043 near Warsash is also very fragmentary. The surviving metalwork suggests it was a Barnett class lifeboat (in use from the 1950s-80s). Again the reason for it ending its days in the Hamble is unknown.

On the west side of Badnam Creek, next to the Mercury Marina, is a large piece of metal, the rear gun platform of HMS Sultan, built in 1870 and deliberately wrecked in 1908 to protect Southampton Water in the event of war.

A lot survives of HAM044 near Crableck Quay. This wreck is 30m long and has been identified as a fishing vessel built in Essex in 1944. It was damaged in an arson attack in 2015 and since left to decay.

HAM153, on the east bank at Lower Swanwick (between the two bridges) still shows a lot of metalwork. This is all that remains of a seaplane towing lighter from World War 1.

On Satchell Marsh are the remains of two hulks (HAM037 and 051), which started life in the 19th century as North Sea fishing boats and were known as TS Mercury between 1885 and 1968. They were individually known as “Flash” and “Fortuna” and were used as hospital ships for a naval training school. They were then abandoned and left to decay.

Situated beyond the railway line and motorway is probably the most famous of the Hamble wrecks, the “Grace Dieu” (HAM141), the flagship of Henry V, built in 1417-18 in Southampton. It was launched too late to partake in the French wars and only sailed one voyage before being laid to anchor in the Hamble. It was struck by lightning in 1439 and burnt to the waterline. The ship was 218 feet long – twice the length of the Mary Rose!

The Grace Dieu was triple clinker built and was not identified until 1933. Dendrochronology and Carbon 14 dating have since confirmed the identification and the site was visited by Channel 4's "Time Team" in 2005.



Artist's impression of the "Grace Dieu"

Even older than the Grace Dieu is the nearby "Holigost" (HAM142), a Spanish Castilian ship (the "Santa Clara"), captured and renamed. It last sailed in 1426 and was identified as late as 2014. It has still not been properly investigated.

The oldest of all our Hamble wrecks is a log-boat found near Fairthorn Manor in 1888 and believed at the time to be pre-Roman. The boat has since been dated to 668-704, making it Anglo-Saxon. It can be seen in the Sea City Museum in Southampton.

The Hamble obviously still holds a lot of secrets and this eye-opening talk was a fitting way to conclude our talks programme for another year.

Alan Sandford

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