

Correspondent

Mike Heyworth, director of the Council for British Archaeology, remembers the war at sea



Above: A mast on the wreck of HMS Aboukir, one of three British ships sunk in the North Sea on September 22 1914 with the loss of over 1,400 lives

Opposite top: Over 700 descendants and relations of sailors lost on HMS Aboukir, Hogue and Cressy at the Historic Dockyard Chatham in September 2014, on the 100th anniversary of the tragedy

Right: Boots on the deck of HMS Defence, sunk in the North Sea at the Battle of Jutland, May 31–June 1 1916; over 9,800 British and German men died in the conflict, and 25 ships were destroyed

on board the ships.

A recent policy forum event held at the British Academy in London, jointly organised by the academy and the Honor Frost Foundation, focused on investigating and safeguarding these wreck sites – and crucially also on the issue of engaging public interest in the war at sea. Part of the context for the event was the recognition that ever more wrecks date from over a hundred years ago as we move through the centenary of the war, so they will fall within the ambit of the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage. This is increasingly relevant as more state parties sign up, although the UK has yet to ratify it. It is nonetheless the position of the British government to abide by the convention's annex as the basis for its current policy on underwater cultural heritage.

Case studies were presented at the British Academy event which showed the range of stories and conservation challenges associated with first world war wreck sites.

Many of the lost ships have not been physically located, and many known wreck sites have not been securely identified and associated with particular vessels. More research is needed to investigate identified sites, and to apply new technologies to locating more. The secure identification of a wreck is particularly meaningful for families of those lost during the sinking. It creates an important link between the intangible and tangible heritage associated with the wreck.

There are opportunities for public engagement, and recreational divers are often well placed to undertake research – based on the well-established principle of “look, don’t touch”. Organisations like the Nautical Archaeology Society (www.nauticalarchaeologysociety.org) and the Maritime Archaeology Trust (www.maritimearchaeologytrust.org) have extensive education programmes, and ways in which the public can engage with our rich maritime legacy. Publicity surrounding the





centenary of the first world war is leading many more people to research their ancestors' roles in it. There is growing interest in the location of wrecks, which are the grave sites for so many who lost their lives at sea.

The wrecks are often decaying rapidly due to the ravages of salt water, tidal currents and other sources of damage. It is not going to be possible to preserve their physical remains, yet with investigation and recording the significance of the vessels can be saved – just as would be expected for an archaeological site on land impacted by development. New digital technologies allow intellectual access to wreck sites which for many are inevitably beyond physical access.

Unfortunately, in some cases investigation and new

understanding are being hampered by people who take material from the wrecks. The remains of HMS Cressy, HMS Hogue and HMS Aboukir, which lie off the coast of the Netherlands, are three examples of vessels sunk in the first world war – by torpedoes from the same U-boat within 90 minutes of each other on September 22 1914 – which are now vulnerable to damage. There have recently been several reports of illegal salvage work on these sites, using heavy-duty claws to rip through the hulls in the hope of finding valuable scrap metal.

The current legal framework for the protection of wreck sites is complex. It includes marine legislation (the Marine & Coastal Act 2009), general heritage protection legislation (the Ancient Monuments & Archaeological

Areas Act 1979 – which has been used to protect the wrecks of three first world war battleships and four cruisers of the German High Seas Fleet in Scapa Flow), and dedicated legislation (the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986; the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973). In Scotland there is additional protection through the designation of Historic Marine Protected Areas under the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010. However, most of this legislation applies only to wrecks which lie within UK territorial waters.

In March 2013 the British Academy and the Honor Frost Foundation convened a joint steering committee of underwater cultural heritage experts and senior archaeologists to work towards the UK ratification of the

2001 UNESCO convention. The committee is chaired by professor Sir Barry Cunliffe. An independent report has been published detailing the UK's routes towards ratification. This demonstrates that reservations previously raised by the government are no longer of concern (see www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Protection_Underwater_Cultural_Heritage.cfm). The convention has now been ratified by nearly 50 state parties, including France, Belgium, Spain and Italy. It is becoming an increasingly important mechanism to allow countries to work together to protect their underwater cultural heritage – often found within the territorial waters of another country.

The Council for British Archaeology has joined other members of the Joint Nautical Archaeology Policy Committee (www.jnapc.org.uk), the British Academy and Honor Frost Foundation, in calling on the government to do more to protect our rich maritime legacy by ratifying this convention at the earliest opportunity. The UK is otherwise largely incapable of offering protection to British wrecks lying beyond our own waters. This is particularly relevant during the first world war commemorations. More than ever at this time, we should be doing all we can to protect the graves of the brave sailors and other individuals who lost their lives fighting for their country. ■

What next for HMS Victory?

Many of the issues which relate to first world war wrecks are also directly relevant to the wreck of HMS Victory 1744, located in the English Channel in 2008 (see feature May/June 2009/106). The UK government previously passed ownership of the wreck to the Maritime Heritage Foundation. There has been uncertainty about the foundation's plans for the wreck site. Recently the government announced that it was allowing it to recover at-risk surface items, but the foundation gave no assurances about the

potential sale of personal possessions of Royal Navy sailors or any cargo carried on board, to fund recovery. Any such sale would be in breach of the annex to the 2001 UNESCO convention, which explicitly forbids selling excavated material to fund work. The CBA is calling on the government to ensure that all material recovered from the wreck site is placed in the proposed new Victory Collection, and deposited with a suitable museum. Failing this, a precedent could be created for the commercial exploitation of historic wrecks worldwide. ■



Let's see what's down there

ROBERT YORKE: ODYSSEY MARINE EXPLORATION