TIME, TIDE AND "HARRIETT"

Janet Presley gets stuck in with The Friends of Purton's weekend excavation

In 1991 Stuart Bryan and Judith Hague carried out a survey of the Bristol type of Kennet barge, *Harriett*, which, in 1964, joined the many vessels beached from 1909 on the foreshore to protect the bank separating the River Severn and canal between Sharpness and Purton. The vessel was built at Honeystreet c.1900 and belonged to the fleet of Fred Ashmead in Bristol, where it is known to have carried 40 tons per load of wood pulp to St. Ann's Board Mills, among other cargoes. Patches of paint bearing the Ashmead colours can still be seen. It is the only known remaining example of her type.

During the NAS Training weekends last year *Harriett* was one of the vessels used in the exercise, being in a better state of preservation, with entire timbers showing above what has been built up as ground level by the silty River Severn. That weekend enabled Stuart to begin a photographic survey of the current remains, in order to make comparisons and establish the amount of deterioration over that time. This, together with the entirety of the vessel shape, prompted the decision of the Friends of Purton to undertake a limited excavation, extending a trench along the mast-step between the two sides of the vessel.

The preparations were made by Project Manager, Laurent Coleman, a professional archaeologist who headed the team comprising fellow members of the 'Friends,' NAS and the Curator of The Kennet and Avon Museum, who is also an archaeologist. Initial meetings having been held with representatives from British Waterways, Natural England, in connection with the SSSI status, and permission sought from the landowners, the Berkeley Estate, a *Written Scheme of Investigation for an Archaeological Investigation* was drawn up and circulated, together with a comprehensive Risk Assessment of the site.

An aerial view of work in progress. *Photo: Hamish Fenton.*

Following the introductions, Stuart gave a brief outline of the history of the vessel and the remaining features. He posed the questions which he hoped would be answered during the investigation:

- Specific measurements which would indicate one of two model types built;
- The depth of timber-covering placed to protect the keelson;
- Is the cheek timber intact all the way down?
- Why is the starboard mast cheek higher than the port cheek – is she listing to port?
- What is the state of preservation of remains below ground?

The turf was removed and the trench measuring 3.7m x 1.2m was dug across the vessel to a depth of 1m, to reveal the keelson with a protective covering of Red Deal, the mast-step and timber planks of the false floor.

The next day the effects of a 4 star rated Severn Bore were discovered as the overnight tide had reached all the vessels on site, a biannual occurrence. The trench was full of water and constant bailing was needed to complete the recording process. One feature which surprised everyone was the smell and staining of coal dust at the bottom of the trench on the port side, providing possible evidence of its final cargo.

Terry Mundy, Curator of the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust's Museum, testing the gap between the keelson and its protective cover at the base of the trench across 'Harriett'. *Photo: Janet Presley*

Stuart said, "interim results show that the gap was 5' 6" (1.7m) deep (rather than 5' 10") and the keelson protection (4"-100mm) had been replaced with thinner material (c.50mm) at sometime and is very worn. Both mast cheeks are continuous to the false floor and, so far, their height difference is unexplained. The floor timbers and keelson (which are damp all the time) are well preserved but the higher buried timbers (which only become wet on the highest of spring tides) are preserved worse than the remaining timbers above the ground".

During the weekend two members from NAS undertook a survey of the remains of *Voltaic*. Aerial photographs were taken by Hamish Fenton using a carp fishing pole as a camera support and a party from the Slimbridge Dowsing Group carried out an investigation in the nearby reed beds.

Laser scanning was undertaken the following day on the grass-cleared remains of *Harriett*, plus an investigation using ground penetrating radar in an area by the reed beds. All the subsequent reports are eagerly awaited. Whatever they contain will have a bearing on the site management plan and investigations in the future.