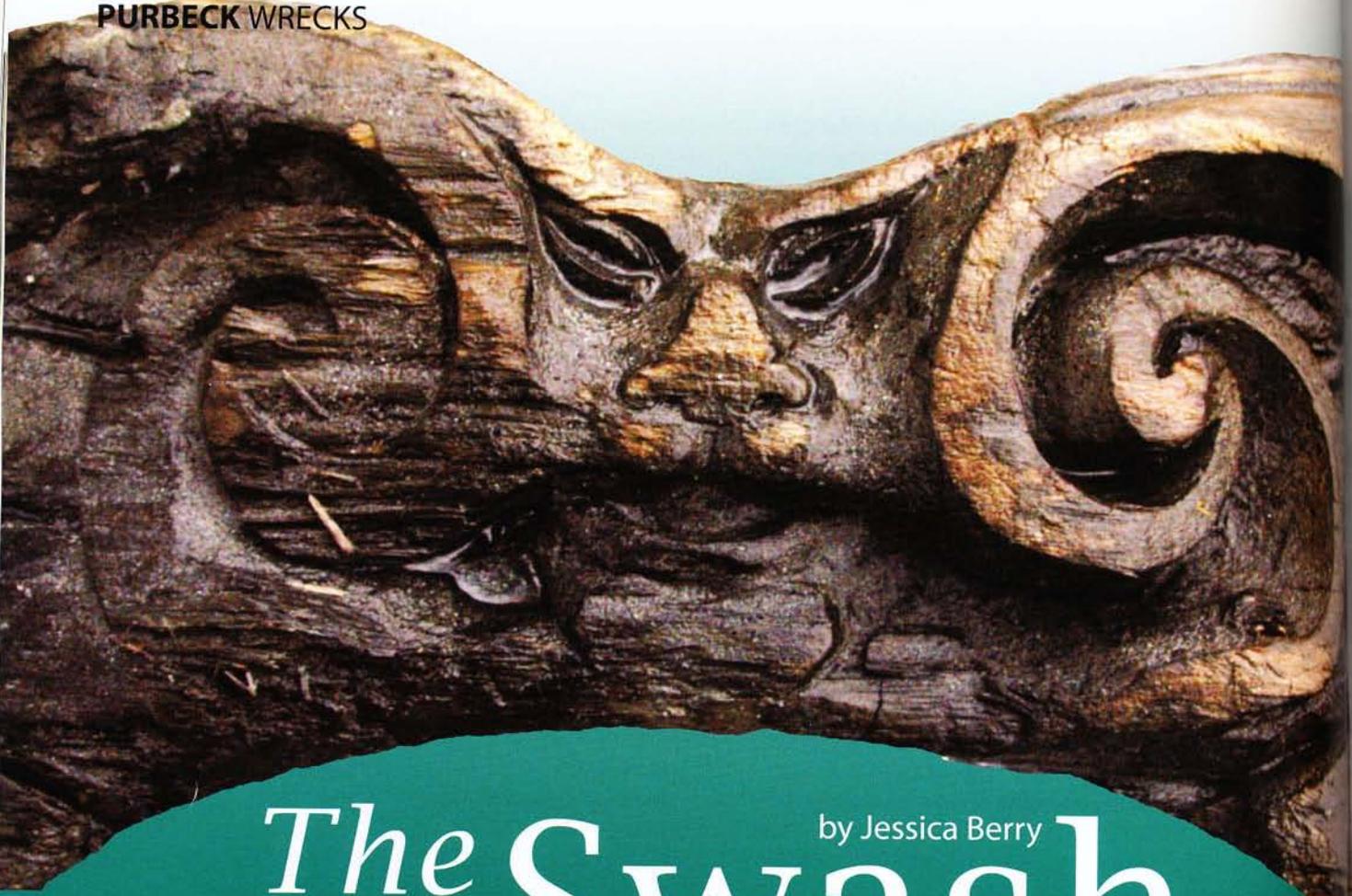


PURBECK!

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The Swash

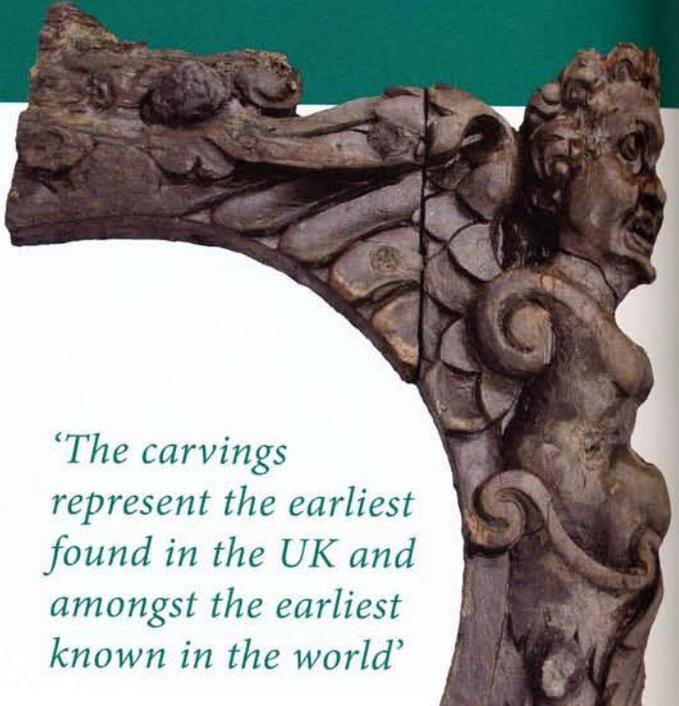
by Jessica Berry

Photos: courtesy Bournemouth University

Swimming around the remains of a 17th century Dutch shipwreck gives an extraordinary sense of historical immediacy. For the last year a team of maritime archaeologists has been doing just that, painstakingly excavating one such structure now deemed to be of great international historical significance.

This project is the biggest undertaking since the raising of Henry VIII's flagship, the *Mary Rose*, in the 1980s. It is funded by English Heritage, Bournemouth University and the Poole Harbour Commissioners and, though not British, the wreck itself is of such rarity in British waters that it is recognised as being of worldwide importance – not least due to the discovery of rare carvings, including some of human faces.

The wreck has so far not been identified so, like an orphan, it's been named after the place it was found: the Swash shipping channel at the entrance to Poole Harbour. The Swash Channel wreck is the remains of a 40-metre long ship which sank in the approaches to Poole in the first part of the 17th century, around 1630. It lies in about eight metres of water. Evidence suggests that this was a high-status, Dutch armed merchant ship. Last summer archaeologists found, to their surprise, that



'The carvings represent the earliest found in the UK and amongst the earliest known in the world'

far more of the wreck survives than was initially thought; in fact, over forty percent of the entire ship (including most of the port side) is salvageable. Last summer their task was to raise the bow timbers and the 8-metre long rudder for conservation and study.

The wreck was discovered in March 1990 when a dredger hit an obstruction while carrying out maintenance work in the channel. Substantial timbers and an iron cannon were raised at that time. However, this find was regarded as a mere sideshow to an excavation already ongoing in nearby Studland Bay. The Swash finds were therefore all but forgotten until the site was rediscovered in 2004, prior to work on deepening the channel for shipping. The area was then formally designated and immediately protected from possible looting by an Act of Parliament.



Nigel Nayling, lecturer in Archaeology at University of Wales Trinity Saint David, being dressed in by Dave Parham, project leader

An initial dive revealed the remains of a large wooden shipwreck. Typically, whenever a wooden wreck is found in these waters, the usual suspect is the Spanish Armada vessel, *San Salvador*, lost in the vicinity in 1588. However, dendrochronological tests on the wood show conclusively that the timbers date to 1629 and were sourced from the German-Dutch border. The hunt is now back on for a new candidate.

As a prelude to the excavation, students and staff from Bournemouth University began monitoring and recording the rapid degradation of the site five years ago. Wherever timber was exposed, its survival time

could be counted in months. By 2010 it was clear that, if this wreck was not retrieved, there would be little left within a very short period. The main threat to the site was not, unusually for shipwrecks, treasure hunters but the natural environment which rarely respects Acts of Parliament. The main enemy was a severe attack of shipworm: small molluscs that can bore their way through even the largest timbers.

The summer of 2011 was the second excavation season. The previous year the wreck was photographed in perfect detail using carefully-designed moveable scaffold grids across the site – the photographer perched on top, photographing every half metre. At the same time, using a water dredge, the team excavated the site, bringing up a large quantity



of small finds. These included pewter spoons, pottery, clay pipes, butchered cattle bone, a copper alloy hand bell, a copper alloy skillet, leather shoes, lead shot, cannon balls, rigging elements (including blocks in excellent condition with running rigging still rove through them), rock ballast and the ship's galley.

'It has fantastic potential to tell us about the beginnings of globalisation'

It has become clear, however, that this was no ordinary mercantile ship but was likely owned by a prestigious – probably Dutch – merchant; perhaps a pioneer at the beginning of north-western European exploitation of connections developed through the voyages of discovery during the previous century.

Clues to the ship's prestige lie not just in the timber's provenance and construction style but also in the carvings. There was great excitement when, in August last year, three wooden ship's carvings were discovered. They are similar

Dismantling the wreck



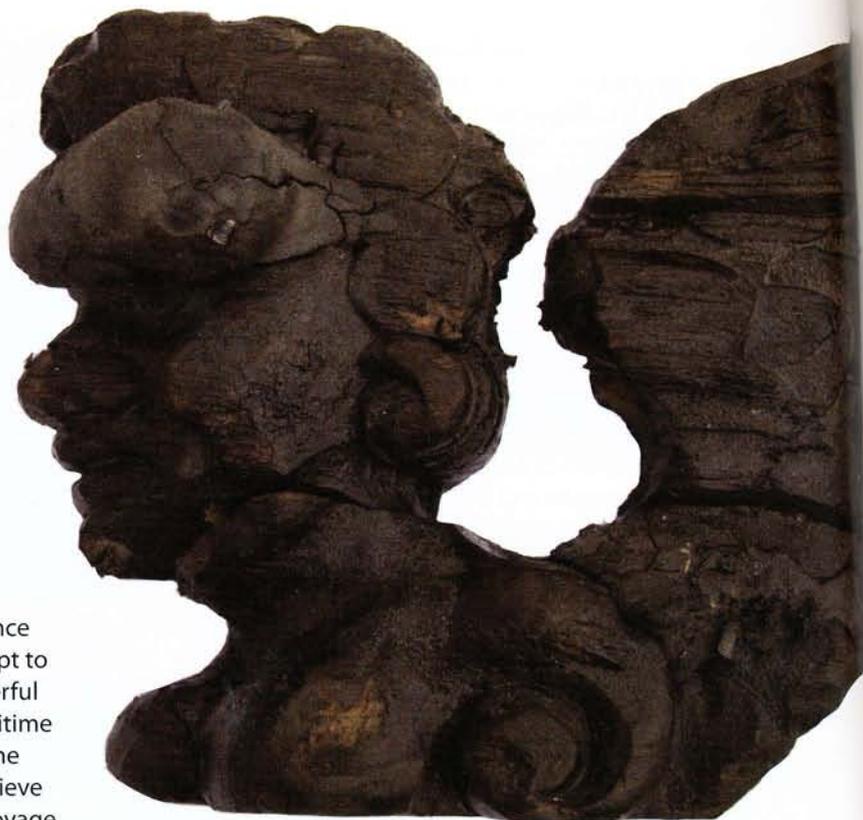
PURBECK WRECKS

in style to those found on the Swedish shipwreck, *Vasa*, which sank on its maiden voyage from Stockholm in 1628.

These works of art join two other elaborate carvings. One, of a human face, is at the head of the rudder. Just the fact that the 2.4-tonne steering mechanism exists in its entirety makes it a unique find in British waters. The other carving, currently being conserved, is that of a merman. It was found loose within the wreck but mortises on its back suggest that it originated from the ship's upperworks and was likely to have been attached to the upper rail. These carvings represent the earliest found in the UK and are amongst the earliest known in the world.

Dave Parham, project leader and senior lecturer at Bournemouth University, has worked on the site since 2006 and is preparing for the next stage – to attempt to identify the wreck. "The Swash," he said, "is a wonderful example of Britain's unseen and under-utilised maritime heritage. It has fantastic potential to tell us about the beginnings of globalisation. At the moment we believe that the ship was probably embarking on its first voyage to the Tropics as the sheathing appears new and there's no evidence of contemporary shipworm boring into the timbers."

As soon as all the timbers are raised and the funding is in place, a team of conservators will begin work on the raised bowcastle, then the rudder, in preparation for a major exhibition at Poole museum. Michael Spender, Borough of Poole Museum manager said: "We are planning to display



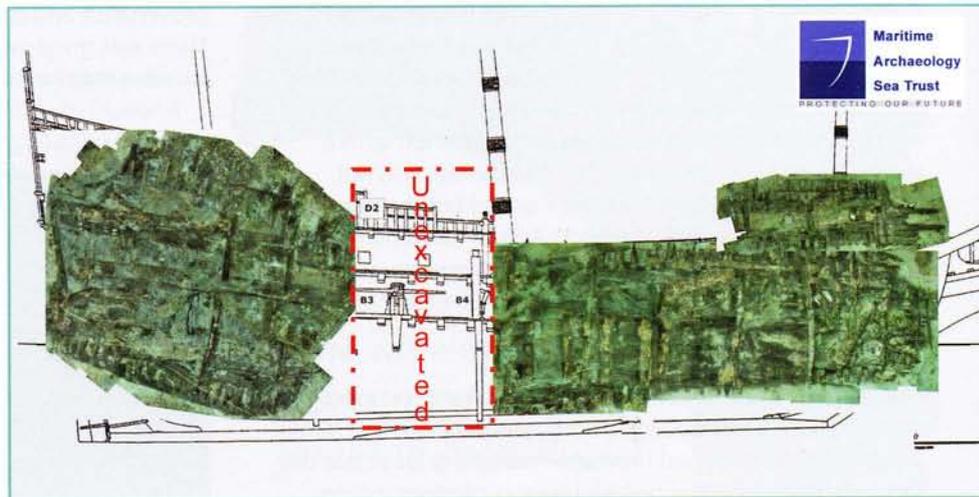
our first conserved acquisition from the wreck, a stunning carved merman, in the near future. It's very exciting to see such a significant part of the ship's structure being lifted from the seabed. We will need to secure funding and donations to protect the bowcastle and other finds in order to make them accessible to the public in the future."

If you would like to make a donation towards the conservation costs of the Swash Channel wreck please contact the Maritime Archaeology Sea Trust at mast@thisismast.org.

A diver removing concretion



Survey showing the the lie of the ship



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