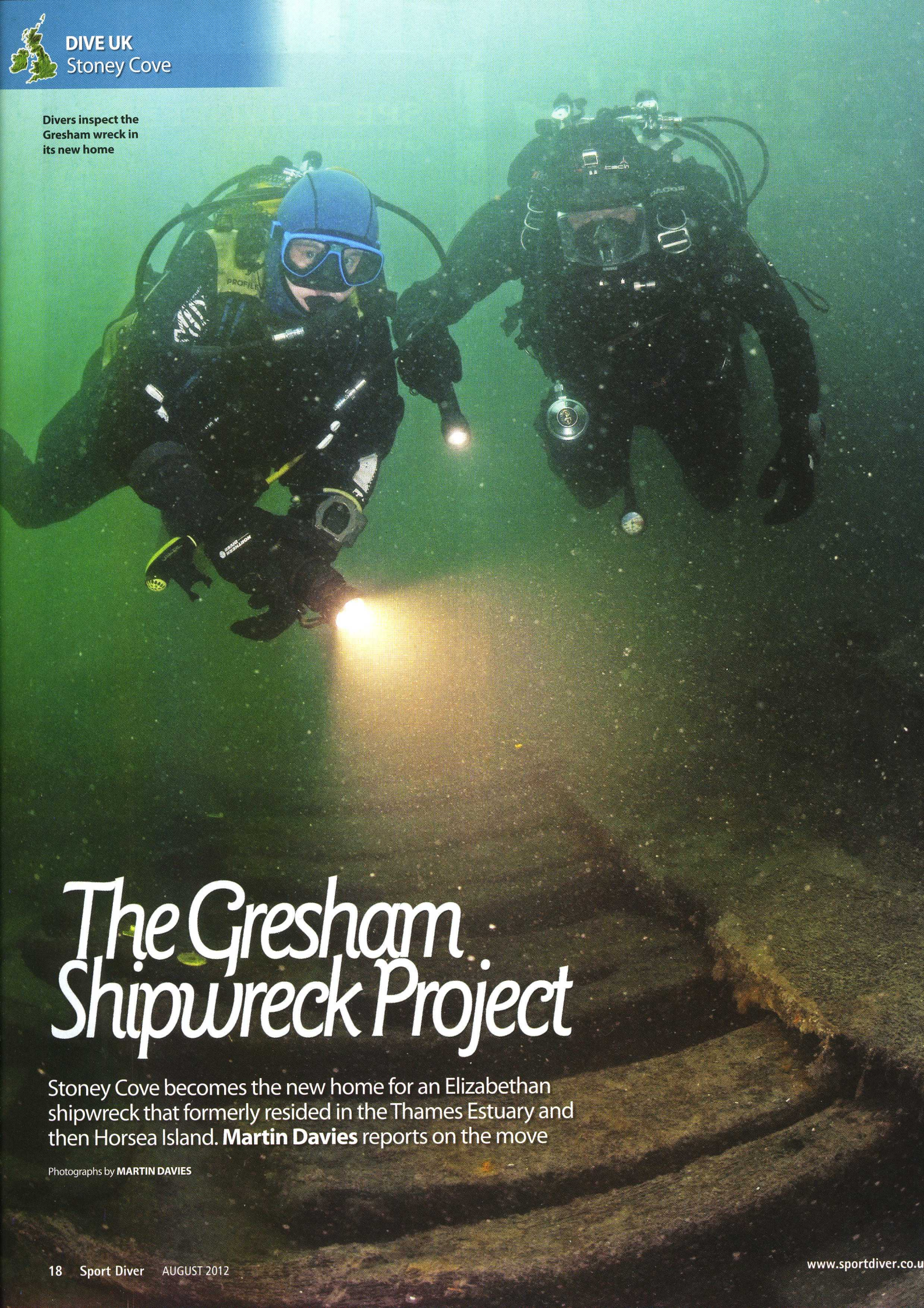
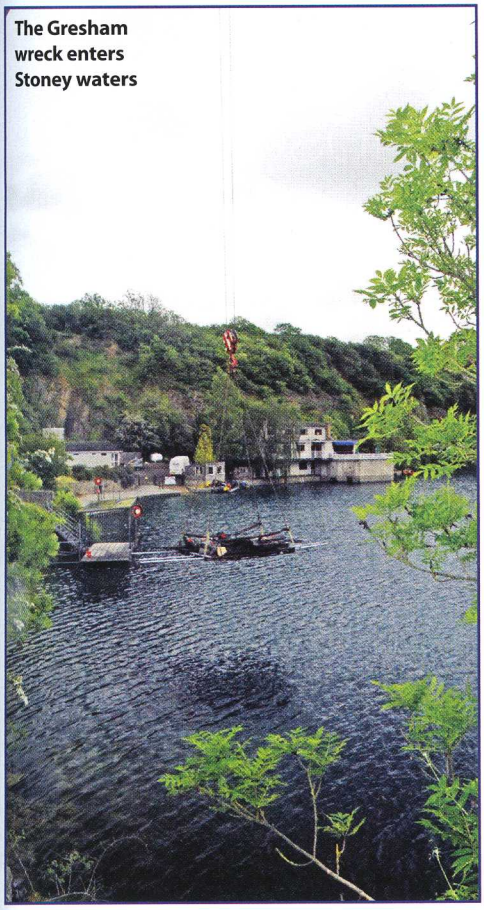


Divers inspect the Gresham wreck in its new home

The Gresham Shipwreck Project

Stoney Cove becomes the new home for an Elizabethan shipwreck that formerly resided in the Thames Estuary and then Horsea Island. **Martin Davies** reports on the move

Photographs by **MARTIN DAVIES**


The Gresham wreck enters Stoney waters

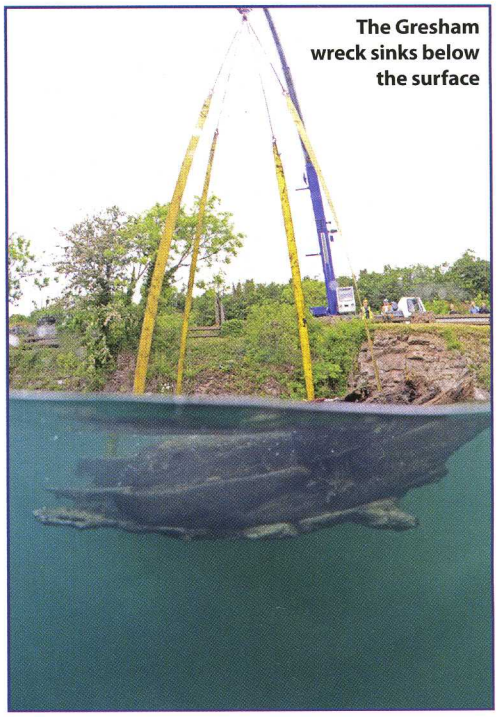

Planning the lift in the car park

The Gresham shipwreck came to the attention of the world in 2003 when it was dredged up from the Princess Channel in the Thames Estuary. At the time nobody was sure what it was. Investigation was carried out on the timbers by archaeologists and it became apparent that this was a Tudor armed merchant ship. The linking of the vessel to Thomas Gresham, a famous Elizabethan financier and founder of the Royal Exchange, became apparent after the recovery of two cannons, which had the insignia 'TG' and a grasshopper motif. After some dendrochronological samples had been taken on the timbers, a date of the tree felling was given as 1574. While the exact identity remains unknown, it has become known as the Gresham Shipwreck because of the link to Thomas Gresham, who owned the factory that made the cannons. Also found at the site were many other artefacts, including some of her cargo of tin and iron ingots and a perfectly preserved leather shoe sole. This wreck was to turn out to be of significant importance to Tudor historians - and now you can visit this rare museum piece at its new home in Stoney Cove.

The wreck was first raised in 2004 and, for over seven years, the five main sections of the hull were kept in Horsea Island near Portsmouth, a brackish and very silty military training facility that was used occasionally by the Nautical Archaeology Society (NAS) for practical training sessions. Horsea closed to the diving public in 2007, which meant that training stopped and nobody could visit the wreck. The move to a new location at Stoney Cove over 160 miles away has taken two years of planning by Mark Beattie Edwards, programme director at the NAS. A small army of helpers from the society volunteered and a local company, Qinetiq, supplied five commercial divers. There was also further sponsorship from the Port of London Authority and a small grant to help pay for two large cranes.

I joined the team in Horsea Island before any of the timbers had been disturbed; Mark Beattie Edwards was keen for me to record the site as it was before any major disturbance took place. The wreck had been used by the NAS for their training of underwater archaeology and access was limited to students on their courses. The move to Stoney Cove will open the site up to all visiting divers and will add to the plethora of things to see at the Cove.

The team of divers from Qinetiq were tasked with getting the main lifting strops in position - easier said than done, I have to say, as the timbers had settled into the clay bottom of Horsea, in some instances by a foot. Used to being given difficult tasks, the divers from Qinetiq ended up with the short straw, plunging their hands and arms into the soft, black, smelly bottom feeling their way around the timbers in order to get the first lifting strops in place. Naturally, as soon as this activity began, the visibility that was about six metres at the start disappeared to zero as the black mud and clay was disturbed and dissolved into the water. Fortunately, they were all wearing underwater coms and this was a godsend in the circumstances - not only could they talk to the surface, they could talk to one another and this was the safest way of doing the job in hand. Once the initial strops

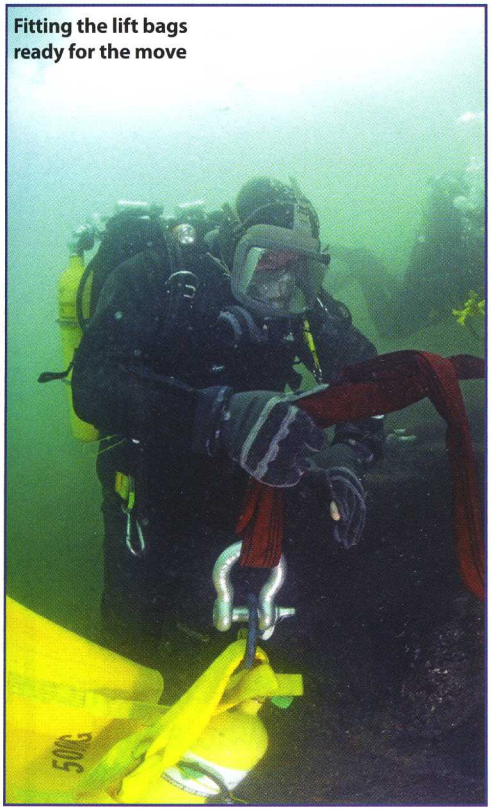

The Gresham wreck sinks below the surface

"The hull timber remains of the wreck are laid out on the ledge in a ship-like shape in 6m of water"

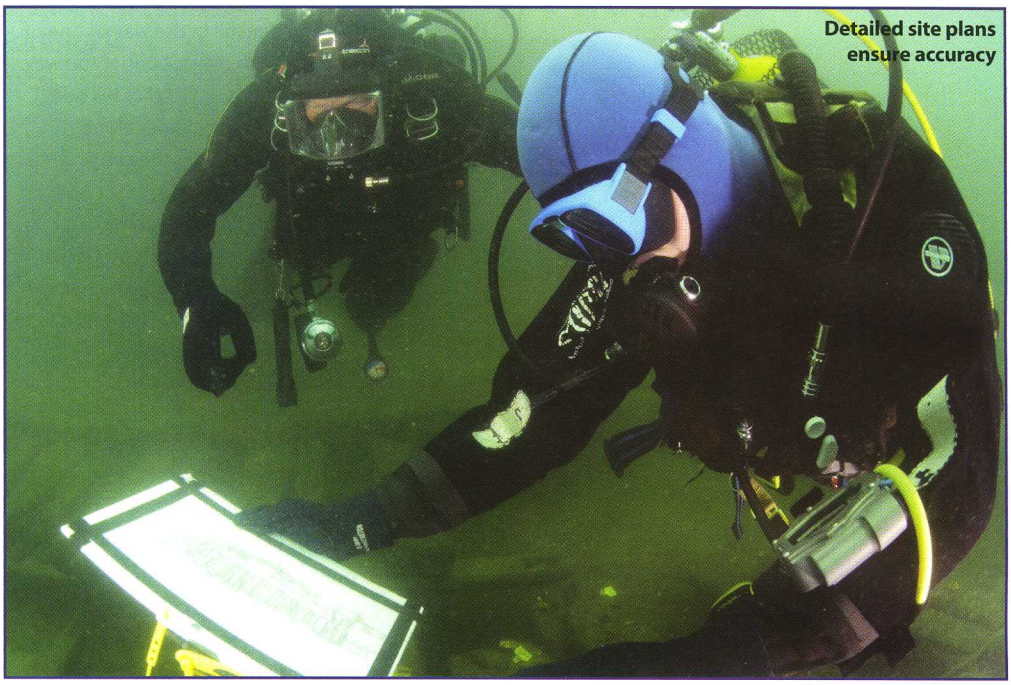
had been put in place, the 500kg lifting bags were attached and the lifting operations started. The initial lift was to prove vitally important as it served two purposes - the first was to release the timbers from the suction of the mud and, secondly, the lain lifting strops that would be used by the crane were to be put in place and then buoyed ready for the day of lift. During the days of this part of the plan, the teams worked continuously supported by NAS divers, getting strops in place, lifting and buoying in zero visibility - this was the most time-consuming and dangerous part of the operation.

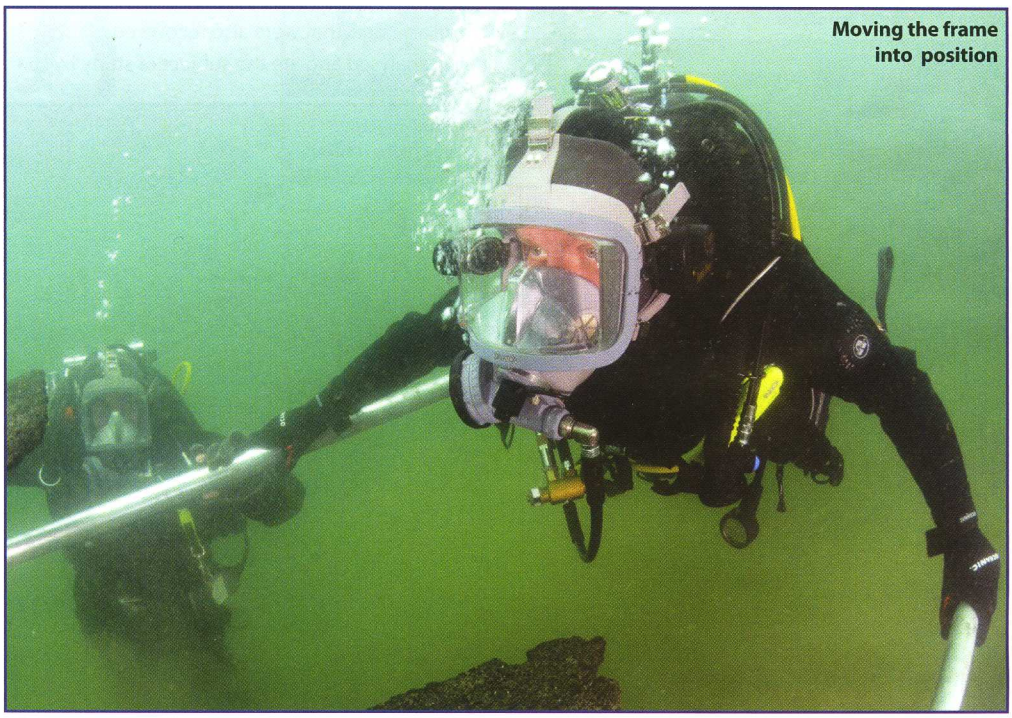
The move had been planned to take place over a week, but preparations began weeks before with timbers being tagged and marked in accordance with the site plan and, as the week for moving the wreck grew closer, decisions had been made to get lifting strops in place in the larger sections so that the crane lift would go smoothly on the day. To assist in the transportation, Mark had organised the Field Squadron (Air Support) 39th Engineer Regiment to transport the timbers up the M1 to Leicestershire. As with all projects of this type, the better the planning the less hitches you have, and all went extremely well at Horsea Island once timbers had been stropped and then lifted onto low loaders for the journey north to its final resting place.

On Wednesday, the fun and games began and all I can say is I am glad I am only a photographer and not an archaeologist - it looked like a huge wooden jigsaw puzzle except the pieces only vaguely fitted and many pieces were missing. In archaeology, the terms 'interpretation' and 'visualisation' are used



Fitting the lift bags ready for the move

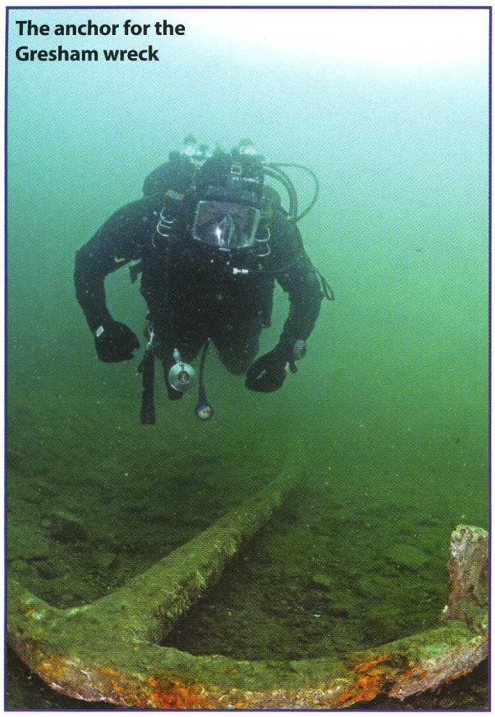

Detailed site plans ensure accuracy

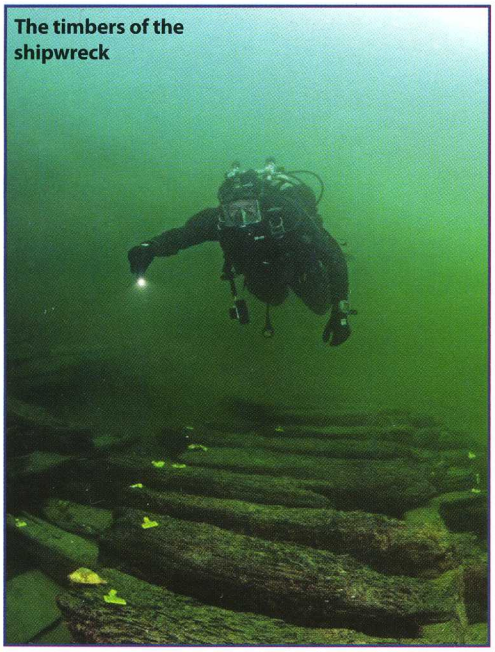

Moving the frame into position

a lot to help us build the concept that once upon a time the item was whole and everything was together. Fortunately, a site plan of the wreck had been drawn up when it had been recovered from the Thames and this was to be used to rebuild the site at Stoney Cove.

An area to the east side of Stoney Cove had been identified and preparations had been made ahead of us arriving to clear the area and make it safe for the wreck to be placed. In clearing the area a fantastic find had been made - an original railway truck that was used to transport the stone out of the quarry. The guys at the Cove had recovered the treasure and discovered it was in remarkable condition, with some red paint that could still be seen on the side of it.

Our craning operations carried on for three days, with our 438-year-old cargo being carefully lifted from the lorries and then carefully put back into the water and then towed gently to the eastern side for final positioning. Once again, the dive team from Qinetiq and NAS were stretched to the limits with the scale of the project. All of the bits must be placed meticulously as per the site plan and, although the visibility was better in the Cove, there were occasional clouds of sediment so dense the visibly was reduced back to zero. At one point one of the divers had decided that


The anchor for the Gresham wreck


The timbers of the shipwreck


The crane's chains are attached to the lifting straps

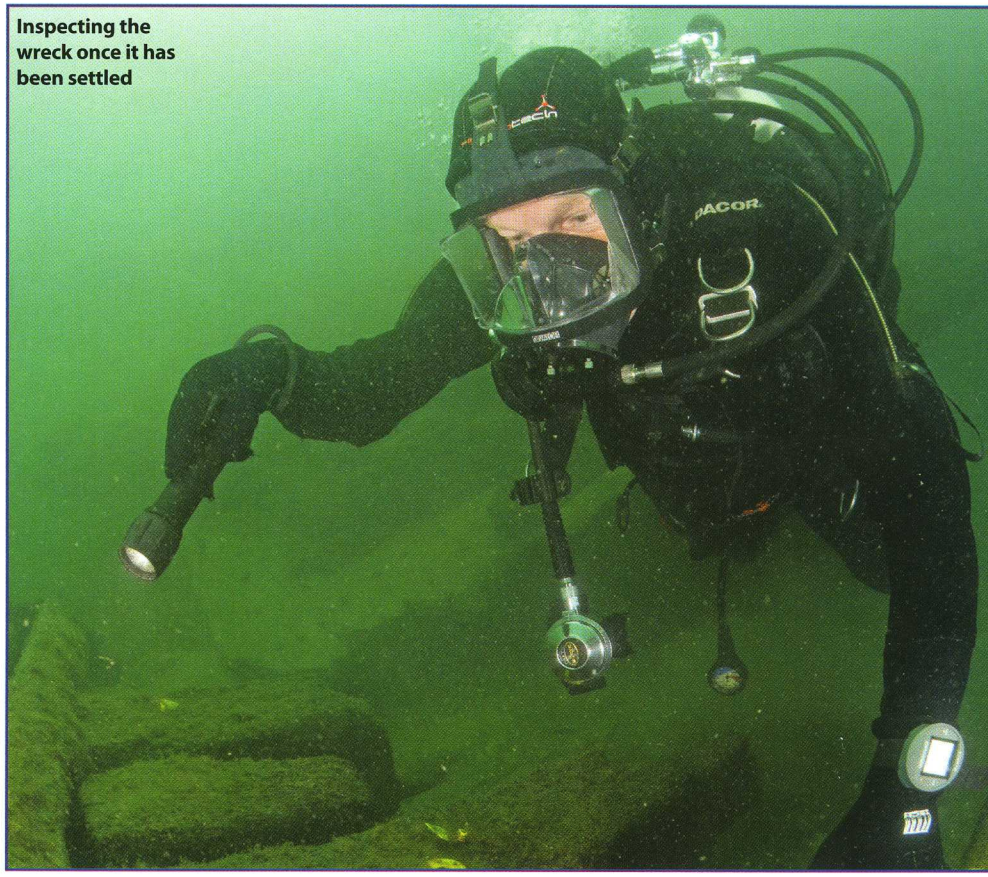
there was a large boulder still in the way of one of the pieces so, in order to move this out of the way, he removed his fins and got rid of all of his buoyancy so that he could roll the boulder along the ledge while pushing his feet from the cliff face - that did wonders for my photography!

The pressure was on by Friday to complete the mission and we were pretty much on target, though the final load from the crane, which had been dropped in last thing on Thursday, still had to be recovered and towed over; this was a group of six pallets that had been lashed together and then supported with a scaffold frame. This had all of the odd and loose pieces of timber on and was to prove the most challenging for Mark - a second team had to be deployed in order to finish off.

The future of the Gresham wreck is now secure and it will live out its days in Stoney Cove, where many more divers will be able to see and enjoy a genuine living museum piece more than 400 years old. It is a great insight into Tudor ship-building and timber construction of ships of that era - many of the artefacts that were also recovered are still being analysed and are the subject of study by the University College London Institute of Archaeolog Also involved in the project are Gresham College, the Museum of London Docklands and The Merce Company, who have given a small grant to develo the underwater museum.

The hull timber remains of the wreck are laid ou on the ledge in a ship-like shape in 6m of water. To help you understand what you are looking at, the NAS have produced a plan and if you are really interested in finding out more about the wreck an underwater archaeology, you can join the NAS on one of the excellent courses they are set to run fro the Cove in the future.

While this latest Stoney Cove wreck might not have the attraction of the Stanegarth for those who enjoy their metal, its historical importance far outweighs anything else in the flooded quarry The Gresham ship was sailing to and from Londor around 30 years after the Mary Rose sank, and like this other iconic shipwreck, has generated much interest from historians, archaeologists and also th wider community. Now you have an opportunity t see Stoney's latest attraction and dive into history - but please treat with respect. ■


Inspecting the wreck once it has been settled

"In archaeology, the terms 'interpretation' and 'visualisation' are used a lot to help us build the concep that once upon a time the item was whole and everything was together"