

# The Gresham ship

Ever wanted to dive on a Tudor shipwreck? Southsea Sub-Aqua Club's Diving Officer **Martin Davies** has a tour in mind



In UK waters the majority of wrecks dived have an association with modern history or one of the world wars and typically are made of metal. By their nature, timber shipwrecks of the pre-industrial era are much rarer and more difficult to locate as they have, by now, succumbed to the forces of the sea. What remains is often buried and so unless you want to start digging in sand or mud you might think it

best to go and see the Mary Rose in her museum in Portsmouth.

Probably the last place you would think of going to see a Tudor ship is a freshwater quarry in the Midlands, but at Stoney Cove you have a unique opportunity to dive on the remains of an armed Tudor merchant ship that has been installed as a diving attraction and a training site for the Nautical Archaeology Society. The Gresham ship,

which offers a real insight into Tudor ship construction, is the easiest way to dive on a genuine piece of our history from more than 450 years ago.

Stoney Cove is one of the oldest inland dive sites in the UK and needs little introduction to UK divers. The facilities are first class and the underwater attractions are clearly marked on its site plan. The resting place chosen for the wreck known as the



ⓘ Above: Supported by lifting bags, divers move parts of the wooden structure into place

Ⓜ Right: The 3D model of the site. Picture courtesy of the Maritime Archaeology Trust



Ⓜ Right: The remaining fluke of the large anchor

ⓘ Above: Martin Woodward, owner of Stoney Cove, has a first dive on the site after installation



● Above: Sections of the hull are lifted into the water on a purpose-built frame  
 ● Right: The timbers were like a jigsaw puzzle



## The golden grasshopper

Englishman Thomas Gresham was a renowned Elizabethan financier and merchantman, whose many achievements included the founding of the Royal Exchange in 1565. Gresham also owned a gun foundry, which forms the primary link to this ship, which has yet to be formally identified.

Back in 2003 the wreck was discovered in the Thames estuary when a few timbers were recovered while dredging operations were taking place in the Princes Channel. Many artefacts were recovered at the time, alongside a large section of the hull, a chunk of the bow and some planking from the side of the ship.

The association with Thomas Gresham comes from finding his initials and his golden grasshopper on a green mound motif on one of the cannons recovered from the site.

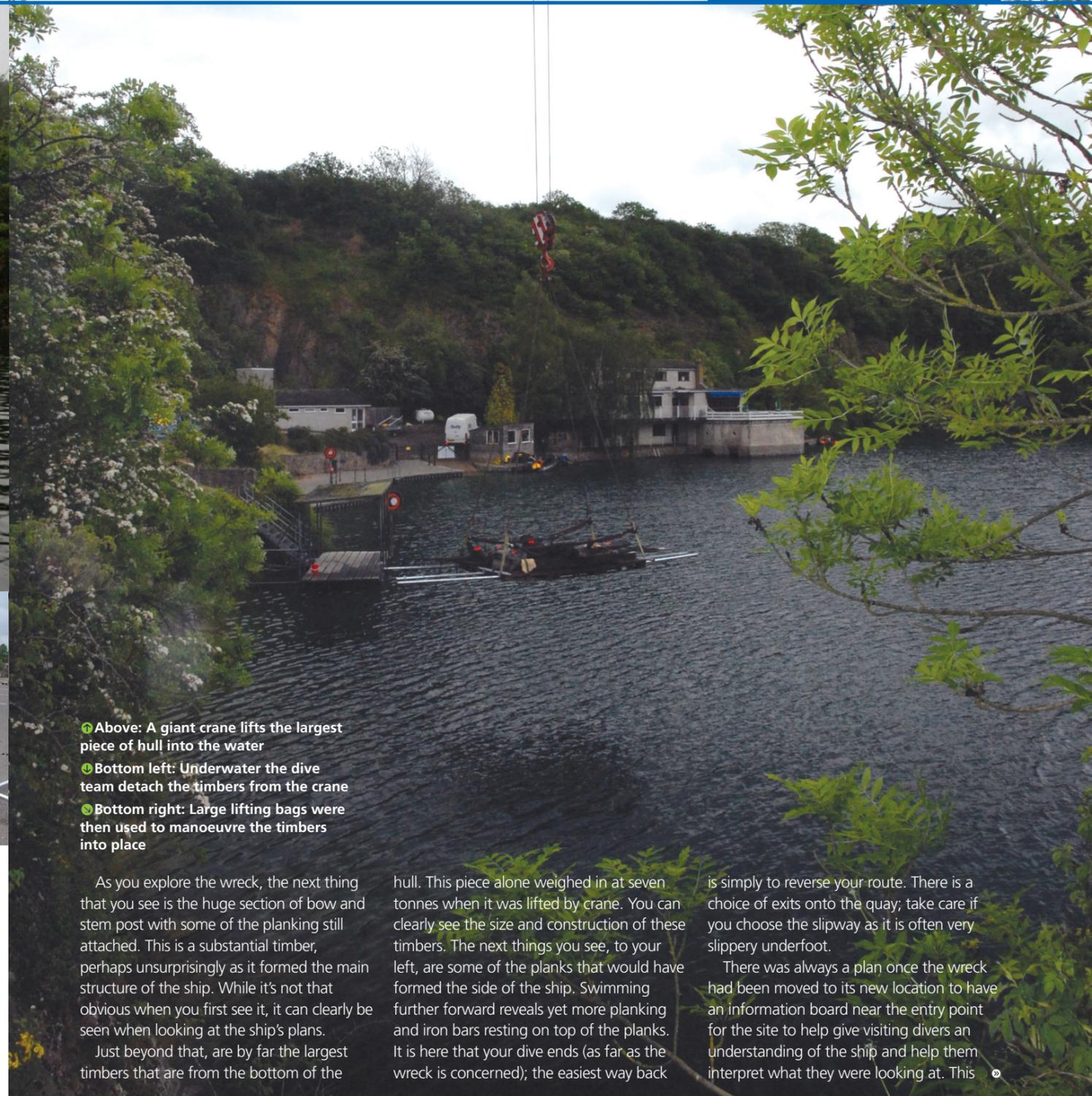
The cargo recovered was mainly iron bars, lead and tin ingots. Some Spanish olive jars have also been recovered. Four cannons were found, indicating they were either cargo or being used for defence against pirates. Some dendrochronology [tree ring sampling] of the timbers has taken place and suggests that the trees were felled around 1574. This means the ship would have been at sea some 30 years after the Mary Rose sank.

Archaeologists recorded what they could at the time and the ship's timbers were left on a quayside until a place could be found for them. Rather than just let them rot, it was decided to move the timbers back into water. So they were taken to the MOD's Defence Diving School facility at Horsea Lake near Portsmouth where they became a training site for the Nautical Archaeology Society. However the lake was closed to public access in 2007. Eventually, after two years of planning, and with the help of the Royal Engineers, the remains of these impressive wreck timbers were moved once again, this time to Leicestershire.

After a final journey of 160 miles, the Gresham shipwreck has found a new permanent home thanks to Martin Woodward of Stoney Cove. The timbers and artefacts have been carefully installed in the exact relative position that they were in when they were first discovered in the Thames.

● Gresham ship is a ledge near to the Nemo's pub, at the end of the cove, so it is best to enter the water at that end of the quay. Passing the classic Nemo's submarine and keeping the foundations of the pub on your left shoulder, keep swimming, maintaining a depth of 6m along the cliff edge passing a concrete block house.

The site has been laid out as it was found. The ship's impressive iron anchor – more than 2m long – is the first thing you see lying flat on the rocky bottom. As you swim further there are some 50mm square bent metal bars lying on the bottom, each about 2.5m long but which have been bent in half to make them 'easier to carry'. These pig iron bars were recovered from the original wreck site in the Thames and could have been part of the cargo, but also could have provided ballast for the ship on the outward-bound journey. They each weigh a significant amount and would have required considerable effort to handle.



● Above: A giant crane lifts the largest piece of hull into the water  
 ● Bottom left: Underwater the dive team detach the timbers from the crane  
 ● Bottom right: Large lifting bags were then used to manoeuvre the timbers into place

As you explore the wreck, the next thing that you see is the huge section of bow and stem post with some of the planking still attached. This is a substantial timber, perhaps unsurprisingly as it formed the main structure of the ship. While it's not that obvious when you first see it, it can clearly be seen when looking at the ship's plans.

Just beyond that, are by far the largest timbers that are from the bottom of the

hull. This piece alone weighed in at seven tonnes when it was lifted by crane. You can clearly see the size and construction of these timbers. The next things you see, to your left, are some of the planks that would have formed the side of the ship. Swimming further forward reveals yet more planking and iron bars resting on top of the planks. It is here that your dive ends (as far as the wreck is concerned); the easiest way back

is simply to reverse your route. There is a choice of exits onto the quay; take care if you choose the slipway as it is often very slippery underfoot. There was always a plan once the wreck had been moved to its new location to have an information board near the entry point for the site to help give visiting divers an understanding of the ship and help them interpret what they were looking at. This



## WRECKED!

It has proved to be one of the more difficult parts of the project. Initially, 300 images were taken and the plan was to manually stitch them together in a computer program, however even for an experienced user it proved too great a task at the time. Now there are software programs that can join hundreds of images together and create a 3D on-screen model, however, most 3D modelling of this type is based around a single object, not an area of 25m by 10m and the task is simply enormous.

The 3D image that has been produced will soon be available for all to see – not just divers. To see how the photos were taken visit

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxczUQt1j0c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxczUQt1j0c)

While there is almost certainly more of the ship still lying in the sediment of the Thames estuary, these large pieces of recovered timber show in detail how vessels were constructed in the Tudor period and this is a rare opportunity to dive a real Tudor shipwreck. ●

## With thanks to...

The historical importance and value of this Tudor wreck attracted interest and support from many parties. Staff at University College London have studied many of the finds and have been responsible for producing the final monograph about the site. Other organisations involved in the Gresham study and relocation project were: the Port of London Authority, which initially found the wreck in the Princes Channel; professional archaeologists from Wessex Archaeology, who were first involved with recording the site as it was found and bringing up some of the first objects; the Museum of London; the Museum of London Docklands; the University of Southern Denmark; the Nautical Archaeology Society; and finally Gresham College in London, which owes its existence to Thomas Gresham.



↑ Above: Divers confirm that all timbers are as per the original site plan



↑ Above: Final inspection by Martin Woodward

## Essentials

**DEPTH RANGE:** 6-7m

**FINDING THE WRECK:** Stoney Cove is on Sapcote Road, Stoney Stanton, Leicestershire LE9 4DW ([www.stoneycove.com](http://www.stoneycove.com)). This is a shore dive head to the entry points near Nemo's Bar. There are many other dive 'attractions' to visit at Stoney Cove such as aircraft, tugs and a fishing vessel. There's also a lot of aquatic life from pike and other freshwater fish to crayfish.

**GAS:** Stoney Cove is a fully equipped dive centre with shop, gas station and changing facilities. Diving at Stoney Cove costs £20 for each diving session for visitors, and £13 for Diverlog card holders.

**EATING OUT:** Nemo's Bar, on site, has a good menu available in the evenings and lunch time. Tea, coffee and light refreshments are available from the hatch at the side of the bar. There are lots of pubs nearby in Stoney Stanton where you can eat and drink.

**ACCOMMODATION:** There is plenty of accommodation ranging from B&B to country hotels. Here are a few options nearby: Steve's Place B&B at 7 Lanes Hill Grove, Stoney Stanton, Leicestershire LE9 4BQ (01455 272 196); Mill on the Soar Hungry Horse Pub – five minutes' drive away – Coventry Rd, Broughton Astley, Leicester LE9 6QA with free WIFI (01455 282 419); The Red Lion 8 Church Street, Sapcote, Leicestershire LE9 4FG (01455 272 341); Best Western Plus – Ullesthorpe Court Hotel & Golf Club – Frolesworth Road, Ullesthorpe, Lutterworth, Leicestershire LE17 5BZ (01455 209 023).

**BLOWN OUT:** You will never be blown out at Stoney – diving is available 362 days a year, whatever the weather. However if you feel the urge to visit some local attractions, then try one of these: the National Space centre ([spacecentre.co.uk](http://spacecentre.co.uk)); Leicester Races ([leicester-racecourse.co.uk](http://leicester-racecourse.co.uk)); King Richard III visitor centre, 4A St. Martin's, Leicester LE1 5DB, England ([kriiii.com](http://kriiii.com)); Armourgeddon tank paintball ([armourgeddon.co.uk](http://armourgeddon.co.uk)).



↓ Below: A diver measures the timbers' placement