

10 things marine archaeologists wished Diggers knew

1. Marine archaeologists are still just archaeologists

Things may be a bit wetter on our sites, and sometimes the environmental conditions require different digging or recording techniques, but we still follow the same guidelines and principles that other archaeologists use. Many of our standards are exactly the same. We aren't a different breed – we're just archaeologists with a marine specialty.

2. Marine field staff don't just dive

Because it is a smaller field, many of our staff must be able to work on multiple aspects of projects. That may include client liaison, report writing, giving awareness briefings, undertaking archival research and assisting with finds management. We have to be a multi-skilled lot, and that requires varied training and experience.

3. Conservation has to begin immediately in the field

Any sites in a salty or waterlogged environment must prepare for immediate 'first-aid' conservation for finds to make sure they remain wet. If they dry out, dissolved salts that have absorbed into the find material will crystallise, expand and crack the material. All finds must be kept in bags or buckets of water until they can be safely desalinated by conservation specialists. Since nearly all our finds require desalination, the costs for conservation per project is also higher and requires careful planning or a stricter retention policy.

4. Time on site can be extremely limited

On land, you may have days to expose and record a site. On underwater sites, depending on the depth, tides and movement of other marine operations, you may have a half an hour window twice a day over a few days of good diving weather. Hence, we must make use of rapid recording as often as possible.

5. Visibility on site may also be extremely limited

On land, you have almost unlimited visibility of the site. When diving, sometimes you're lucky to be able to see more than a metre- in the Thames Estuary and much of the east coast of England, it's even less than that. Our archaeologists have had to survey and record sites where visibility is heavily restricted, often using touch to locate parts. As a result, a simple site plan is made much more complex and requires much more of the precious dive time.



6. Not every diver can dive as an archaeologist

Diving as an archaeologist for work requires HSE dive certifications or an equivalent. For example, the minimum for inland archaeological or scientific diving requires a CMAS III* equivalent qualification. Offshore work requires HSE certification or an HSE recognised international equivalent. Some types of work also require surface supply training, rather than SCUBA, which is usually gained through an intensive 4 week course.

7. It's not just shipwrecks

The image of marine archaeology may be the fantastic preservation of shipwrecks, such as the Mary Rose but there is a massive range of sites and periods that are included in the work. Our job also includes sites such as underwater aircraft wrecks, marine infrastructure such as anti-submarine boom and anti-aircraft defences (such as at the Maunsell Forts) and palaeolandscapes including Doggerland. We use marine geophysical survey methods such as bathymetric, marine magnetometers and sidescan sonar to identify potential sites, and then ground-truth them using ROV or diver surveys. Marine geotechnical surveys and sub-bottom profile surveys are also used to identify the palaeolandscapes of submerged prehistory.

8. Historical records are often limited for ships and aircraft

Despite being from a relatively recent time period, there is still very little in the historical record concerning the construction plans and techniques for ships and aircraft, particularly if they are military. Hence, what can be found by archaeologists is often of high significance. There is also often very scant information about the location of wrecked ships and aircraft offshore so any discovery by archaeologists is important and adds to these records.

9. Some of our sites are from a single event, but there's always more to be found out

Shipwrecks and aircraft wreck sites are formed from a single downing event, and so are more 'time capsules' than a stratigraphic site. Despite this, the spread of the site may provide useful information on how it wrecked in the first place and assist with identifying the ship or aircraft. The arrangement of the site also provides information about site formation processes since the wrecking event including how it has broken up from physical, chemical or biological processes, or how humans may have changed the site through salvaging, fishing, trawling or diving.

10. Asbestos is also a problem on marine sites

Shipwrecks and aircraft from the 20th century have the potential to contain asbestos, and it was used much later than in buildings due to special exceptions for military needs. Asbestos may have been used on pipework, valves and structural members where asbestos containing material formed part of gaskets or seals. It may also be in fibrous material such as rope or cladding, particularly if fire-resistance was needed. However, risks to archaeologists are low if these items are found wet and kept wet and sealed.

