T&DLHS Visit to the National Trust Smallhythe Dig, 15th August 2023

30 members of the Society signed up for this excursion, being rewarded by beautiful weather on the day. Nathalie Cohen, the NT’s archaeologist, gave us an overview of the site before taking us off to see the action at some of the 20 trenches which are being investigated.

Smallhythe Place stands on a prominent piece of land overlooking what was once the River Rother, now the Reading Sewer. The building of the Knelle Dam to the west of Smallhythe in 1330 meant that the river flowed north around the Isle of Oxney and ensured the maritime prosperity of this area. So the trenches are giving up fragments of medieval treasures amongst the post holes: including glazed tiles and pottery, Bellarmine jug pieces, aglets for lacing clothes, and less glamorously, in the dumping areas – lamb bones, oyster and mussel shells and a horse skull!

Across the road and a walk along the sewer brought us to Elphick Field and a look at Trench 11 with its mostly 14th and 15th Century finds, with some 13th Century survivals too, especially the Flemish bricks and floor tiles. This trench had uncovered what seemed to be a cellar wall a metre deep; along the depth the layers were amazingly clear to see: the original natural ground, with an early deposit about that, then some dump backfill, brick rubble and highest were the chalk stones. Chalk is not a local building material and the quantity of it here is unusual. We were looking at the remains of what were perhaps three properties very close to the old shoreline and an evolvement of activity over time. A strange find here is numerous copper alloy pins such as might be used in domestic dressmaking – also similarly discovered in another trench.

Trench 18 took us back 2,000 years into Roman archaeology and the discovery of at least two different buildings. Their construction showed original stone foundations with clay redeposited above, which packed a clear line of post holes for a timber frame. The second building higher up the field confirmed the Roman dating with coins and fragments of Samian Ware, including a lovely depiction of two dancing people. Further excavations on this Roman site have yielded extensive remains from the 1st to the 3rd century: amphora and mortaria (kitchen vessels), some with the stamp of the Roman Naval Fleet, all of which would have been brought in from the Continent.

Back down at the river bank was the largest dig on the site, an area approx. 25m x 25m. This was uncovering what appears to be a series of shipbuilding areas from the 14th century. The shipwrights here dug out a low dry dock in which to build the vessel, with a ‘dam’ across the shore line; when ready, breaking down the dam at high tide would bring in the sea/river water in to float the ship away. This is not where the famous big ships such as the “Jesus” of Henry V’s time were built but rather long slim ships with 30 to 40 oars. These were known as ballingers, in use as barges, and could perhaps be fighting ships – like the “Little Jesus”. These small docks seem to be one-time use only; the landscape here continues with a series of similarly shaped dips and hills all the way to Reading Street!

The significance of this place internationally has become immense. These are perhaps the only intact medieval shipbuilding docks in Europe. As the banks silted up and with the breaching of the Knelle Dam in 1635, the waterways were no longer navigable enough for shipbuilding to continue; thus by becoming defunct, the site of ancient shipbuilding at Smallhythe has been preserved, uncluttered by any modern structures, for us to see today.