

News

Winners of the Awards for the Presentation of Heritage Research 2007

English Heritage has awarded its sixth annual Awards for the Presentation of Heritage Research. In partnership with the Royal Archaeological Institute, Cadw, Historic Scotland, the Environment and Heritage Service, and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Republic of Ireland), the awards are designed to encourage specialists to present the results of their heritage research to a wider public.

This year's contest was a dead heat, with two projects sharing the award: Vincent Gaffney on Doggerland (CA 207), and Dominic Powlesland for his work in the Vale of Pickering. Additionally, Lydia

Carr was awarded the under-30 prize for her research on the working relationship between Tessa Verney Wheeler and Mortimer Wheeler at the Caerleon Amphitheatre.

Ten presentations by the short-listed finalists, covering a wide range of subjects and approaches made this a day to remember. The presentations were judged by the audience and by a panel of heritage professionals chaired by Julian Richards, presenter of BBC TV's *Meet the Ancestors*.

More information about the event and this year's winners can be found at www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/ConWebDoc.11998

A VIKING SHIP AT MEOLS?

Do the remains of an intact Viking Age boat lie buried nine feet under the soil of a pub car park in Meols, in the Wirral?

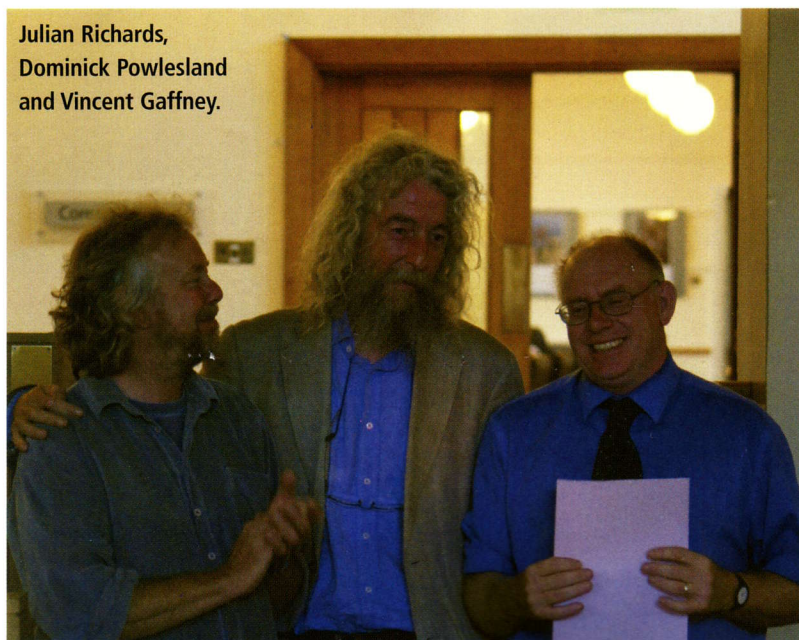
Originally discovered in 1938 during excavation of the pub's basement, the boat's timbers were intentionally covered over by builders reluctant to have their work delayed by an archaeological dig; thus the story, along with the boat, was buried. However, a witness to the cover-up recently stepped forward, and myth quickly became reality when a team led by the University of Nottingham's Professor Stephen Harding surveyed the site with ground penetrating radar. Images from the radar confirmed the existence of a boat-like object buried deep beneath the pub car-park.

The form and unusual depth of this intriguing find have prompted a number of recent news reports and headlines referring to a Viking boat or ship. However, both the character and date of the find remain unproven, and further study is necessary to resolve the mystery of the 'boat'.

The original discovery was made in 1938, when workers unearthed part of an old clinker boat buried in waterlogged blue clay some 2-3m beneath the Railway Inn pub. One of the workers, Mr John McRae, made detailed notes about the vessel- its size and clinker design (built with overlapping planks)- and noted its location before it was covered over. In 1991 his son (also John) compiled the notes together into a report with a sketch. The report was brought to the attention of the current landlord following a planning application to construct a patio. The landlord then contacted well-known local police officer (and amateur history sleuth) Tim Baldock, who in turn contacted Professor Stephen Harding of the University of Nottingham, author of *Viking Mersey* and expert on the Vikings in the North West of England.

Enlisting the services of Malcolm Weale of Geofizz Ltd as well as John McRae Jr, a survey using ground penetrating radar was completed in front of the pub entrance, using the McRae sketch as an approximate guide. The radar

Julian Richards,
Dominick Powlesland
and Vincent Gaffney.

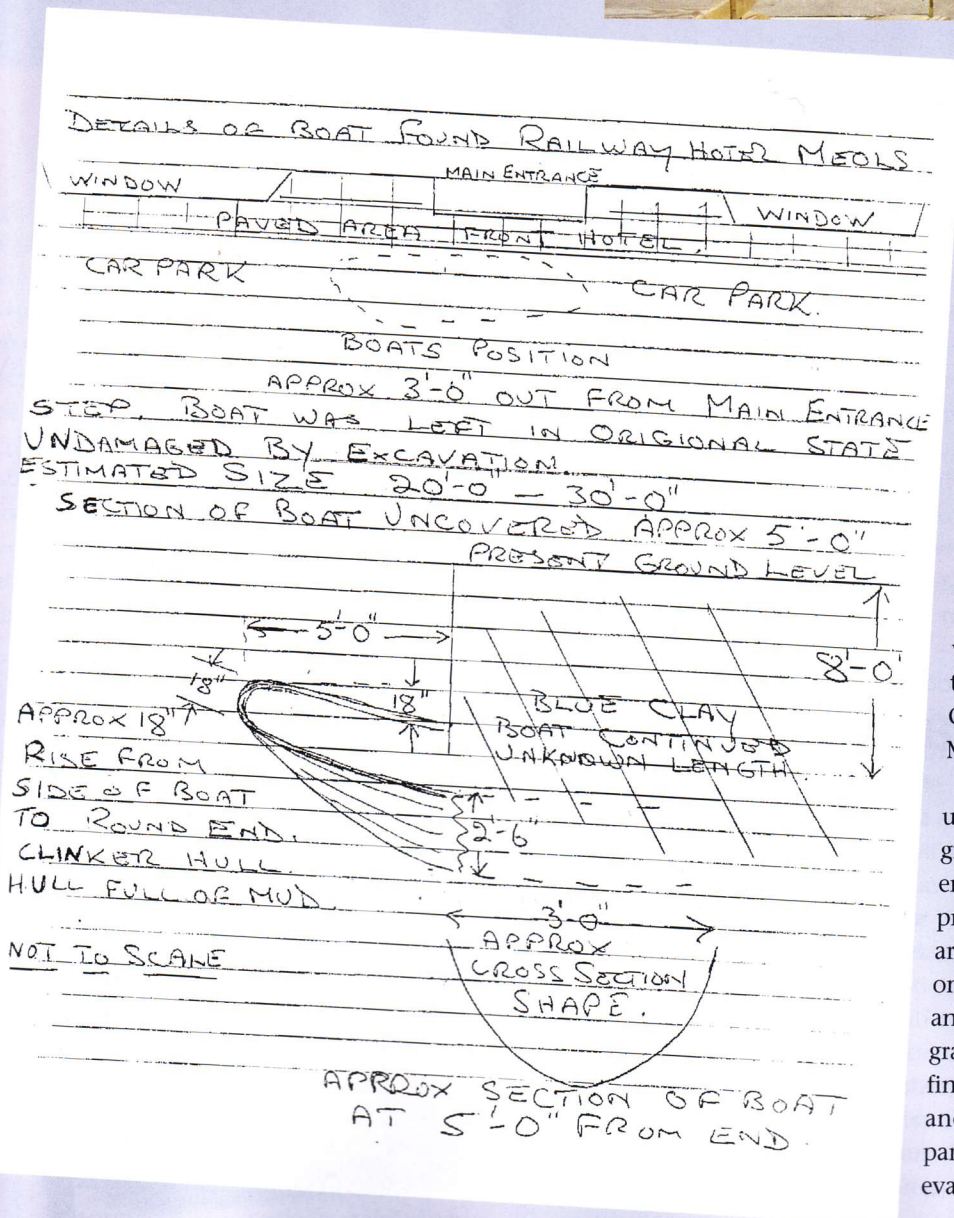


images revealed the existence of a boat-shaped anomaly in the underlying clay, whose approximate position and dimensions broadly matched those given in the sketch.

The position and depth of the potential vessel raise the possibility that it is of considerable antiquity. Intriguingly, the find spot is approximately 1km away from the present coastline and even further from the medieval coastline. Professor Harding suggests that the boat may have been washed in by an ancient flood and/or sank in a local marsh- as that part of Wirral is full of old Norse field/track names associated with marsh and wetland. According to Harding: 'We also know the Wirral was an area of intense Scandinavian settlement with its own Thing parliament, an intensity confirmed by a recent detailed genetic study. Although



Above (left to right) PC Tim Baldock, Malcolm Weale, John McRae Jr, and Professor Stephen Harding- all standing over area under which the boat is buried.



Left John McRae Sr's original 1938 sketch of the clinker vessel found under the Railway Inn pub. The drawing was given to the Liverpool Museum in 1991.

currently unproven there is a good chance it is from this period or from the descendants of these people.' Experts in Norway who have scrutinised the 1938 sketch and report have noted a similarity with a 30ft long clinker of the 'Faering' type discovered along with the famous Gokstad burial vessel, but the origin of the Meols boat still remains a mystery.

A phase of consultation is now underway. The team, including archaeologists from the University of Nottingham, emphasise that as both the date and the precise character of the reported discovery are still unknown, the initial focus will be on the possibility of additional survey and analysis with a view to assessing the stratigraphic position and general context of the find. Pending the results of this assessment and further discussions with interested parties, consideration will be given to an evaluation excavation.