Archaeological dig at Buckler’s Hard reveals preserved 18th Century shipyard slipway

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Site with volunteers from the Master Builders House – © Bucklers Hard Shipyard Trust.

Buckler's Hard, not far from the motoring history mecca at Beaulieu, has had some fascinating and vitally important aspects of its shipbuilding past uncovered in an archaeological 'dig' during the summer of 2025.

The Buckler's Hard Shipyard Trust tells us...

(All words and photographs from the Buckler's Hard Shipyard Trust).

A huge amount of 'finds' have been discovered at Buckler's Hard as an archaeological dig revealed a preserved 18th century slipway which exceeded expectations.

The Buckler's Hard Shipyard Trust has just finished a new survey of the one of the historical slipways where 55 wooden warships for the Royal Navy, including Nelson's favourite HMS *Agamemnon,* which were built on the banks of the Beaulieu River in Hampshire.

Buckler's Hard village is famous as the private shipyard in use from around 1740 until 1971 when the boatyard operations moved upstream, leaving the historic site to be preserved and undisturbed.

Iron nails, staples, copper plate and nails, ceramics, glass, bottles, clay pipes, bones and even some more modern 20th debris from the time when the slipway was used in WW2 were all found during the three-week summer dig. Finds were put on display for the public at Buckler's Hard to help identify them – and will be recorded and kept as part of the Buckler's Hard Museum collection.



Boxes of Finds © Buckler's Hard Shipyard Trust.

The biggest find of all was the huge timber structure that formed the base and sides of the slipway. Massive trees laid in a line down the site on which the keel blocks and keel were laid have survived well, especially the ones lower in the wetter environment near the river edge. Samples were taken from these timbers which will be dated using dendrochronology and it is thought that some of them might even been as old as planted as far back as the 16th century. The Maritime Archaeology Trust did a georeferenced drone digital survey of the area to record all the features and locations of the structure.

During three weeks this summer the dig was overseen by University of Southampton, Centre for Maritime Archaeology Department under Professor Jon Adams and Dr Rodrigo

Ortiz-Vazquez, with supporting students and volunteers from the New Forest National Park Authority, the Maritime Archaeology Trust, local volunteers and community members. It has been funded through the Buckler’s Hard Shipyard Trust through donations and with help from the Beaulieu Estate and contractors Pete and John Niccolls.



Maritime Archaeologists Rodrigo Ortiz-Vasquez and Garry Momber show Dan Snow the revealed timbers – © Buckler's Hard Shipyard Trust.



From Left – Hilde, Jon, Rodrigo, Mary and James © New Forest National Park Authority.

Buckler's Hard Shipyard Trust chairman Mary Montagu-Scott said:

"This dig has exceeded all expectations as so much of the structure has survived preserved under the mud and soil. This will give a greater understanding of how the largest 64 and 74-gun ships were built and launched across the bend in the river. I really enjoyed digging with the team and was amazed how much we found and uncovered each day but there is still so much more to excavate in the future to aid our understanding."



Mary Montagu-Scott Buckler's Hard Shipyard Trust Chair © Garry Momber.

Professor Jon Adams said: "No other private yard built as many ships for the Royal Navy during this period and this makes it uniquely suited for learning about traditional shipbuilding due to its remarkable survival. At Buckler's Hard you can actually see the whole of the infrastructure needed to build ships of that size all set in the perfectly preserved 18th century village. This has been a wonderful opportunity for students and volunteers to take part and expose the structures, revealing them for all to see and from which we have increased our understanding of the shipyard site."



Jon Adams and Dan Snow inspect the work of the students as the tide comes in. © Buckler's Hard Shipyard.

Dig to continue in 2026

Following the dig, the area has been backfilled to protect the structure. The dig will continue in summer 2026 to explore the lower intertidal area where it is thought the structure will be even better preserved. For more information of the dig follow @bucklershardshipyardtrust on social media.

The Buckler's Hard Shipyard Trust's mission is to bring the story of Buckler's Hard shipyard alive, with its rich history from medieval times to shipbuilding in the 18th and 19th centuries,

its role in WW2, the global footprint of ships originating from it and its rural village community, and preserve it for future generations.

Buckler’s Hard is open seven days a week in the heart of the New Forest National Park, with its beautiful riverside historic setting and maritime museum telling its story.

A free exhibition and film in the Shipwrights workshop *HMS Agamemnon – Navigating the Legend* tells the story of Nelson’s favourite ship Agamemnon where you can view the adjacent historic slipway area.

Buckler’s Hard, in the heart of the New Forest, is accessible by foot, car, motorbike, bicycle – or boat! For those arriving by car, a small parking charge contributes to the upkeep of the historic village.

For more details see www.bucklershard.co.uk or call 01590 616203.

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