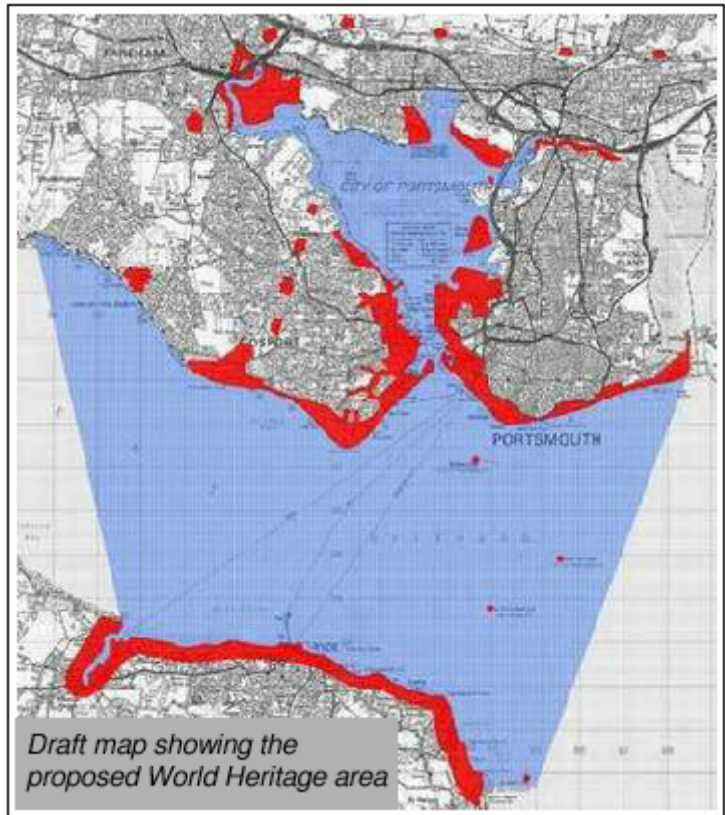


“The past is a present to the future”

Portsmouth Harbour, Isle of Wight & Spithead as ‘the world’s first Cultural Seascape’ 'to be inscribed on the World Heritage List'

The public launch of the project on 28 January 2008 in the modern auditorium of Boathouse 6 was an appropriate venue in the Historic Dockyard for this enjoyable, successful and informative occasion. Over 150 delegates attended from a wide range of organizations representing local government, heritage bodies, companies, property / landowners, community groups, and local societies. It followed closely on the good news of the Heritage Lottery Fund’s massive grant for a new museum for the Mary Rose.

The chairman, Peter Goodship of the Portsmouth Naval Base Property Trust which sponsored the event, stressed that it would have been just as appropriate to have held it on the Isle of Wight, Fareham, Gosport or Winchester, such is the scale of the project. All these councils have expressed their support for the project, which is very encouraging. Working together with major stakeholders will we hope will have an integrative effect on policies.



The exciting prospect – to inscribe Portsmouth Harbour, Isle of Wight and Spithead on the list, of World Heritage sites - would be the world’s first Cultural Seascape to be included. The people who attended the launch had been invited because they all had the potential to make this ambition a reality. David and Jackie Baynes had worked tirelessly to bring together over a hundred and thirty people representing many diverse interests. Local people’s support was needed – because without universal stakeholder support, the project cannot get off the ground. Ann Coats drafted an informative leaflet, designed by Gail Baird of 131 Design; printing costs were paid by Portsmouth City Council, which also seconded an officer to work on the economic benefits and provided the draft boundary map.

David Michelmore of ICOMOS – the international advisory body which advises UNESCO on the list outlined the World Heritage site bidding process, which in the UK is controlled via the Department of Culture, Media and Sport’s Tentative List. David has successfully inscribed 11 sites onto the World Heritage List, and is preparing several others. After working with Celia Clark on an EU Walled Cities project in Obidos in Portugal and Xingcheng in China, he had suggested that Portsmouth Harbour and Spithead were just as worthy of World Heritage status. After a year of preparatory work, the bid was ready to ask for public support. Creative, forward looking cities regularly reinvent themselves, and the process towards achieving this project would help the harbour and island communities to establish new roles.

John Rodger spoke eloquently about the difference World Heritage status has made to Blaenavon Industrial site in South Wales. Local people’s perception of the site’s key history as a cradle of the Industrial Revolution had been totally changed by a continuous programme of events and activities. Physical repairs and new buildings had raised property

values and encouraged considerable inward investment, and tourist figures to the Big Pit and other industrial sites have tripled.

Celia Clark and Gary Momber of the Hampshire and Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology described the unique combination of geography and history which shaped this key part of the Solent. The theme of the bid was Defence of the Realm. The dockyard and its supporting establishments: Gunwharf, ordnance, victualling, ship-testing, hospitals were distinctive to the area's history, and they had been defended from enemy attack by successive layers of defensive structures. The navy and dockyard continue to defend the nation's interests – a living tradition. Gary Momber showed how the Solent River's submerged landscape holds evidence of its pre-history in the tidal zone and underwater. The story of human occupation and responses to cycles of climate change over seven thousand years is being discovered. His trust works hard to promote understanding and pride in this heritage in local people.

The discussion with the diverse audience included an eloquent contribution from Alan Burgess of the Portsmouth Campaign for Climate change – reminding us all of how vulnerable the area is to rising sea levels, a factor which ICOMOS encourages applicant sites to take into account. The leader of Portsmouth City Council, Gerald Vernon-Jackson, said that nothing should jeopardise the navy's freedom of operation. This is already subject to civilian planning law on land and the myriad of marine consents on water, and Defence Estates are to commission a study of the effect of World Heritage designation on the navy's operations.

Peter Goodship concluded by saying:

“We are at the very beginning of a journey and we still have much to learn about the process. And, importantly, we do not yet know how the new DCMS guidelines which were to be published last Autumn may impact on our ideas. What we do know is that the DCMS wish to review the current waiting list, remove those who have been on it for many years and made no progress and admit new applicants who have a real chance of success. We wish to be one of those new boys.”

“I would like to say one thing at the outset: an obvious question is would World Heritage Status frustrate economic progress and just become another layer of bureaucracy or indeed impede the way in which the Royal Navy, for instance, operates within the Harbour? I can say that if for a moment we believed any of those things to be true then we would not be here today.”

“All the research we have undertaken suggests that the reverse is true; it positively encourages inward investment, is good for tourism and unlocks grants and yes it may demand that new design is appropriate and of good quality – but I believe we can all sign up to that.”

The Steering Group are now planning Phase 2 - to widen their membership, and to work on the medium-term gains which will reward the process, whether or not we succeed with world recognition. These include:

- A cultural heritage-led regeneration theme: defence of the realm.
- A significant international focus on the area.
- Co-ordination of policies around what we perceive as one place.
- Increased collaboration between key harbour/waterfront authorities and agencies – needed to plan the future of the area.
- Integration of planning around harbour and on Ryde, Gosport and Southsea waterfronts including tall buildings policies.
- Opportunities for joint tourist marketing and promotion.
- Increased appreciation and protection of marine industry/nature conservation/port matters.

- Raised awareness of Portsmouth Harbour and Spithead heritage among regional and national agencies and bodies, e.g. DCMS, English Heritage, SEEDA, PUSH, HLF etc.
- Increased opportunities for grants, project funding and inward investment by gathering interests under one over-arching theme.
- Raising the profile of civic pride in Portsmouth, Gosport and Isle of Wight waterfronts and harbour heritage amongst residents and visitors, increasing visitor numbers and usage of attractions and local businesses.
- Cementing the primacy of waterfront and harbour within the harbour communities' identity.
- Protection and enhancement of public access to the water.

World Heritage status helps to preserve and sustain the heritage - built, underwater, archaeology, cultural, natural - by emphasising its importance worldwide, to local people, to the local economy and in trust for future generations.

These are the gains from the process, whether or not the application for World Heritage status succeeds. Celia Clark suggested that we should use the naval, military, dockyard, ordnance, victualling and medical legacy as a springboard for new creative visions for the harbour and Isle of Wight communities.

Celia Clark

Source: Portsmouth Society News - The Newsletter of The Portsmouth Society - Winter 2008 - www.portsmouthsociety.org.uk