Exercise Magwitch, Rat Island 2019

Interim Archaeological Excavation Report

A Wicked Noah's Ark: Exercise Magwitch, Rat Island 2019. Interim Excavation Report Code BI19

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Non-Technical Summary

Further erosion at Burrow Island (known as Rat Island) – an MOD asset between Gosport and Portsmouth on the south coast of England – resulted in additional human remains being eroded from a cliff that had already been examined in 2014 and 2017. A team undertook recovery work in March 2019 to retrieve these remains and bones from a minimum number of seven adults and one infant (0-1 years of age) were found. These displayed various pathological traits. The finding of two bones of an infant was unusual; the first occasion that this project team has encountered remains of such a young individual. If the human remains represent burials of those who died upon the prison hulks of the 18th and 19th centuries (as most documentary sources seem to point towards), then this raises interesting questions about the incarcerated demographic

Contents

Introduction 3
Research Objectives 4
Summary of the site archive 4
Potential of the data 4
Legislation, policy, and plans 4
Desktop Strategy 4
Location and Topography 5
Documented History 6
Fieldwork Methodology 2019 14
Results 16
Conclusion 17
Recommendation for further work 18
Acknowledgements 18
References 18
Appendices 19
Contexts: 19
Finds 23
Human Remains 25

Introduction

The excavation report from the 2017 season at Burrow Island/ Rat Island (Osgood et al, 2017) concluded that 'there is a VERY HIGH likelihood of further human burials being present on the island, with the eastern and south eastern portion of the island especially sensitive. Indeed, fragments of wood, consistent with the elm coffins found in the excavations were visible close to a rubble wall in this area'. Erosion in the period between spring 2017 and spring 2019 did indeed reveal further deposits related to the burial ground on the island.

A recovery programme was established which also drew upon the skills of the Royal Military Police Special Investigation Branch (SIB) as part of a module in Body recovery training. This programme was codenamed Exercise Redcap Recovery and this team, combined with military veterans on Operation Nightingale (provided through Breaking Ground Heritage), archaeologists and forensics specialists from Cranfield Forensic Institute worked on site for a week on March 2019 to retrieve the remains. A Ministry of Justice exhumation license (19-0036 Burrow Island) was thus obtained. A series of burials, some partly eroded and lost already, were encountered with evidence for further burials still *in situ* being seen. The probability is that these too will erode BY spring 2020. The report below details the results of the project.

Fig 1: Participants on Exercise Redcap Recovery (Photo Harvey Mills Photography).

Research Objectives

The primary focus of the field week was to recover human remains eroding from the cliff. Ancillary aims were to consider the potential for deeper stratigraphy of burial, to consider the possibility of chronological data and to assess all result to make further statements on the individuals interred on the island. The work also provided positive training opportunities for the SIB to work in partnership with forensics specialists and archaeologists.

Summary of the site archive

All paper archives are held by Richard Osgood at the Ministry of Defence. No small finds within securely sealed stratigraphic contexts were encountered, bar coffin nails and a clay pipe bowl. No environmental samples were taken. A photographic archive will be included with this report and deposited with the Hampshire Historic Environment Record. All human remains were held at the Cranfield Forensic Institute (an approved repository) prior to intended reburial. The Hampshire Historic Environment Record will be informed of any reburial in order to complete this record.

Potential of the data

Further analysis on the remains of these individuals (aDNA), stable isotopes and the suchlike would facilitate a greater understanding of this prison population, the ailments suffered and their place of origin. The work in this report should be taken alongside that of the previous study (Osgood et al, 2017) to make any statements on the group buried on the island

Legislation, policy, and plans

Work on the Ministry of Defence (MOD) estate is guided by the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) Protocol for the care of the Government's Historic Estate and, specifically within Defence, Joint Service Publication 362 Leaflet 12 (Defence Lands Handbook). Rat Island is not covered by one of the MOD Integrated Rural management Plans (IRMPs) nor covered by a Regional Prime Contract (RPC) hence the funding for such work came from Defence Infrastructure Organisation and the Conservation Stewardship Plan. On this occasion, the fieldwork required one statutory permission – from the Ministry of Justice (Exhumation Licence 19-0036 Burrow Island)

Desktop Strategy

The work of 2019 drew upon all the assessments conducted prior to the 2017 excavations and also the results of that programme. Following the initial site visit in 2014, the authors undertook a standard Desk-based assessment of the area – with map regression, air photographic examination, an interrogation of the Hampshire Historic Environment Record (HER), newspaper searches, any holdings within Ministry of Defence Files, and a search of local history literature. Discussions were also held with Abigail Coppins – a leading expert on PoWs and prisoners of the period and curator of the English Heritage Prisoner collections at Portchester Castle.

After the fieldwork in 2014, and prior to the excavations of 2017, a Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) survey of the area directly above the most concentrated areas of burials (Area

A) by Peter Masters of Cranfield Forensic Institute. This survey was able to distinguish anomalies at some 2m below the surface of the made ground of the island which were perhaps further burials.

Location and Topography

The site is located between Gosport and Portsmouth in Hampshire (NGR SU62077 100790). It is an island connected to the mainland by a causeway (towards Priddy's Hard) which is submerged twice a day. The island is up to c3m in height with a series of dredged layers, building debris destruction layers, and beached shingles in clearly stratigraphically distinct laminated layers. The area has a coverage of foliage including holm oak and grasses. This is successful in preventing erosion to the west of the island but less so to the east.

Fig 2: Rat Island Grave Locations marked in red on Burrow Island (courtesy of Wessex Archaeology)

Documented History

This extensive history (and indeed details of documentary sources) was presented in the previous report on fieldwork (Osgood et al, 2017) and is by Chris Daniell.

There are two main sources for the history of the island: maps and newspapers. However, the search is complicated by the fact that the island has two consistent names: 'Burrow Island' and 'Rat Island'. There has been some speculation about the name Rat Island, which was either because of the rats living on the early 19th century prisoner hulks and coming ashore on the island, or because of the waste offal from Royal Clarence Yard which was washed up on the island which the rats then ate. The earliest example of the name Rat Island so far discovered was the name given on the 1812 painting by John Schetky (see below). Whilst 'Rat Island' has been consistently spelt, there are numerous variations of Burrow Island. The earliest recorded name is on two Tudor maps 'Barrow Island' (pers comm R Harper, who has suggested that the site may have been so called because of a Prehistoric barrow located on the island), and 'Baro' (1678).

There are several maps by De Gomme who proposed a fortification upon the island. His terminology included: 'The Barow Island', 'Redout upon the Little Island' (1688), 'The Eyland called the Bou… Gosport …'' A 19th century document records: 'Burrough Island bough of John Holt in 1679 for £22:10:0; deed dated 17th Sept 1679'. The spit joining the island at low tide to the mainland was known as Burrow Bank and in 1857 a portion was 'under removal' (*Portsmouth Times and Naval Gazette* 28 February 1857).

The earliest detailed maps of the area go back to the 17th century and the first map with any detail dates from 1678, which shows a small island and shingle back formed by the convergence of Forton Creek with Portsmouth Harbour. The Victorians speculated that the site had either a Roman or Medieval fort on it (*Portsmouth Times and Naval Gazette* 28 February 1857), but there is no independent evidence for this, though in 1871 the *Hampshire Telegraph* reported that dredging in the harbour had discovered Roman pottery at a depth of 16 feet. 'There is a legend that the fort was preceded by a Norman Castle. An old letter of 1847 which I have seen mentions 'the ruins of Borough Castle, traditionally ascribed to King Stephen,' (Note: Capt G Civil note in the English Heritage Monument Long Report, National Archive, Swindon. Capt Civil's letter no longer exists.)

The earliest known structure is a small fort called Fort James built by the famous Dutch defensive engineer Sir Bernard De Gomme in 1679. Fort James was part of a much bigger defensive scheme around Portsmouth harbour as the vulnerability of the naval dockyards had become apparent during the Second Dutch War (1672-1678). Fortunately a detailed set of plans have survived of Fort James, copies of which are in Portsmouth City Library. The plans show a strong rectangular two-storied fort with walls six feet thick with a platform for guns and a curtain wall, also six feet thick. Within the fort is a 'House for a Sargeant', two guns and various rooms, with corner turrets each as a 'sentry house'. (Portsmouth Map Collection, Dartmouth Collection James Forte).
However, within a few decades of the fort's completion it was un-used and falling into decay. In 1698 the drawbridge was said to be needing repair and ten years later in 1707/8 Admiral Sir George Byng noted that the fort was in poor condition (G H Williams, *The Western Defences of Portsmouth Harbour 1400–1800.* Portsmouth City Council 1979 . p. 19).

In 1742, an order was made to recover its 2 guns which were weed-covered (http://www.pastscape.org.uk/hob.aspx?hob_id=238752&sort=4&search=all&criteria=monckton&rational=q&recordsperpage=10). There was a scheme to rebuild it in 1750, but this was not carried out (Williams, ibid pp 21-22). During the 18th century the fort continued to decline.

There is a drawing of the ruinous fort in the National Maritime Museum collection, described as Rat Island 1812'' by John Schetky, which shows the fort and curtain wall before its demolition (National Maritime Museum PAI 0913). There are no windows or fixtures or fittings shown, but the walls look substantial, high and strong. There is also a small curtain wall running down to the sea and then turning parallel to the sea. The artist's location is not clear, but the most logical location is at Priddy's Hard looking across Forton Lake to Royal Clarence Yard (indicated by the buildings behind). That the view is of Forton Lake in the foreground is also emphasised by the small ships and the pencilled in small ship which appears beached in the immediate foreshore. It is also possible that the fort is shown on two other drawings.

On a map of 1810 the fort is shown in outline, but with an additional feature stretching into Portsmouth Harbour. This could be a jetty which was used for transporting the stone away from the island. By the late 1820s the fort had been completely removed. English Heritage have a record from 1953 which states a 'letter of 1828 says "the walls of the Castle [ie Fort James] have lately been taken down" (Note: Capt G Civil note in the English Heritage Monument Long Report, National Archive, Swindon. The original letter no longer exists.) By the 1830s there was nothing left of the fort.

The first indication of a 19th Century military presence on the island is the report of an accident in 1833 (*Reading Mercury* 4 Nov 1833). A gun exploded on St Mary's Quay and the wadding was catapulted over to the island, severely injuring Master-gunner Ross. Thereafter there were frequent newspaper reports of plans or activities on Rat Island.
In 1846 the *West Kent Guardian* (14 February 1846) reported a planned scheme to make the island into a coaling station. A pier was to be created, on the end of which was a large coal store. This scheme was dropped in 1847 because of 'insuperable' objections, in particular because the jetty would lead to the 'unavoidable accumulation of muddy deposits' (*Morning Post*, 16 August 1847). *The Evening Chronicle* (31 August 1846) also reported on the proposed coaling station and there was the recommendation that Rat Island should be converted into a fort as it could sweep the entrance of the Harbour 'and be made useful than Blockhouse Fort'.

Possibly as part of the planned coaling station in May 1846 Lieutenant Richard Tylden of the Royal Engineers drew a plan and sections of the island (The National Archives MPHH 1/233/6). There is no trace of the fort on the plan and the island is devoid of any trees and only has two structures upon it, one of which is a building 46 feet long and 18 feet wide, and the other is a 6ft square structure. The length of the island is 348 feet and its width is 108 feet. Instead, in 1847, the Ordnance granted permission for the Admiralty to make the island into a drill-ground for HMS Excellent's men to drill with field-pieces (London Daily News 8 March 1847), whereas the *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette* (9 March 1847) stated that the officers and seamen would be exercised 'in field fortification, storming etc. Some

heavy 60 pounders will be mounted on the island' in defence of the harbour and dockyards. Later in the year the Board of Admiralty visited the harbour, which included Rat Island 'where officers and men of the Excellent are instructed in the formation of field works etc and other kinds of fortifications' (*Morning Post* 11 August 1847). The *Dover Telegraph* (14 August 1847) added the detail that the Lords 'inspected the plans of Lieut. Savage, of the Royal Naval College, for Service Batteries, one of which is erected on the island'. In preparation for this thousands of tons of spoil from the excavated dockyard basins were dumped by convict labourers.

Rat Island was also used as a Victorian burning ground on occasion and on 16 September 1854 *The Hampshire Advertiser* reported that the St Vincent was towed into harbour and as a precaution 'a large number of the blankets and hammocks etc used by the Russian prisoners, supposed to have been infected by cholera (as she came into port with several cases on board), were burned on Rat Island in this harbour'. The *London Evening Standard* (12 September 1854) stated that the blankets belonged to the men 'who died on cholera' whilst on board and the *Evening Mail* (13 September 1854) quantified the burnt amount as 'several hundred beds and blankets'.

For the rest of the century the island had two main uses, the first as a drill ground and the second as a site of experimentation.

Drill Parade Ground

In 1847 the Ordnance granted permission for the Admiralty to use Rat Island as a drill ground for Excellent's men with field-pieces (*The Daily News* March 8 1847) and the function of the island as a drill ground was the island's primary role for the rest of the century. In the same year a high ranking visitation visited the island where the officers and men of the Excellent are instructed in the formation of field work etc and other kinds of fortifications' (*West Kent Guardian* 14 August 1847).

In 1854 the 'newly raised men of the Excellent were drilled in musket and sword exercise …and the men of the ordinary were also exercised in the use of the floating engines' (which were not specified) (*Hampshire Advertiser* 29 July 1854). This use continued until the end of the century, but in 1900 the *Hampshire Telegraph* reported that Rat Island 'was formerly used as a drill ground for field gun practice by the seamen of the Excellent' (*Hampshire Telegraph* 22 September 1900). In an article, written in 1926, stated that field work took place on Rat Island 'and on one day a week the Marine Cadets were instructed … in field fortification work' (*Hampshire Telegraph* 27 December 1929).

However, this use unfortunately led to some accidents and even deaths, and the newspapers reported in 1862 the death of Robert Price, who was 21, who was an able bodied seaman on HMS Excellent. He was practicing drill and was moving a 12-pounder Armstrong gun when it overbalanced and crushed his head – causing instant death (*Portsmouth Times and Naval Gazette* 28 June 1828). In 1870 Henry Hicks, a leading seaman with HMS Excellent, also died on the island whilst practicing gun drill, this time because of a heart attack (*Hampshire Telegraph* 24 September 1870).

An odd occurrence happened in 1861 when a bullet was fired through the bread-room of Royal Clarence Yard. The police investigated and a number of men from the Excellent who 'were at rifle practice, with blank cartridge – and it is supposed the bullet was fired by one of those men thoughtlessly; it is, however, strange that it is not one as issued by the Government' (*Morning Advertiser* 18 Oct 1861).

However, the logistical difficulties were written about in the *Naval and Military Gazette* (10 February 1872): 'It is estimated that one hour of drill hour in every five is lost daily by drill parties in going to and from Burrow or Rat Island for field battery drill and laboratory processes etc'). The reference to a laboratory on the island is not elaborated upon. On the foreshore large fragments of crucibles have been found and these may have been part of experiments on the island.

Experimentation

The island was also used as a base for experimentation. In 1847 the officers and men of Excellent created a 'sand-bag battery' (*Shipping and Mercantile Gazette* 6 October 1847). In 1849 a series of experiments were undertaken to blow up a practice stockade. The reports were widely published in a variety of newspapers with one of the longest accounts given in the *Salisbury and Winchester Journal* (29 September 1849). A practice stockade was erected, from the recently broken up brig Curlew, with different amounts of gun powder being detonated against it. Whilst the 5lb and 10lb charges did not affect the stockade, when 5lb of powder in a flannel cartridge was used, with 120lb bag of sand over it three planks of the stockade were blown down with fragments being thrown in all directions. The experiment then stopped as a splinter hit the Commander in the leg and he suffered a considerable wound (*Lloyds Weekly London Newspaper*, 30 September 30th 1847) which turned out to be very heavy bruising (*The Daily News*, September 26 1849 page 7). Earlier in the year *London Evening Standard* (22 March 1854) reported that experiments were carried out on the island by the Royal Marine Artillery, in mining and blasting operations with the *Portsmouth Times and Naval Gazette* (25 March 1854) adding that the experiments were 'to try the effects of gunpowder in blasting stockheads'. The experiments were witnessed by Vice Admiral Sir Thomas John Cochrane amongst others.

As well as for military purposes Rat Island was also used for more general purposes. The 1852 various experiments concerning Phillipp's Fire Annihilator were reported on Rat Island. The experiments were described in detail by the *Illustrated London News* (23 October 1852) and the *North & South Shields Gazette and Northumberland* and *Durham Advertiser* (22 October 1852) and the *Liverpool Mail* (23 October 1852)), though there are some discrepancies between the accounts. The first experiment involved an 'immense quantity' of coal which was put into a trench and ignited. The next experiment involved twenty tar barrels which were put into a trough, or reservoir, forty or fifty feet by five feet in size, filled with wool, tar, naptha and 'other flammable materials' and then five empty tar barrels were filled with shavings and naptha and 'other flammable materials' poured on them and then they were set alight, and the third and last involved a purposefully built wooden building, twenty five feet long and high, was filled with combustible materials and set alight. The 'Annihilator' successfully put out all the flames and the experiments were deemed

successful. The *North and South Shields Gazette* describes the annihilators as 'portable engines. The largest goes on wheels, and is about the size of a small barrel'.
By the second half of the 19th century there was a considerable number of buildings on the northern end of the island. A detailed Admiralty map of 1891 shows the buildings and structures, which included: Officers' Mess Room; Mens' Mess Shed; Gun Shed; Gunner's Quarters; Signal Post; Observatory; Flagstaff; Practice Battery; Jetty and Derrick. The buildings were all single storey and are shown as part of a Portsmouth Harbour photographic panorama of 1881 and in a painting by the local artist Martin Snape. In 1892 tenders were invited to 'Remove Earth Closet Soil and Rubbish … and further to supply Dry Earth for use with closets' *(Portsmouth Evening News* 1892) showing that the area was still actively used.

On the 25 July 1896 the *Army and Navy Gazette* gave the first indication that homing pigeons were to be based on Rat Island as part of the Navy's messaging systems from ship to shire. The pigeons had previously been trained by the Commander of Whale Island entirely at his own expense, and the following month the proposed plan was mentioned in *the Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* (22 August 1896). The *Morning Post* in September (9 September 1896) mentioned that the 'pigeon establishment' had not been transferred to Rat Island yet. The plan was then changed, and the pigeon loft was being built near the Queen's private landing stage on Royal Clarence Yard (*Morning Post* 16 March 1897), but was changed again and on the 17 July 1897 the *Isle of Wight County Press* and South England reporter wrote that Rat island was 'an ideal spot in every way', and in November the *Army and Navy Gazette* (6 November 1897) wrote that the pigeon cote on Rat Island was 'comparatively new'. The *Belfast Newsletter* (28 July 1897) gave details of the new communications system of homing pigeons had been initially developed by individual officers, but the Naval Intelligence Department took notice and a pigeon cote had been built on Rat Island, 'an ideal spot in every way'. The pigeons were kept on board ship and then released up to 120 miles from shore where upon they would fly home with messages. The article reported that pigeons were even used on the Royal Yacht. However, under the main article was another with a cautionary tale – the Germans had flown homing pigeons from Dover, but the coast guard had found many dead, having been attacked and killed by British hawks.

The Mindry Family

In the latter part of the 19th century the Mindry family lived on the island and through a range of records a reasonably detailed picture can be built up of the family. The reason for the family living on the island is probably that the father, Robert Mindry, was a caretaker for the whole site. In the 1871 Census Returns the husband, Robert, was 48 and living on Burrough Island. However, also in the 1871 census Robert was again included – a rare example of a 'double count' on the census – and this time the island was described as 'Rat Island Extra Parochial' and his family was included. The family consisted of Robert, the father, who was 47 and a Gunner 1st Class Royal Navy who was born in Gillingham Kent, his wife Mary Anne, 47, born in Devonport, Mary Jane, 21 born in Portsea, Frederick R, 13 born in Portsea, Henry H, 11 born in Portsea, Edith, 8, born in Portsea and Helena 2, who was born on Rat Island. Helena is the only known confirmed birth on the island. However, a birth announcement in the *Portsmouth Times and Naval Gazette* (6 April 1867) states that a

daughter was born on Borough Island – an alternative name to Rat Island - to the wife of Mr Henry Kuron, gunner RN and it maybe that the family were resident there before the Mindry family. Despite extensive searches no other reference has been found to the Kuron family and it maybe that the name was misspelt in the newspaper, made more likely by the lack of a birth certificate in 1867 with the surname Kuron. In 1881 Robert Mindry was away from Rat Island and his wife Mary remained with Henry, Edith and Helena. Mary was described as 'Gunner's wife RN' and her 20 year old son Henry was described as a 'Seaman RN'.
The most detailed record for Robert is his Physical and Service record (number 319657) which records that he was born on the 20th May 1821 at Gillingham in Kent. He had 'light' hair, blue eyes, a fair complexion and was 5 feet 81/2 inches tall and he could write. His only injury was a scar on his right leg. He was aged 25 when 'ticketed' and he first went to sea as a boy in 1836 and at the time of writing (20 May 1846) had served in the Royal Navy for 9 years. When not in the navy he resided in Hackney. In 1846 and 1847 he was on HMS Dasher, being discharged on 4 June 1847. HMS Dasher was a wooden paddle packet of 357 tons, launched at Chatham Dockyard on 5 December 1837 (https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/dasher). He died in the last quarter of 1907 in Portsmouth.

The newspapers of the time revealed several tragedies which occurred to them. In 1873 the case of the young son of the Mindry's was reported. Two of the Mindry boys were sent to Gosport for medicine as their mother was ill. Whilst attempting to cross the water the '10 or 11 year old' fell overboard the boat and despite assistance being given he was drowned and his body could not be recovered (The *Hampshire Telegraph* and *Sussex Chronicle* March 5 1873). Although the boy is not named, given that Henry was 11 on the 1871 census, he is the most obvious candidate, but he appears on the 1881 Census, whereas Frederick does not, so Frederick (then aged 15) was presumably young looking for his age.

In 1877 the family again came to the attention of the press with a potentially tragic court case which was written about in the *Hampshire Telegraph* (Saturday 11 August 1877). The report told of an unnamed woman who lived on Rat Island (presumably the wife, Mary-Jane) applying to the Magistrates for the restitution of her six month old baby whom her husband had 'detained' over-night. As she could not breast feed the baby she was frightened that her baby might starve to death. He had been violent and aggressive towards her and had broken the Venetian blinds of the house where they lived. The Magistrate stated that the island was under naval control, so she had better apply to the commanding officer of the Excellent. The woman replied she had already done so and been referred by the commander to the civil authorities. The Magistrate said that if anything should happen to the baby the husband would render himself liable to serious indictment but he considered it a family quarrel and had no power to intervene. The outcome of the incident is not known. In the 1881 Census the family had moved off the island and the resident population on Rat Island was nil (*Hampshire Advertiser* 23 May 1883).

During the Victorian era the island formed a useful vantage point for cheering important guests or gun salutes – especially royalty. In 1858 the Coastguard fired for the Queen's Birthday and in 1874 the men from HMS Excellent 'were drawn up like sentinels on the crest of the grounds' of Rat Island with a 19 gun salute being fired (rather than the normal 21) 'signifying that formal honour was being paid, for the first time, to the new First Lord of the Admiralty.' (*London Daily News* 24 April 1874). Later in the same year Queen Victoria

inspected the seaman and marines at Royal Clarence Yard and a large number of seamen stood on the side facing Royal Clarence Yard to welcome the Queen (*Hampshire Telegraph* 25 April 1874).

One of the last big events reported by the newspapers the transportation of Queen Victoria's coffin to her beloved Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. The men of the Excellent and boys from the training ship St Vincent manned Burrow Island as the coffin cadets lining the island as the coffin of Queen Victoria went past (*Portsmouth Evening News* 30 January 1900). Later in the same year Edward VII and his Queen visited Portsmouth and the men on Burrow Island 'added to the volume of welcoming acclamations'.

As a drill-ground Rat Island was no longer in use by 1900 but a scheme was reported in the *Hampshire Telegraph* (12 September 1900) to convert the island into the new naval coaling station. It was to be connected to the mainland by a railway so coal could be delivered by land and water. To enlarge the island material was going to be dredged from the harbour (*Hampshire Telegraph* 4 May 1900) This was the last major conversion scheme proposed for Rat Island but it was never carried out and in 1902 the scheme had been abandoned (*Hampshire Telegraph* 13 December 1902).

In the 20th century the island became less and less used. In 1904 tender notices were issued for the removal of earth closet soil and rubbish from Whale island and Burrow Island (*Portsmouth Evening News* 19 August 1904), and it may be that a decision had been made to formally reduce the use of Burrow Island. In the event this is what seems to have happened. During the 20th century from a previously bare patch of ground the vegetation began to take hold. Maps and aerial photography of the island show it vegetation-less until the 1920s and then slowly the trees began to grow. The maps and aerial photographs show the progressive growth of the vegetation.

It is only in the 20th century that a few mentions of beached shipping occur. In 1906 there was a mention of Rat Island in relation to a collision at sea when the Solent Queen, one of the harbour ferries collided with another ferry, the Frances, and was holed. The Solent Queen was first beached at Rat Island and the 'collision mats' were deployed. She later attempted to journey to Southampton, but took in so much water that she had to land at Gosport Hard (*Portsmouth Evening News* 4 December 1906). In 1946 the corvette Lupin was beached at Rat Island after springing a leak and in 1947 was to be towed to Portchester to be broken up, but owing to the bad weather had to be towed in the winter of 1947 (*Hampshire Telegraph* 29 August 1947, *Hampshire Telegraph* 14 November 1947). A large anchor structure, dated 1944, still survives at the southern end of the island and unless the tides have moved it, it is likely that the island was used in some way for D-Day, though this aspect is unrecorded.

The uses for the island in the 20th century were as a landing point for under-sea cables and also as a burning ground for unwanted fuel or munitions from Priddy's Hard. It was in order to carry the material to be burnt that a little tramway was built from Burrow Island to Priddy's Hard, the tracks of which can still be seen along the shingle bank. Today the island is completely overgrown with only the odd platform or object to be found on it. There are

small portions of walls or re-vetting, especially on the eastern side. At present their uses and dates are unknown.

Note – There are several islands named 'Rat Island' which are reported on in the newspapers, notably Rat Island near Lundy, and on Jersey. In 1856 there is a single line entry about the building of barracks, which states 'And Rat Island, for 13 officers and 378 men' (Morning Chronicle 3 May 1856), but this is not the Rat Island in Portsmouth Harbour.

The Burials

The burials discovered on Rat Island are as yet undated, but there are two main possibilities. The first is that they are prisoners of war from the American War of Independence or the Napoleonic Wars. If this is the case then they could be from a wide area of the globe, as fighting took place in North America, Caribbean, Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Abigail Coppins has undertaken a large amount of research on the prisoners of war in Gosport, and there were large prisons at Portchester Castle and Forton Creek, as well as prisoner of war hulks in the harbour.

Whilst prisoner of war burials are possible, especially if there was a continuing tradition, there is more evidence for the burials being of convicts from the 1830s and 1840s from the prison hulks which lay in the harbour. Prison hulks were a common sight in Portsmouth harbour and were large decaying ships which were used to house prisoners, either as a 'prison overspill' system or for prisoners awaiting transportation to the colonies. An OS map of 1858 states that the south-eastern section of the island is the 'convicts burying ground' and in 1852 it was described as the 'the convicts' burial-ground' (*Morning Chronicle* 18 October 1852). This was remembered after the burials had ceased and in 1891 a report of Queen Victoria's visit to Portsmouth mentioned the previous convict ships 'and any one will tell you the direction of Rat's Island, where the prisoners were buried.' (*London Daily News* 27 February 1891).

Another tantalising reference is located in some lines from a tale written in *The Graphic* in the 5 January 1878 edition about the Portsmouth of the 1840s and 1850s. 'By Celia's Arbour' by Walter Besant and James Rice suggested that the burial of convicts was rudimentary though probably not dissimilar to many other inhumations in Portsmouth and Gosport at the time, and were at least with spiritual component:

"Brave and honest soldier – there is the roll of musketry over his grave – God rest his soul! Down below, creeping sluggishly along, go the gangs of convicts armed with pick and spade. No funeral march for them when their course is run; only the chaplain to read the appointed service; only an ignoble and forgotten grave in the mud of Rat Island"

However, there is one certain, named, burial on Burrow Island. In 07 February 1831 the *Reading Mercury* stated that Charles Morris Jones, a convict on the York prison hulk died and was buried on Rat Island. Earlier newspapers had charted the course of Charles's life and how he came to be on the prison hulk. The Abingdon court notices of October 24 1829 give a detailed account of how Morris came to be caught. Charles Morris Jones was born

and lived in Aberystwyth and in his early 20s he moved to Abingdon where he was employed in the drapers shop owned by Mr George Shepherd. He was described as a 'genteel looking young man'. Shepherd strongly him of stealing money, so with some friends set a trap whereby two people bought some cloth with 'marked money'. Morris was searched and some marked money was found in his pockets. It also transpired that Morris had an accomplice in London (who was not named) who had received goods to the value of £30 from Morris.

The trial report ends ominously 'There will be little doubt that he will be committed on Tuesday next on a capital charge'. The expectation was that he would be hanged. On November 2 it was reported that Jones was not 'examined' by the magistrates owing to the fact that one of the witnesses from London failed to attend. The examination was reported in the November 7 Oxford Journal when the two London witnesses had arrived. They were named Owen and Jones and had received money and different sorts of cloth and a ticketed piece of lace, which proved it had come from Shepherd's shop. Morris had also written to Owen and boasted that he was doing very well 'at the rate of one pound a day!". Jones was again committed until the next Assizes. The actual trial was on the 3rd March 1830 and Morris was one of nine others found guilty of relatively minor theft – all were sentenced to death.

A long trial report was given in the Reading Mercury which includes a transcript of a letter from Morris to his cousin in Upper-Baker Street. The letters indicates that Jones was pretending to be a travelling buyer of cloth which he would then post via the Alert coach to Jones in London. Jones made no defence and was immediately found guilty with his counsel pleading that his life be spared. It was the jury that pleaded that his life be spared and the judge agreed – on the condition that he be transported for life. Sometime during the week of May 17 Jones and seven others were taken to the York hulk in Gosport, in the expectation that he would be transported for life. It was nearly a year later the Abingdon correspondent reported on the 3rd February 1831 that Charles Morris Jones 'who was sentenced to 14 years transportation, lately died at the hulks at Portsmouth, and was buried on Rat Island'.

Fieldwork Methodology 2019

Unlike the excavations of 2017, the recovery of the human remains from Rat Island in Spring 2019 took place in far from ideal conditions – this providing an excellent test of RMP skills as part of a training serial. The work was during one of the major spring storms with windy conditions and limited by tidal times as to when the excavation could take place.

Most frustratingly, excavations could not take place in a horizontal plane because of the large overburden of the cliff and the need to recover the deposits quickly. On discussion with experts such as Jaqueline McKinley of Wessex Archaeology (author of CIfA guidance on work with human remains), the decision was taken to recover the remains in a horizontal plane; photographing this work and the location, and cataloguing the human remains with unique numbers in order to enable assessment and geolocation at a later stage.

Given the elements above, neither sections nor plans of the grave (or indeed a profile) were possible to draw. This would have been unsafe given the nature of the collapsing cliff, part

of which did indeed slip whilst we were one the island. The location of the burials is highlighted in the images below.

Fig 3: The cliff face section at Rat Island with various grave cuts exposed (Photo Harvey Mills Photography).

Fig 4: The cliff face section at Rat Island with the numbering of the various grave cuts exposed (those in circles represent clear grave cuts/more complete burials)

Skeletal recording forms were completed for all remains.

Results

The fieldwork yielded the remains of at least seven adults and one infant in the cliff face to the immediate north of the ashlar wall that may represent part of the remains of James Fort. This showed the burial ground extends further to the north than previously thought. What is also important is that these burials are also at greater depth and thus this raises the potential for far higher numbers of individuals being here.

Whilst digging area SK6, it became clear that there was the potential for a cliff collapse. Work was thus stopped in the area. The team removed overburden to make the area safer. Within the upper area, several human bones were present (catalogued as SK9). This illustrated that there are burials at a stratigraphically higher layer. In 2019, we saw burials not only cut into the consolidated beach shingle as per 2014-17 but also into the grey clay layers sealing it. SK9 appears to be in a layer some 1m above the burials located in 2014-17.

Fig 5: Team members from Cranfield Forensic Institute and Royal Military Police investigate exposed coffin and burials in the cliff face (Photo Harvey Mills Photography).

The work of 2019 thus showed that the burial ground is potentially far larger than first thought with burials stacked not only within the beach shingle, but also in the laminated layers above it. The area noted as SK7 also showed the earlier burials had been disturbed (and used as backfill) for later burials, implying perhaps a continuity of use of the island as a burial ground beyond the phase where grave markers are visible, or otherwise a severe pressure on reutilising the available land to this end.

Fig 6: Area of SK7 with coffin end in the centre of the image and disturbed human bone visible in the grave cut to the left and right of the coffin wood. (Photo Harvey Mills Photography).

As in earlier seasons, iron nails were seen *in situ* as part of coffin furniture. In 2019, we also noticed the presence of *in situ* copper alloy nails in some of the coffins (SK2 for example).

A further inspection of the location of the graves examined in 2014-17 was undertaken. In the grey clay immediately above burial B of 2014, a human femur was noticed along with a clay pipe bowl (see Finds below) decorated with a ship. Above Grave C1 of 2014 two small rib fragments were also seen having eroded in the five years since the earlier operation. This all contributes to the picture of stacked coffins located to the east side of the island. It should be noted that there may well be burials on the western, northern and central elements of the island but that these locations are not affected by erosion and thus not currently vulnerable or at risk.

Conclusion

Erosion continues on Rat Island and the fieldwork has added at least a further 7 adult individuals to the list of human remains recovered from the site. The discovery of two infant bones is intriguing. Do these hint at the presence of a child of such a young age (0-1 years of age) on a prison ship or does this point towards varying places of death for the deceased? We know from documentary sources that children below the age of 10 were convicted and placed on prison hulks but this is altogether younger. If they were on a prison ship, were they with mother or father? All the burials seen thus far are of men.

The work highlighted the problems of speedy recovery of remains from a collapsing cliff face and the limitations on traditional site recording potential (sections/plans). To this end, it provided good training to teams that are often very limited in the time that they can spend on site to recover remains. Priority was given to recovery of the remains themselves, with recording film and photography to document the work, and then to the analysis of the physical remains.

There will undoubtedly need to be further work undertaken here, as not all the components were retrieved.

Recommendation for further work

The fieldwork was only for one week in duration. This was not long enough to examine all of the graves that have been exposed by erosion. At least two areas (both of which show either coffin wood or even human remains) need to be excavated as a matter of some urgency and thus a project to complete this phase in later 2019/early 2020 is essential.

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Appendices

Contexts:

Please note that due to the immediate urgency of recovery, separate context numbers were not allotted to cut/fill of any deposits. Rather, a unique 'SK' number was given to each separate cutting, and the fill (including human remains/coffin wood/matrix) included within this allocation.

SK1: Located immediately to the north of the one surviving portion of the walls of James Fort. Parts of two femurs were visible in a grave cut through consolidated beach shingle, and coffin wood was also present. [NOT EXCAVATED]

SK2: A number of foot phalanges were visible in the cliff face and a defined wooden coffin some 30cm to the north of SK1 (north of the wall). This was a burial cut down through now-consolidated beach shingle and with over 1.5m of cliff overburden. The grave cut had the remains of an adult within it and was filled with a course yellow brown sand with sea shell inclusions and elements of coffin wood. The articulated burial here was extended and supine, W-E aligned with head at the west end. Further elements of an addition burial were seen on the south side of the grave cut when recovery work was completed. These too were retrieved and catalogued as SK8.

Fig 7: Phalanges visible at the start of fieldwork for SK2 (Photo Harvey Mills Photography).

SK3: An earlier grave cut through consolidated shingle. No remains however – only small bone fragments. This had already eroded in the past. Area SK6 was located immediately above and slightly to the west.

SK4: Below the rubble revetment wall seen in 2017, the eds of two bleached tibiae/fibulae were visible. The area of this wall was opened to reveal a burial in a coffin with separate (articulated) human remains lying at a perpendicular directly above the burial – labelled as SK5. SK4 was articulated, extended and supine, and W-E aligned with head at the west end, SK5 was N-S aligned. This grave highlighted the fact that the wall seen in 2017 was indeed for site revetment (as suggested in the previous report). It also demonstrated further evidence for the stacked nature of the burials on the island. The burial lay in a shelly/sandy matrix with pebble inclusions and yellow/brown in colour. Coffin wood was present in the north face of the grave cut.

Fig 8: bleached human bones of SK4 below the revetting wall on Rat Island – illustrating stratigraphic sequence (Photo Harvey Mills Photography).

Fig 9: Burial SK4/5 below wall before (left) and during (right) excavation (Photos Harvey Mills Photography).

Fig 10: SK4 during excavation with SK5 running above (and perpendicular to) it (Photo Harvey Mills Photography).

SK5: This partial set of articulated remains was aligned N/S and lay directly alongside and above SK4 below and behind the revetment wall.

SK6: Within the cliff face, coffin wood and several phalanges were visible. This area was located above and to the west of an older grave (SK3). SK3 was not cut into the consolidated shingle but a layer of grey clay with sandy, gritty soil in a higher level within the cliff. This indicated that the cemetery is almost certainly more extensive than previously thought with burials stacked at higher levels up the cliff than has been encountered before. This burial was in a wooden coffin, extended and supine, aligned W-E with the head at the western end. The skull was NOT recovered as the cliff face was deemed too unstable to attempt to retrieve it. This area was later affected by cliff collapse. When this face collapsed, further bones from even higher up the cliff (and kept separately as SK9 and SK10) were seen.

Fig 11: SK6 under excavation

SK7: On cleaning back part of the cliff face, a further assemblage of human bones was visible. This was a real jumble and with little articulation; the cranium was in a different location to the mandible. On further cleaning, it appeared to have a coffin lying on top of (and disturbing this burial) and thus seems to represent redeposited bones from an earlier grave cut that formed the backfill of a later grave – the coffin (A) of which was visible (though UNEXCAVATED in 2019). A couple of bones (infant) came from a further UNEXCAVATED coffin (B) in this cut before the site was backfilled and revetted. Coffin B (UNEXCAVATED) seems to have been substantially compressed by the overburden.

Fig 12: One of the infant bones in area SK7 (Photo Harvey Mills Photography).

SK8: On the completion of excavation of SK2, a further set of remains were seen. These were located to the southern edge of the coffin of SK2 and were labelled as SK8.

SK9: a layer of soily overburden above SK6 which was removed as part of attempts to make the working area safe on the cliff face. At some point after this work, the cliff area later collapsed. The layer was grey brown soil with roots holding much of it together and with little by the way of inclusions – apart from some brick fragments.

Finds

There were iron nails and fittings embedded in several of the coffins (which in 2017 were analysed as being of elm wood), and in 2019 a couple of copper alloy nails were also found still embedded in coffins. These were however neither retained nor given small find numbers. No other *in-situ* small finds were made bar a clay pipe bowl from above burial B from 2014 (re-examined post-erosion).

SF001: 19th Century Clay Pipe Bowl. Burial B. BI14

Fig 13: Clay pipe bowl in situ (Photo Harvey Mills Photography).

Fig 14: Views of the Clay pipe bowl recovered at Rat Island 2019 (Photo Harvey Mills Photography).

This pipe bowl had been manufactured by Thomas Frost of Southampton. A detailed examination of pipes of this type was made by David Higgins (1989) in the Newsletter of the Society for Clay Pipe Research. He wrote:

"Some years ago John Lucas of Leicester kindly showed me a fine example of an early nineteenth century decorated pipe which he had found in Southampton (Fig.19). The style and decoration is typical of the more elaborate pipes produced at this period in the south of England. There are series of bowls with this form and type of leaf decoration on the seams but which show Britannia and an admiral, sometimes with the word 'Trafalgar'. These must have been made to celebrate the famous battle soon after 1805. This particular piece is marked TF on the heel and was almost certainly made by Thomas Frost of Southampton. The Frost family are a well known family of pipemakers and Arnold, in his study of Southampton pipemakers, records that Thomas was born in 1782, married in 1804, and worked until at least 1839 (Arnold, 1977). Given the date of the Trafalgar pipes, it is likely that this was one of the earlier products made by Frost, probably dating to the period c1800-1820.

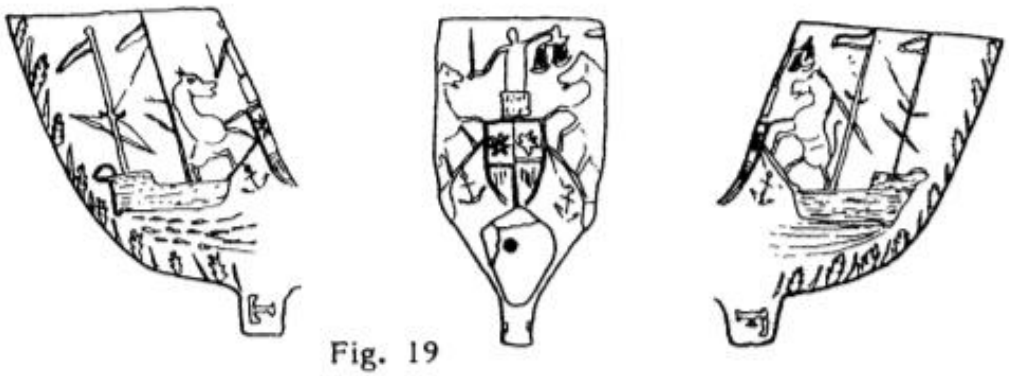

Fig. 19

18

Human Remains

By Nicolas Márquez-Grant

Burial Area No.	% Complete	Sex	Age	Height	Comments
SK2	>75%	Male-possibly Male	wide age 18-25 years, narrow age 20-25 years	Height: 164.7cm (interval 161-167 cm)	
SK4	>75%	Male, Caucasoid	wide age >45 years, narrow age >60? years	Height: 180.6cm (interval 177-183 cm	Healed facture rib possibly, crushing healed

					fracture vertebra?, osteoarthritis hips, bowed humeri.. Other; Bleaching on distal tibiae and fibulae from sun exposure, foot bones absent
SK5 (disarticulated just above SK4):	>25-50% (lower limbs, mandible and vertebra) complete	Male	wide age Adult (>18/20) years, narrow age 18-45 years (ie not old adult)	Height: 169.7cm (interval 166-172 cm)	Periostitis (active infection at time of death) on both femora.
SK6	50-75% complete	Male	wide age 17-23 years, narrow age 18-20 years	Height: 166cm (interval 163-169 cm)	Nothing major (Schmorl's nodes, lipping on vertebra)
SK7	50-75% complete	Male	wide age >40 years	Height: 164.7cm (interval 161-167 cm)	**Other: two infant bones (femur and tibia) present.**
SK8	<25% complete (left femur and two patellae)	Male dimension	wide age Adult (>18-20 years	Height: 169.4cm (interval 166-172 cm)	
SK9	Bones from two individuals				Fragment of femur (periostitis, infection), foot bones, hip bone fragments,

					ribs and clavicle (ribs and clavicle from same individual; different to hip bones and probably foot bones).

BI-19 Miscellaneous. Several elements of unstratified remains including one right femur (very weathered), some foot bones, rib fragments, and then SK 10 with a right femur with osteomyelitis (infection).

If we take the femora total adults: 7 (safe minimum number of individuals) in addition to the infant remains = 8.