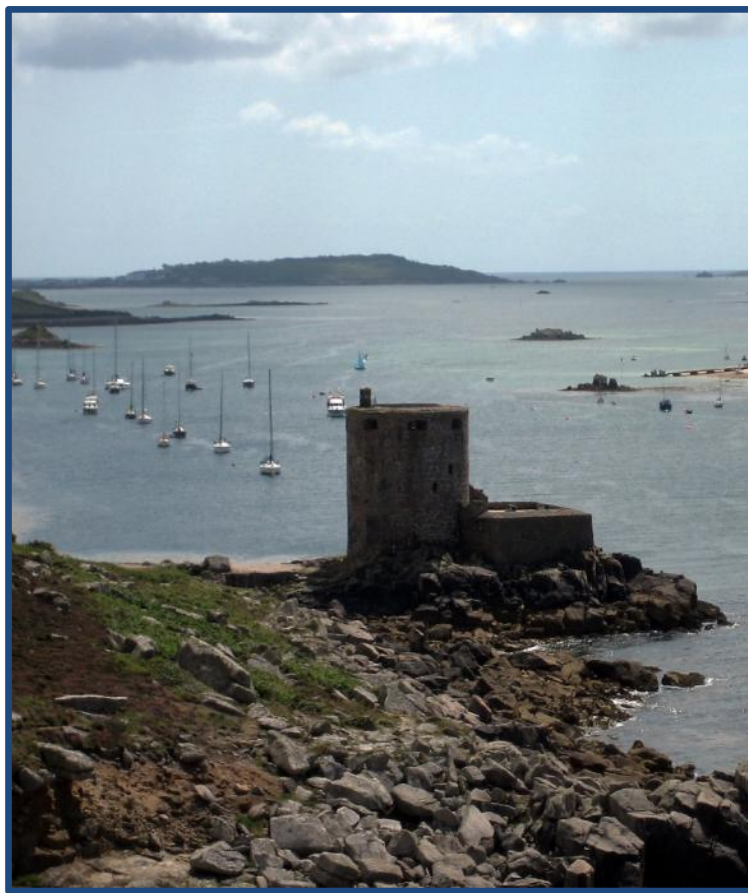


# Tresco Channel

Isles of Scilly

## Survey Project



## Interim Project Report

ProMare & CISMAS



## Acknowledgements

This project was undertaken jointly by the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Maritime Archaeology Society (CISMAS) and ProMare. The project would not have been possible without funding generously provided by ProMare. The site was brought to our attention by the charter boat skipper, Dave McBride, who recovered a number of pottery fragments from Tresco Channel. The project has also received help from Ambient Pressure Diving, Tania Weller, Richard Larn and Sean Lewis.

Cover photograph by Sarala Shama

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## Project Summary

This interim report presents the outline of the project; the full report will follow as soon as the analysis of the pottery has been completed (by John Allan) hopefully in the autumn of 2012. Early fourteenth-century pottery has been recovered from a small area in Tresco Channel on the Isles of Scilly. To date almost 300 sherds have been recovered, the majority of which are from the Saintonge region of France. The distribution of this pottery has been recorded and it is thought that this material is likely to be indicative of a medieval shipwreck.

## Background

### Location

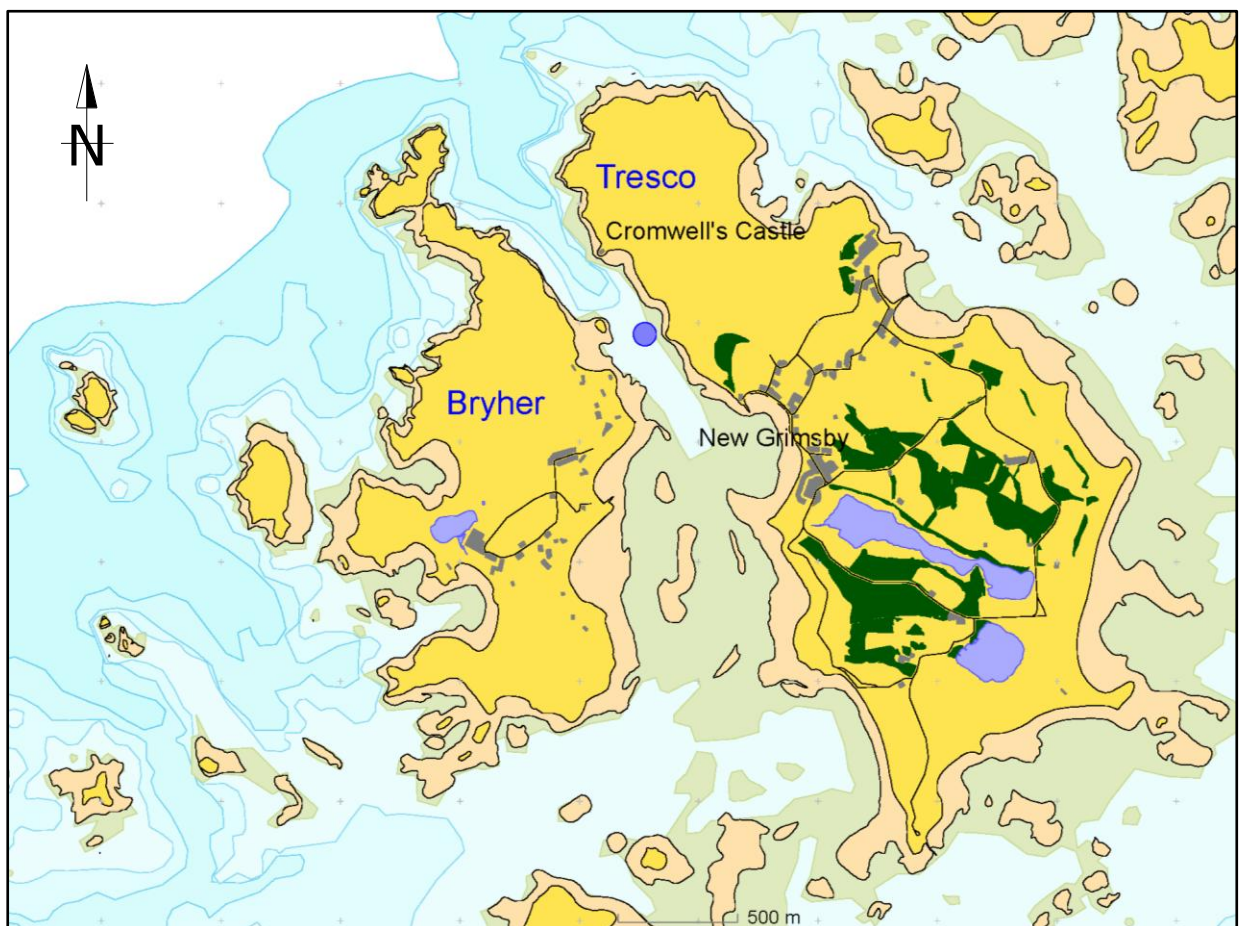


Fig 1.

*The site is located in Tresco Channel, between the islands of Tresco and Bryher, on the Isles of Scilly. The site is shown by the blue circle.*



## The Site

Tresco Channel is a narrow stretch of water between the islands of Tresco and Bryher in the Isles of Scilly (fig. 1). There is a small harbour on the Tresco side of the channel, called New Grimsby, which lies close to the site (400m). The channel is defended by small coastal forts (on Tresco) of multiple periods, which lie approximately (350m) from the site. The earliest of these is a small blockhouse built in 1548-1554, which was replaced by Cromwell's Castle (see cover illustration) built in 1651 and enlarged in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. On slightly higher ground above Cromwell's Castle there is a ruined civil war artillery fort, King Charles's Castle, built in the mid-sixteenth century. All these defences were designed to protect the deep water approach to New Grimsby Harbour.



Fig 2.

*Tresco Channel from the north; Cromwell's Castle is visible in the centre of the picture. The island of Tresco is on the left, Bryher is on the right – photo Sarala Shama*

Shipping activity in medieval Scilly is mentioned by (Thomas, 1985, p.200) *"Scattered references hint that, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, ships from many parts of Atlantic Europe called at Scilly. There are fragments of French polychrome pottery of the time from Samson, St. Helen's and Tean".*



## Local Context - St Nicholas Priory, Tresco

The Abbey Gardens on Tresco contain the ruins of a monastic settlement. This was the priory of St Nicholas, a cell of the Benedictine Abbey of Tavistock, in Devon.

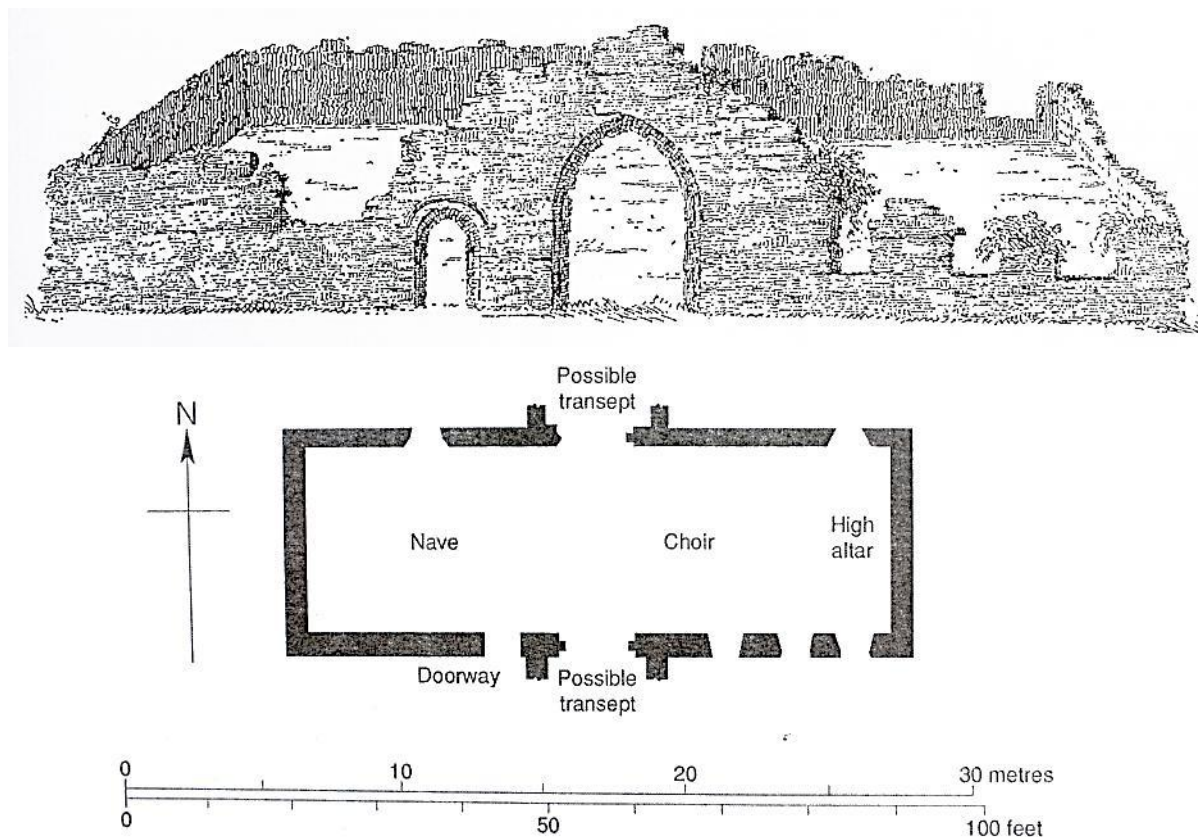


Fig. 3. The remains of the abbey church on Tresco recorded in 1756 by William Borlase

In 1114 all the religious houses on Scilly came under the control of Tavistock Abbey, together with all wrecks except whole ships (Johns et al., 2004, p.75)(Bowley, 1968, p.39). St Nicholas' Priory was established on the island of Tresco. The priory was granted rights of wreck, a valuable and much wrangled-over asset which would only have any value if wreck was a reasonably common event. There is surprisingly little known about the abbey on Tresco; no record of its dissolution survives, and it may have already ceased to function by the dissolution in 1539 (Bowley, 1968, p.39).

There is some evidence that the abbey was involved with foreign trade. The 13<sup>th</sup> century *Orkneyinga Saga* tells how an early 12<sup>th</sup> century Viking, Svein Aseifarson, robbed a merchant ship belonging to the Monks of Scilly (Orme, 2010). This example of a monastic house engaging in shipping is by no means unique – another documented example is provided by Beaulieu Abbey in Hampshire, who owned their own ship *La Stelle* in 1269 (Ransley et al., 2011, p.247)

The abbey may well have had links with foreign trade and further background research may yield useful information.

## The Pottery

The presence of medieval pottery in Tresco Channel has been known for some time. In 2001 Mac Mace, a mooring contractor in Scilly, informed one of the authors (Kevin Camidge) that green-glazed pottery was often found in Tresco Channel and was mostly French in origin. A dive at the time only revealed small, isolated fragments of green glazed pottery. The Archaeological Diving Unit (ADU) investigated the site in 2002 but they did not take the matter any further. The pottery is also mentioned in the Rapid Coastal Zone Assessment for the Isles of Scilly (Johns et al., 2004, p.123).

A significant quantity of French medieval pottery (mainly Saintonge) in material recovered from excavations undertaken as part of the electrification of Scilly is of interest, as this type of pottery is often seen as high status and the inhabitants of Scilly would seem unlikely owners of high status pottery (Ratcliffe, 1991). Saintonge is a small region on the French Atlantic seaboard, from whence pottery was widely exported in the medieval period, although this type is relatively rare on the Cornish mainland. This possibly betokens direct maritime trade between Scilly and France rather than transshipment via Cornwall and is an important part of the maritime heritage of Scilly. Pottery is one of the few trade items which survive well in archaeological contexts, and it is probable that it arrived as part of other, more perishable cargos. For instance in the mediaeval period wine is an important trade item, but other items such as pottery often accompanied it. (Ransley et al., 2011, p.273). Only small quantities of wine were produced in England and wine was imported, principally from Bordeaux. It was a high status commodity mainly consumed by the church and nobility. The measure of a ship's capacity was in fact derived from the number of standard Bordeaux wine tuns (c.252 gallons) which a ship could carry (Ransley et al., 2011).

Further evidence of trade links with France is exhibited by the presence of Caen Limestone reported in the fabric of the abbey church on Tresco and in the buildings on St Helens (Ratcliffe, 1991, p.93)

## Previous Work

More recently pottery has been recovered in considerable quantities (53 pieces in 2011) by David McBride, a local dive charter boat skipper. This has been recovered from a relatively small area (c. 15 m diameter circle) and appears to have been pulled from the seabed sediments by the action of a mooring chain. Very recently (June 2011), a concentration of animal bones has been found about 20m from the concentration of pottery, and eight jaw bones, probably porcine, have been recovered.



*Fig 4. Some of the pottery collected by Dave McBride in 2011 (scale 10cm) – photo Dave McBride*

John Allan has seen some of the pottery recovered by Dave McBride and reports that much of it is French (mainly Saintonge) dated to c.1300AD (John Allan pers.com.)



*Fig 5  
One of the jaw bones recovered by  
Dave McBride in 2011  
Photo Dave McBride*

## Project Objectives

The primary objective is to search the seabed in the area around the recent pottery recovered by Dave McBride to determine its extent and distribution. By mapping the location of each piece of pottery it should be possible to determine whether the pottery scatter has a focus or is randomly distributed. The pottery will be recovered so that the date range and origin can be determined.

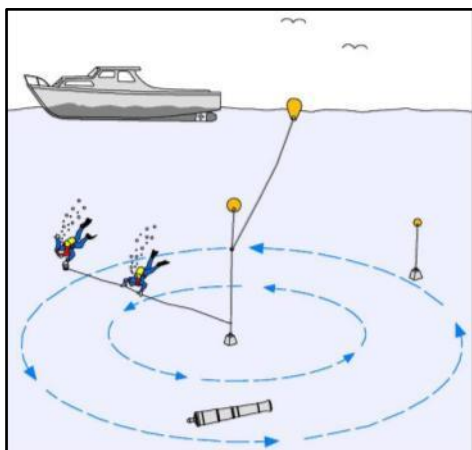
Any anchorage will accumulate detritus jettisoned from the vessels at anchor so a multi-period scatter of material can usually be expected. However, if there is a concentration of material from a single period or a small and well-defined location then an 'event', such as a wrecking, could be indicated. The concentration of Saintonge pottery recovered by Dave McBride and the significant quantities recovered from the electricity cable trenches in the 1980's may be indicative of either a wreck event or – perhaps - regular visits to Scilly by vessels trading with France.

Given the fourteenth-century date assigned to the pottery recovered by Dave McBride, any associated wreck material would be of great importance to our understanding of maritime Scilly, and any surviving hull structure would be of national importance given the scarcity of wrecks of this period in the UK.

# Methods

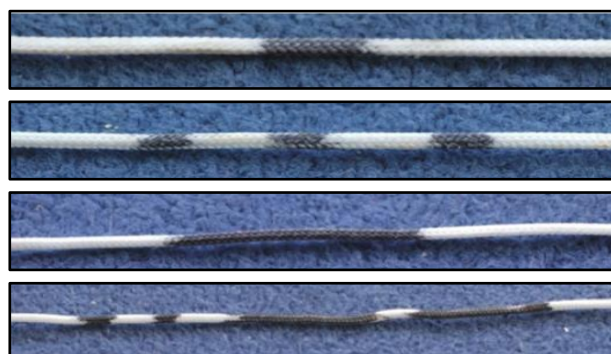
## The Searches

The site is overlaid by a line of yacht mooring buoys administered by the Tresco Estate. This is the reason the survey was undertaken in October when the moorings would be free of visiting yachts. The search started at the location discovered by Dave McBride and worked outwards until no more green-glazed pottery was found. Each search was centred on a shot line (or mooring buoy), the position of which was fixed using positions from a GPS receiver.



*Fig 6*  
*Diagram illustrating the circular search*  
*method used*

Standard diver's surface marker buoy (SMB) reels were used as distance lines. These were marked at 1m intervals, as shown in fig. 7 below. The distance line was attached to the shot line 1m above the seabed, and a circular search was conducted by two divers. The divers were positioned along the distance line such that the innermost diver could clearly see the shot and the outermost diver. The spacing between divers varied depending on the visibility, but was usually two to three metres. Once a complete circle had been searched, the divers extended the distance line and continued with the next circle. A maximum search radius of 25m was used.

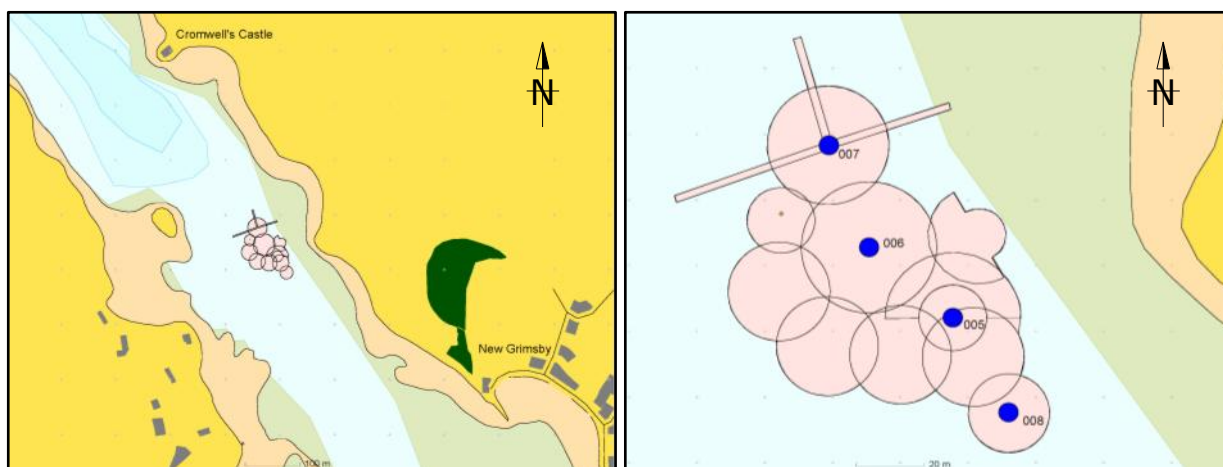


*Fig 7. The SMB reel and markings (from the top down) 1m, 3m, 5m and 12m*



When an artefact was located, the position was recorded by noting the distance to the shot (using the marked distance line) and the back bearing to the shot (using a diver's magnetic compass). This allowed the positions to be plotted using Site Recorder's radial positioning tool. This method of searching for and plotting artefacts was developed on previous CISMAS projects; a detailed description of the method is outlined in (Camidge et al., 2005) (Camidge & Randall, 2009)

Subsequent circular searches were carefully positioned to slightly overlap adjacent circles so that a complete coverage of the search area was obtained (fig 8).



*Fig 8 Left shows the position of the search areas and right the layout of the circular searches. The yacht mooring buoys are shown as blue circles.*

In total eleven circular and three jack-stay searches were made, each search being given a unique number and plotted in Site Recorder. The total area searched was approximately 6000m<sup>2</sup>.



*Fig. 9 .Divers conducting a circular search. Photos Sharon Austin*

## Survey Methodology

Primary positioning was done using a Garmin 76C WAAS-enabled handheld GPS receiver with an estimated precision of 4m (95%). All positions were given on the WGS84 datum with grid positions on UTM Zone 29.

Positioning of the circular searches was planned around the estimated positions for the mooring buoys and the area of seabed scoured by the mooring chains. The initial searches were done using the mooring blocks as the centre point while later searches were done using a shot line deployed from the surface at a pre-defined location.

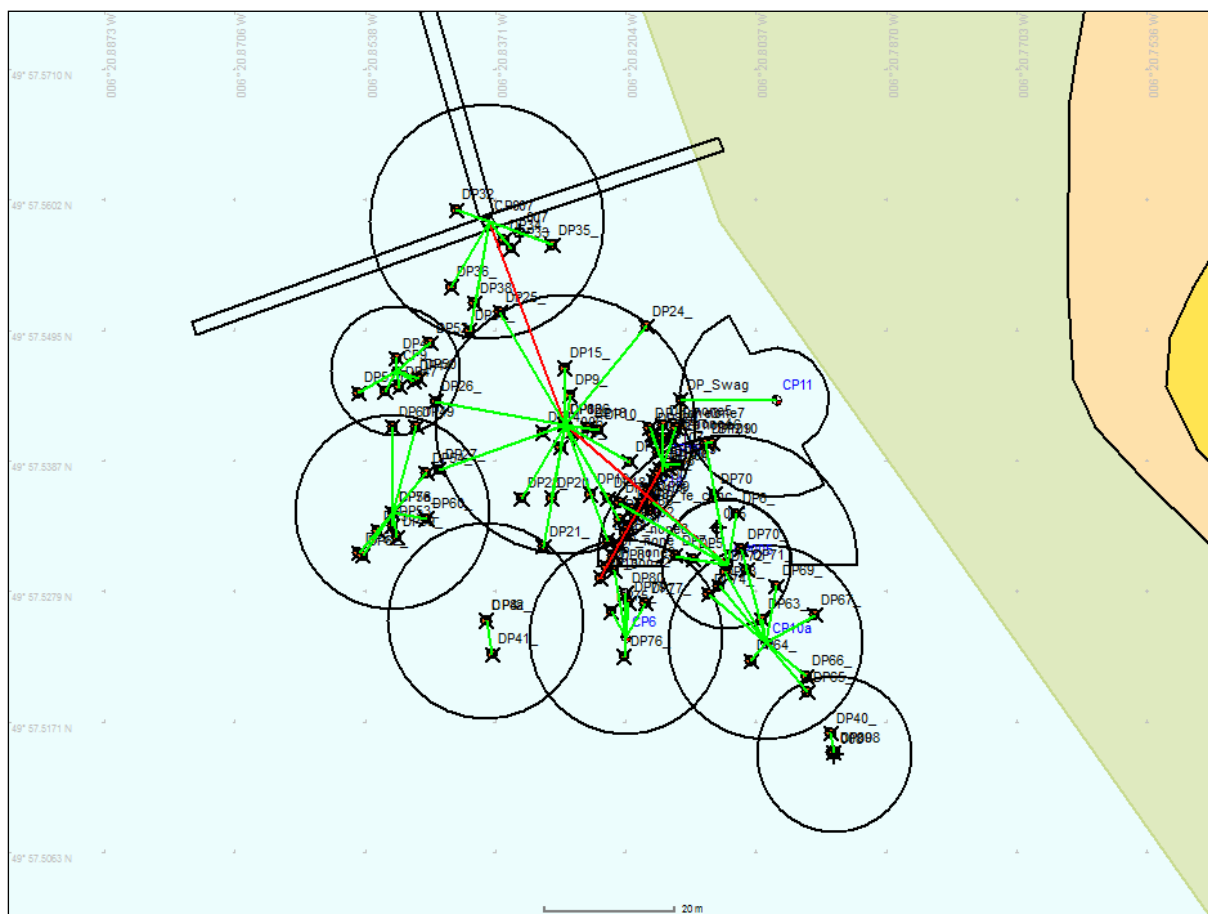


Fig 10

Artefacts were positioned using radial measurements back to a central shot line. The precision of a hand held magnetic compass is in the order of 5° which equates to a position uncertainty of 1.8m at 20m. The estimated precision of absolute position for any artefact is better than 6m, but in tests the results were better as the same object could be positioned from two independent searches to within 2m.



## Finds Handling

All finds were placed into pre-numbered minigrip bags on the seabed. Finds positioning was achieved by taking a distance and bearing to the centre of the circular search (mooring buoy or shot line). The centre of the search was established using a GPS receiver.

### Pottery

The pottery was recovered to the surface. It was then photographed using a digital SLR camera (Nikon D70 with 60mm micro Nikkor lens). The pottery was desalinated in fresh running water for approximately four weeks until readings of the dissolved solids in the water showed no change over the fresh tap water. The pottery was then marked and bagged. In total, 243 sherds of pottery were recovered.

### Bone

The bone was recovered at the same time and in the same way as the pottery. At the surface the bone was photographed (separately to the pottery). The bone was reburied on site at the end of the project in a small hole c. 0.45m deep at position 690293.267E 5537442.734N. A total of 170 pieces of bone were recorded.

A rough species identification will be made from the bone photographs and included in the final project report.

## Results

### *Treasure Found (a bag of loot)*

During one of the searches (TC11) a large sports bag was located on the seabed at 690288E 5537449N (UTM WGS84). The bag contained a number of bottles of alcohol, about £250 in cash and a charity collection box. This was handed over to the local police, who suspect that the money had been stolen from Bryher Church earlier in the summer. Richard Larn was a guest on the dive boat that day and subsequently informed the local press of the find. This resulted in several amusing stories in the national and local press – including the headline “*Loot-hunting divers stumble across real stolen treasure*” in the Western Morning News. As is often the case, archaeologists may be somewhat dismayed at the spin the press put on stories of their discoveries. *Loot-hunting* is perhaps a little pejorative, but *stumble across* is downright insulting when painstaking systematic searching was the means of discovery.



*Fig 11*

*The pictures which appeared in the Western Morning News and The Cornishman.*

*Above Lindsey Thomas with some of the alcohol; note Cromwell's Castle in the background.*

*BelowLeft Richard Larn poses with the charity box while the finder, Peter Holt, looks on in the background*

*Photos Dave McBride*

*Below Right PC Matt Collier with the bag of loot*

*Photo Peter Holt*



A map of the study area showing sampling locations and 500m buffers. The map includes a coordinate grid with latitude (49° 57.5057 N to 49° 57.5704 N) and longitude (006° 20.8202 W to 006° 20.8536 W). A scale bar indicates 0m to 30m. Sampling locations are marked with green squares and labeled with 'Bag' numbers (e.g., Bag 11a, Bag 11b, Bag 11c, Bag 11d, Bag 11e, Bag 11f, Bag 11g, Bag 11h, Bag 11i, Bag 11j, Bag 11k, Bag 11l, Bag 11m, Bag 11n, Bag 11o, Bag 11p, Bag 11q, Bag 11r, Bag 11s, Bag 11t, Bag 11u, Bag 11v, Bag 11w, Bag 11x, Bag 11y, Bag 11z, Bag 12a, Bag 12b, Bag 12c, Bag 12d, Bag 12e, Bag 12f, Bag 12g, Bag 12h, Bag 12i, Bag 12j, Bag 12k, Bag 12l, Bag 12m, Bag 12n, Bag 12o, Bag 12p, Bag 12q, Bag 12r, Bag 12s, Bag 12t, Bag 12u, Bag 12v, Bag 12w, Bag 12x, Bag 12y, Bag 12z, Bag 13a, Bag 13b, Bag 13c, Bag 13d, Bag 13e, Bag 13f, Bag 13g, Bag 13h, Bag 13i, Bag 13j, Bag 13k, Bag 13l, Bag 13m, Bag 13n, Bag 13o, Bag 13p, Bag 13q, Bag 13r, Bag 13s, Bag 13t, Bag 13u, Bag 13v, Bag 13w, Bag 13x, Bag 13y, Bag 13z, Bag 14a, Bag 14b, Bag 14c, Bag 14d, Bag 14e, Bag 14f, Bag 14g, Bag 14h, Bag 14i, Bag 14j, Bag 14k, Bag 14l, Bag 14m, Bag 14n, Bag 14o, Bag 14p, Bag 14q, Bag 14r, Bag 14s, Bag 14t, Bag 14u, Bag 14v, Bag 14w, Bag 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36g, Bag 36h, Bag 36i, Bag 36

*Fig 12  
Distribution of the  
pottery. The mooring  
buoys are shown in blue*

The site is located within a line of mooring buoys which are evenly spaced at 33m intervals . The four mooring buoys shown above were positioned using a GPS receiver – their positions are as follows:

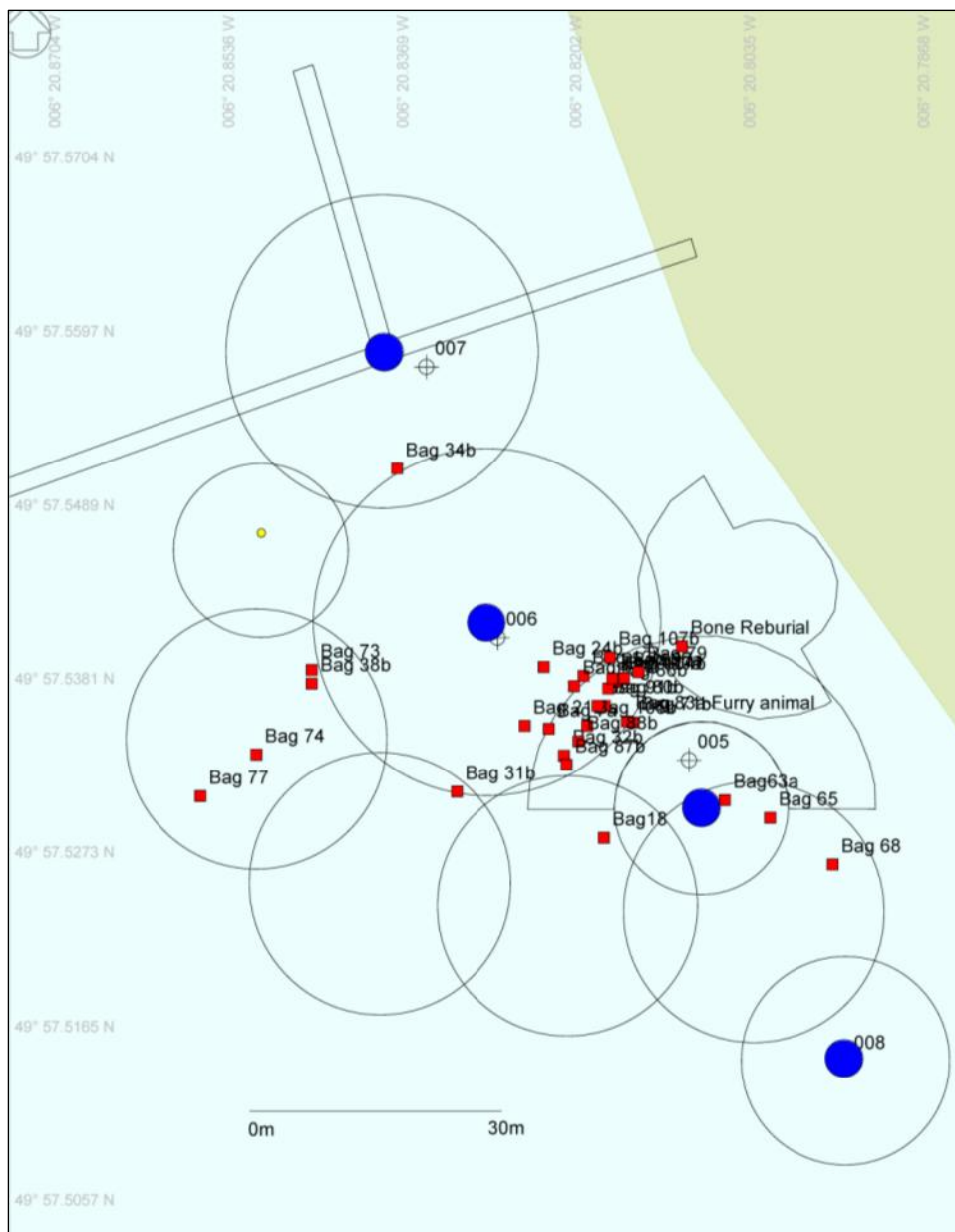
No	Position UTM (WGS84)
005	690295.484E 5537424.112N
006	690270.771E 5537445.489N
007	690258.909E 5537476.620N
008	690311.926E 5537395.295N

The moorings each consist of a stone mooring block c. 0.8m x 0.8m x 0.5m deep, partly submerged into the seabed sediment. A length of heavy chain approximately 3m long is attached to the mooring block, to which is fixed a length of rope tied to a mooring buoy at the surface. The mooring block is surrounded on the seabed by a shallow depression caused by the action of the heavy mooring chain being dragged around the block by the action of weather and boats on the mooring buoy. It is probably this scouring of the seabed by the mooring chain which has been responsible for exposing the pottery and bone from the seabed sediments. Four of the moorings are shown on the distribution plans (figs 12 & 13) as 005, 006, 007 and 008.

The pottery recovered by David McBride was all recovered from around two of the mooring buoys (shown as 005 and 006 on figs 12 & 13). The precise location of recovery was not recorded but Mr McBride asserts that it all came from the area immediately around the mooring blocks.

The diver searches undertaken in this project located and recovered 243 sherds of pottery (fig 12) and 170 pieces of bone (fig 13). The distribution plan for the pottery demonstrates a concentration around the mooring blocks 005 and 006, the density of pottery becoming sparser the further from the mooring blocks you go. Interestingly the bone distribution (fig 13) is even more focused, clustered in a tight area between the two mooring blocks. It seems clear that the distribution of the recovered pottery indicates a single source for the majority of the pottery rather than a general scatter of debris in an anchorage.

We are still awaiting the results of the pottery analysis being undertaken by John Allan. This will be published in the project report – which will be produced once the pot report is available. In the meantime it is worth looking at the results of the preliminary pot viewing undertaken by John Allan to get an idea of the range of dates and types of pottery recovered (fig 14).



## The Pottery

Preliminary pot viewing JA Exeter 18.III.2012			
Context	Sherds	Description	Date
+	4	Saintonge	1250-1350
	1	English	
1	3	Saintonge	1250-1350
	2	?	
2	11	Saintonge	1250-1350 L12-13 <sup>th</sup> C Med
	2	Ham Green, Bristol	
	3	English	
5	8	Saintonge	1250-1350
6	2	Saintonge	1250-1350 Med
	1	Greyware English	
7	1	Greyware English?	Med
8	1	Glass	19 <sup>th</sup> C
	13	Saintonge inc bridge spout	1250-1350
	1	? Saintonge	1250-1350
	2	Greyware English	1250-1350
	1	English	1250-1350
	7	French porcelain	20 <sup>th</sup> C
9	1	English red	Med
10	3	Saintonge inc graffiti base	1250-1350
11	4	Saintonge	1250-1350 Med 20 <sup>th</sup> C
	4	English	
	1	Glass	
12	4	Saintonge	1250-1350
13	3	Saintonge	1250-1350
14	3	Saintonge	1250-1350
15	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
16	1	Saintonge rim	1250-1350
17	3	Saintonge	1250-1350
18	2	Saintonge	1250-1350
20	1	Ham Green, Bristol	L12-13 <sup>th</sup> C
21	1	Normandy buff rim	12-13 <sup>th</sup> C
22	1	Creamware	E19th C
24	4	Saintonge	1250-1350
25	5	Saintonge	1250-1350 L12-13 <sup>th</sup> C
	1	Ham Green, Bristol	
	3	?	
26	1	Bristol	L12-M13th C 13 <sup>th</sup> C 1250-1350 12-14 <sup>th</sup> C
	1	Severn Valley	
	3	Saintonge	
	1	SW English	
27	5	Saintonge	1250-1350
	2	French? Greyware	
	1	?	
28	1	English	Med

Fig 14  
Table of preliminary  
pot identification.

Preliminary pot viewing JA Exeter 18.III.2012			
Context	Sherds	Description	Date
29	3	Saintonge	1250-1350
	1	Ham Green, Bristol	L12-13 <sup>th</sup> C
	1	English coarse flint tempered	Med
	1	English?	Med
30	1	?	
31	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
32	3	Saintonge inc horn	1250-1350
	2	?	
33	2	Saintonge	1250-1350
34	1	Bristol	13-E14th C
	1	Southampton Redware	Med
35	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
36	1	Bristol / Severn	L13-14C
37	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
39	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
40	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
51	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
52	1	English coarse H made	12-13 <sup>th</sup> C
54	6	Saintonge	1250-1350
	1	Porcelain	19 <sup>th</sup> C
	1	Ham Green, Bristol	L12-13 <sup>th</sup> C
	3	English hand made	Med
55	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
56	2	Saintonge	1250-1350
57	1	Redware	Med
58	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
	1	Bristol	Med
	1	Ham Green, Bristol	L12-13 <sup>th</sup> C
59	1	Greyware English	Med
60	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
61	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
62	1	Saintonge WT handle	1250-1350
	1	N France	L12-M13th C
	1	English	Med
63	1	Ham Green, Bristol?	L12-13 <sup>th</sup> C
64	1	Saintonge spout	1250-1350
66	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
	1	SW Englishland	Med
69	1	Saintonge handle	1250-1350
	1	English handle	
	1	English jug	
70	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
71	2	Saintonge	1250-1350
	1	Greyware English	Med
72	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
76	1	English Jackfield	L17-18 <sup>th</sup> C
78	4	Saintonge	1250-1350

*Fig 14*  
Table of preliminary  
pot identification.



Preliminary pot viewing JA Exeter 18.III.2012			
Context	Sherds	Description	Date
	1	N France	L13-E14th C
79	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
80	4	Saintonge inc base graffiti	1250-1350
82	2	English red	Med
85	2	Saintonge	1250-1350
	1	SW English	Med
86	2	Saintonge	1250-1350
	1	English jug	Med
87	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
88	2	Saintonge	1250-1350
	2	English	Med
89	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
90	2	Saintonge	1250-1350
	1	Greyware English?	Med
95	8	Saintonge	1250-1350
	1	Limestone tempered greyware	1250-1350
98	1	N France Green G	L12-M13th C
99	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
101	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
102	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
	1	English coarse	Med
103	1	SW English Mic redware	Med
	1	French or Cornish	
104	1	English Jug	13 <sup>th</sup> C
106	1	English red	Med
107	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
	1	English Greyware	
109	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
	1	Greyware English?	Med
202	1	Saintonge	1250-1350
	4	Coarse wares	Med
210	2	Saintonge	1250-1350
211	2	Saintonge	1250-1350
212	1	Tile	Med

Fig 14  
Table of preliminary  
pot identification.

Total sherds = 243  
Saintonge = 155  
Other French = 14  
Total French = 169  
Ham Green, Bristol = 8  
Bristol = 3  
SW English = 4  
Other English = 29  
Total English = 44  
Other = 30

## Conclusion

The distribution of the pottery and bone on the site suggests that these artefacts originate from a fairly well defined site rather than from a scatter of material originating from an anchorage. Furthermore 70% of the pottery found was French in origin, the majority of which (64% of the total) was from the Saintonge region. All but a tiny percentage of the pottery has been preliminarily dated to the early part of the fourteenth century.

While we must obviously wait for the full pottery report before drawing final conclusions, the data so far suggests that we may be dealing with an early fourteenth century wreck in Tresco Channel. Given the scarcity of English wreck of this period the site is certainly worthy of further investigation.

The most obvious course of action would be to excavate the small areas being damaged by the mooring chains around buoys 005 and 006 – a radius of 3m around each of the two buoys.

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