

Secrets of UK's last sea salt producer to be unveiled

By New Forest National Park Authority

Dated: Jul 14, 2010

Two historic buildings which are the only unaltered remains of a long-lost industry in the whole of Britain are to have their secrets revealed by archaeologists at the New Forest National Park.

The area around the country's last two remaining sea salt boiling houses at Lymington will be excavated with the help of volunteers to celebrate the Festival of British Archaeology which starts next week (Monday, July 19).

Salt was a vital trade and the buildings, which ceased production in 1865, were the last sea salt producers in the country to close.

Now the New Forest National Park Authority is organising an archaeological excavation at the site beside the Lymington-Pennington marshes to attempt to establish the extent of a typical salt working site and how far back the history of the industry might extend, before the Grade II listed buildings are given a new lease of life.

The New Forest National Park Authority's Archaeologist Frank Green said the excavation will last for two weeks starting on July 19 and people will be able to view the excavations as part of guided tours.

He said: 'Salt was often said to be worth its weight in gold and has played a vital role in nearly every civilisation since the beginning of time. It has been used to preserve and improve the taste of food, for tanning hides to make leather and treating wounds. It wouldn't be over-emphasising it to say that you could judge how sophisticated a society was by the availability of salt.'

'The salt industry once dominated the New Forest coast and has shaped the natural and economic landscape which residents, visitors and nature lovers know today.'

The salt was made by drawing sea water into clay-lined trenches where some of the water evaporated. The brine, which was now concentrated, containing more salt, was then pumped by windmills to tanks outside the boiling houses and then into large copper or iron boiling pans which were fired by coal brought in from the Newcastle area by barge to the boiling houses. As the water was evaporated the salt crystals could be skimmed off to be dried and stored before being taken out again by barge to ships for transportation.

Evidence shows that at the industry's peak in around 1730 there were 163 pans in the Lymington area. Between 1724 and 1766 Lymington exported 4,612 tons of salt in 64 ships - 12 cargoes were destined for Newfoundland, 33 to America and others to Norway, Ireland and the Channel Islands.

Although seasonal, it could be a hugely lucrative business when the weather was dry and warm. Records show that the owner of some of the Lymington salt houses, Mr Charles St Barbe, made a profit of £25,000 – equivalent to £2.2 million today – and that was after paying heavy salt taxes.

By the middle of the 19th century the coastal salt production industry died out because of the cost of fuel, because it could only be produced in the summer and because cheaper rock salt became available from Cheshire.

Frank said: 'Salt production is one of the oldest industries and has played an important role in human

development, yet this has not been reflected in the level of archaeological attention it has received. With this excavation, we might find earlier evidence of salt working on the site from at least the Iron Age, if not the Bronze Age.

‘What we do know from the 1840 tithe map for Lymington is that one of the buildings was much larger and longer than we see today.

‘Also, the character of the site is important for understanding many other important issues such as the coastal processes of the area and how the Solent was formed. It’s important we find out as much as we can about these before they are lost to climate change.’

The old buildings have planning permission for conversion into an office and storage, once the excavation is finished – ensuring they survive for future generations.

The excavation is part of the New Forest National Park Authority’s coastal heritage project which was set up to fully record the archaeology of the coastal area and to share this with as many people as possible.

To date over 100 volunteers have signed up to help with fieldwork and taking part in dives to discover the underwater archaeology of the Solent. Volunteers will be undertaking a large amount of the excavation, under the guidance of Wessex Archaeology. The project is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and English Heritage with support from Hampshire County Council, ExxonMobil and The Crown Estate.

Tours are available on:

Wednesday 21 July – Saturday 24 July: meeting at 11am

Sunday 25 July: meeting at 2pm

Monday 26 July – Wednesday 28 July: meeting at 11am and 5.30pm

Booking essential. Secure your place on a tour by contacting James Brown on 01590 646695 or email archaeology@newforestnpa.gov.uk when the meeting point will be provided.

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Photo caption

The salt boiling houses at Lymington marshes where the New Forest National Park will excavate the surrounding area as part of the Festival of British Archaeology.

Notes to editors

The Festival of British Archaeology is an annual extravaganza of heritage events coordinated by the Council for British Archaeology.

Each year the Festival showcases the very best of British archaeology, by presenting hundreds of special events organised and held by museums, local societies, national and countryside parks, universities, and heritage organisations across the UK. The Festival presents everyone the opportunity to learn about their local heritage, to see archaeology in action, and to get involved.

Events ranging from excavation open days and behind-the-scenes tours to family fun days, hands-on activities, guided walks, talks and finds identification workshops take place all over the UK during this special fortnight.

For more information visit: www.archaeologyfestival.org.uk.

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The New Forest National Park lies mainly in south-west Hampshire; it is famous for its stunning landscapes, wildlife, coastline & picturesque villages. It is the eighth national park in England and the first in the south-east to be created for nearly 50yrs.

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