



Uncovering the Secrets of Burrow (Rat) Island in Portsmouth Harbour – Exercise Magwitch (<https://www.strongisland.co/2018/05/03/uncovering-secrets-burrow-rat-island-portsmouth-harbour-exercise-magwitch/>)

by PAUL GONELLA (<https://www.strongisland.co/author/paul/>) 3 MAY (<https://www.strongisland.co/2018/05/03/uncovering-secrets-burrow-rat-island-portsmouth-exercise-magwitch/>) CULTURE (<https://www.strongisland.co/category/culture/>) HARBOURS & THE SOLENT (<https://www.strongisland.co/category/culture/harbour/>) (<https://www.strongisland.co/category/features/tier-1/>) TIER 3 (<https://www.strongisland.co/category/features/tier-3/>) VINTAGE & HISTORICAL PORTSMOUTH (<https://www.strongisland.co/category/culture/vintage-portsmouth/>) 34845 VIEWS

ARCHAEOLOGISTS LOOK FOR TRUTH IN THE OLD MYTHS ABOUT ISLAND'S PAST

[Burrow Island](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burrow_Island) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burrow_Island) (often referred to as 'Rat Island') sits in Portsmouth Harbour forming the entrance to Forton Lake (creek) over in Gosport. The small tidal island is accessible by foot from Priddy's Yard (home of the [Explosion Museum of Naval Firepower](http://www.historicdockyard.co.uk/site-attractions/off-site-attractions/explosion-museum-of-naval-firepower?gclid=Cj0KCQjw8YXXBRDXARIsAMzsQuU1r28MeTTbs-rglAHobRkIpjx2dcM-lGwr9IQbMOPEgYC1DQiqBHMaaufKEALw_wcB) ([http://www.historicdockyard.co.uk/site-attractions/off-site-attractions/explosion-museum-of-naval-firepower?](http://www.historicdockyard.co.uk/site-attractions/off-site-attractions/explosion-museum-of-naval-firepower?gclid=Cj0KCQjw8YXXBRDXARIsAMzsQuU1r28MeTTbs-rglAHobRkIpjx2dcM-lGwr9IQbMOPEgYC1DQiqBHMaaufKEALw_wcB)gclid=Cj0KCQjw8YXXBRDXARIsAMzsQuU1r28MeTTbs-rglAHobRkIpjx2dcM-lGwr9IQbMOPEgYC1DQiqBHMaaufKEALw_wcB)) but is off limits to the public as it is MOD property. Last year archaeologists undertook *Exercise Magwitch*, an excavation of the island with operatives from Operation Nightingale and [Breaking Ground Heritage](http://www.breakinggroundheritage.org.uk/) (<http://www.breakinggroundheritage.org.uk/>). Their dig on a sunny four days in May last year was to find out just what (and who) lay beneath the island's surface.

” *The small tidal island is accessible by foot...but is off limits to the public as it is MOD property...*



Burrow 'Rat' Island out in Portsmouth Harbour.



Dig team working on the low tide shoreline of the island.



Searching for small finds with spoil from the pits.



Prison hulks were decommissioned or captured ships converted in the 1800s for floating prisons that were home to convicted prisoners and prisoners of war...

Prison Hulks and Charles Dickens

For over 200 years an urban myth has been shared on both sides of Portsmouth Harbour .. suggestions that this small island was the site of buried prisoners who had perished on the numerous prison hulks that lined the west side of Portsmouth Harbour. [Prison hulks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_British_prison_hulks) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_British_prison_hulks) were decommissioned or captured ships converted in the 1800s for floating prisons that were home to convicted prisoners and prisoners of war (principally French). Nearly two dozen hulks were moored up between 1814 in the harbour and were home to on average 7000 individuals at any one time.

Conditions on board these dilapidated hulks were terrible. The ships themselves would have had their masts, rigging and rudders removed and the prisoners were essentially trapped out in the fast flowing tidal harbour waters. Portsmouth's own [Charles Dickens](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/dickens_charles.shtml) (http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/dickens_charles.shtml) would have known these hulks in Portsmouth Harbour and they would have probably been a direct inspiration for the character Abel Magwitch, the escaped convict in the literary classic *Great Expectations*.



[Prison Hulks in Portsmouth Harbour by Ambrose-Louis Garneray](http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/13402.html#8ZAU9tf5JkcXafyh.99)

(http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/13402.html#8ZAU9tf5JkcXafyh.99), circa 1806-14. © National Maritime Museum Collect

Origins of Exercise Magwitch

In early 2014 the South Coast suffered from a number of heavy storms and strong tides, resulting in the shoreline of Burrow Island being heavily eroded. With sand and shingle washed away revealing several human remains, the Police were quickly alerted by members of the public. The [Defence Infrastructure Organisation](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/defence-infrastructure-organisation) (https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/defence-infrastructure-organisation) of the Ministry of Defence was quickly mobilised and carried out emergency recovery work on the site. The team, including members from Operation Nightingale, began excavation work in February 2014 after receiving permission from the Ministry of Justice.

After this 2014 dig a more detailed excavation was planned that would remove the skeletons identified in 2014 and look to further understand the remains and the historical context of their burial site. A team of veterans from Operation Nightingale and Breaking Ground Heritage were brought together with experts and a support team for the 4-day dig that happen in May 2017.

” With sand and shingle washed away revealing several human remains, the Police were quickly alerted...



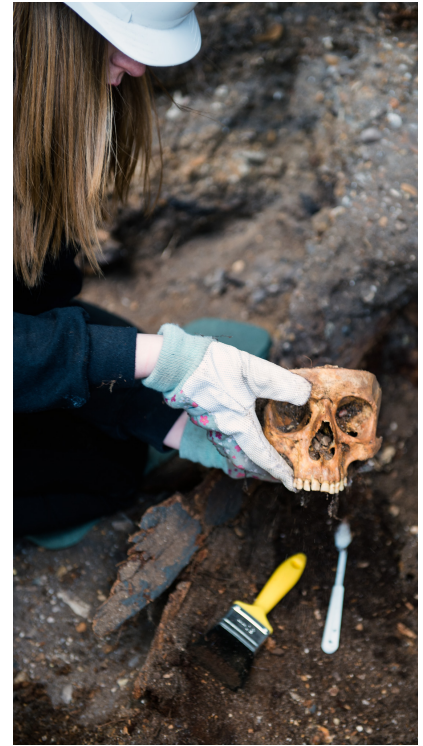
Exposed remains.



Burial pit on Burrow Island.



Measuring a skeleton in one of the burial pits.



Carefully recovering a skull.

” *...initiative developed to use archaeology as a means of aiding the recovery of service personnel injured in recent conflict...*

Operation Nightingale

[Operation Nightingale](https://www.opnightingaleheritage.com/) (https://www.opnightingaleheritage.com/) is a military initiative developed to use archaeology as a means of aiding the recovery of service personnel injured in recent conflict, particularly in Afghanistan.

There is a close correlation between the skills required by the modern soldier and those of a professional archaeologist. These skills include surveying, geophysics (for ordnance recovery revealing cultural heritage sites), scrutiny of the ground (for improvised explosive devices artefacts), site and team management, mapping, navigation and the physical ability to carry out hard manual work in often-inclement weather conditions.

Members of Operation Nightingale were on the ground at the dig for Exercise Magwitch.



Dig team working on the burial pits around the edge of the island.



Recovering a bone from one of the skeletons.

” *In the end both digs carefully and respectfully recovered 12 sets of remains from the Island (4 recovered as part of Exercise Magwitch)...*

Exercise Magwitch

The dig on Burrow Island between the 2nd and 5th of May 2017 brought a large team from the UK down to Portsmouth Island. The group worked during the low tide hours and excavated carefully the human remains around the edges of small island's shore and included numerous archaeological finds.

Before the excavation the dig personnel undertook specialist training at the Cranfield Forensic Institute in how to carefully handle and identify the bones expected to be discovered on Burrow Island. The sessions also included training on how to identify from the skeleton bones basic information about the individual, such as sex and approximate age.

In the end both digs carefully and respectfully recovered 12 sets of remains from the Island (4 recovered as part of Exercise Magwitch), with the following scientific research to be worked on and published in due course. Early indications suggest that all of the remains belonged to young men of around 18-21 years of age.



Burial pits.



Recovered jaw bone.



Wood from the remains of a coffin.

Something Unexpected

One thing of particular interest was that the archaeologist discovered that one of the skeletons had a Craniotomy, which is most unusual. There are a number of possible explanations: (a) it could have been a post-mortem examination; (b) it could have been used as a medical training cadaver; (c) there is some anecdotal evidence that, around the Napoleonic period, prisoners that were convicted of murder had this procedure performed on them after death...! One of the skulls has been since been worked on for fascial reconstruction.

Looking forward to finding out more about this dig in this month's issue of [Current Archaeology Magazine](https://www.archaeology.co.uk) (<https://www.archaeology.co.uk>) and the future scientific published research.

A huge thank you to our friend [Harvey Mills](http://www.harveymills.com/) (<http://www.harveymills.com/>) for the heads up on this fascinating project. Harvey is an awesome local photographer and was the official photographer for Exercise Magwitch, all the images in this article were shot by Harvey.

One last thing: as mentioned before this is MOD property and out of bounds to members of the public. These digs were carefully organised with specific permissions and with highly skilled and experienced personnel, please don't go exploring yourself on Burrow Island.

Written by: Paul Gonella

Photography by: [Harvey Mills](http://www.harveymills.com/)
(<http://www.harveymills.com/>)



Walking back to shore from Burrow Island.



Working with 2014 skeletal remains.



Learning how to identify bones and reconstruct a skeleton



Careful handling of a skull.



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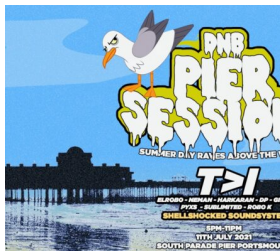
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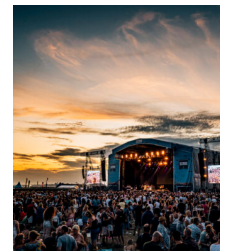
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(<https://www.strongisland.co/2021/03/25/wasps-treadgolds-brought-back-to-life-as-a-unique-cultural-space-in-the-city/>)



(<https://www.strongisland.co/2021/03/25/wasps-festival-2021-initial-lineup-announceme-feat-royal-blood-the-streets-richard-ash-madness-more/>)

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5 MAY

Fascinating! I walk past there every day, I had no idea, thank you!



JAMES MCCONNELL

16 AUGUST

This is nowhere near the full history of Rat Island. I lived at Felix Road in Gosport, the MoD know a lot more about on that island than they are letting on to. We used explore the island decades ago, I can tell you that there were a lot more than 12 skeletons/bodies buried out there. We used to go out there when Prddy's Hard Naval base was still operational along with Clarence Barracks being active Naval buildings at Weevil lane with the old chain draw footb where the Millennium Bridge is now, connecting the two . There were railway tracks that ran from Priddy's Hard Na munitions depot over the spit to Burrow (Rat) Island and the tracks disappeared into the bottom of the Island. The tracks ran off an back along Priddy's Hard, through Hardway than up past Fort Brockhurst, curled around by Fort Gi and terminated at Haslar. We were told as kids that there were many prisoners of war buried on & under the island found many human remains when out on the island dozens of times, as I'm sure so did many others, but the MoD k hell of a lot more about that island than what they are willing to admit to, the usual for a government body like the As for the footnotes stating that you CANNOT go there as it's "Out of bounds" to members of the public, well as I s used to go out there, camp all night, be fishing when the tide came in around it, daring each other, and sometimes : at once climbing the two submarine watch-out towers (I'm sure they will be gone now) I last climbed the one on the point of the island in the early 90's, (these were well rusted & completely unstable and very dangerous structures t went up above the treeline tops) I did climb it very shakely as a grown man while once again camped out over night my boys and their friends, fishing from the island AND the Naval base & Barracks were still active then, nobody EV bothered us. Sometimes we would try to take the dogs over, one or two of the dogs just wouldn't stay and would bol from the place, I don't know if they could smell the deaths in the ground, but the terriers wouldn't stay, they didn't but it didn't bother our Great Danes, they didn't spook easily, we would walk right around the Island collecting as n firewood as possible and often in plain sight of Naval Personnel in Clarence Barracks, nobody ever stopped us or approached us and that's from the late 60's onwards, the last time I was out there was about 1995. It was NO surpr

when I heard that skeletal remains had been found out there, it was a surprise to hear they were only claiming to have found TWELVE. The Navy know a lot more about this island as I've said, I mean when did they last use the submarine watch towers, WWII ? WWI ? Why did the MoD suddenly show an interest in that island again and WHY is there several mentions about it being "off limits to the public" all of a sudden, very strange!



JAMES MCCONNELL

25 AUGUST

Interestingly, it actually makes the mention 3 times that the island is MoD property and as such is off limits to members of the public, and yet strangely enough in the paragraph headed ; ORIGINS OF EXERCISE MAGWITCH, 2nd & 3rd line reads;- "With sand and shingle washed away revealing several human remains, the police were quickly alerted by members of the public", NOT members of the MoD, NOT members of the Ministry of Justice, NO! Members of the very people the article makes a point of mentioning THREE times 'are not allowed out there' THE PUBLIC. So, in all likelihood, weren't for members of the public who have been going out there for decades, these skeletal remains would more than likely have been dispersed by the ongoing tides and washed away without anyone realizing or even noticing. What is it that the MoD are so worried about that they are still actively distributing literal & verbal warnings for them to stay away from the island? Why? What WAR CRIMES evidence have they got buried under the island? Not that it ever comes to light in our corrupt judicial systems!

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