‘Command of the Oceans’ project is launched

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At the heart of the 'Command of the Oceans' project will be ‘the ship beneath the floor’ which focuses on the conservation, long-term preservation and interpretation of the archaeological remains of a highly significant warship with important associations with 18th and early 19th-century people and events.

The ship beneath the floor archaeological find is a unique assemblage of ship’s timbers found beneath the floor of the Wheelwrights’ Shop in 1995. Comprising c25% of the frame of a single a 2nd Rate ship of the line, the find was described by archaeologists at the time as being:

“...the single most important warship discovery in Northern Europe since that of the Mary Rose.”

Since then much detailed work, research and analysis has been undertaken to successfully identify the ship – the outcome of which further confirms the archaeologist’s initial assessment of significance. The ship is the NAMUR, launched in 1756 and had an active service spanning 47 years – she was engaged in nine fleet actions, seven of which were instrumental in enabling the Royal Navy to secure and maintain worldwide command of the oceans in the second half of the 18th century – events that were to lay the foundation for the later development of the British Empire and Britain’s global position today.

Command of the Oceans is a new £8.5m project, that has recently secured initial Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) support, at The Historic Dockyard Chatham which will tell the story of Chatham Dockyard and its Defences’ role in supporting British naval supremacy at sea - during the heyday of the age of sail - through the design and construction of the Royal Navy’s finest ships of the line. The ‘ship beneath the floor’, embodies both the advances in ship design developed by Chatham people and the extraordinary longevity of Chatham-built warships that led to their outstanding success in battle over a long period of time. Using The Historic Dockyard’s many surviving monuments and archaeology as the script, Command of the Oceans will create the arrival, orientation and interpretation of the place that nurtured the Navy of the Age of Sail.

Stuart McLeod, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund South East, said: “The Historic Dockyard Chatham is an extraordinary site that charts Britain’s impressive naval history throughout the ages and gives a special insight into Britain’s maritime heritage. The Heritage Lottery Fund is delighted to be giving our initial support for the ‘Command of the Oceans’ project which will dramatically improve the visitor experience at Chatham and reveal ‘the ship beneath the floor’ – exploring this important archaeological find for the first time. We are looking forward to seeing these exciting and innovative plans develop over the next few months.”

The project will become the gateway to Chatham’s world class naval and military heritage, providing a sense of arrival, orientation, navigation to dispersed sites and interpretation. It will reconnect some of Chatham’s earliest features including the North and South Mast Ponds constructed in 1696 and 1702, the adjacent ‘Mast Houses and Mould Loft’, and ‘Wheelwright Shop’. This redevelopment work will provide visitors with a four and a half hectare, free to enter heritage gateway and improved entrance to the Dockyard at the North end of the site, and in doing so make the most of the important mast making monuments. This new space will encourage everyone to explore the history of the dockyard and its geographically distributed defences and also form the starting point for a series of discovery trails.

The Heritage Lottery Fund has given its initial support including a development grant of £116,300 to assist The Historic Dockyard Chatham in progressing its plans to seek approval for the full £4.5m HLF grant at the second round.

Further information

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