

Dover yields fishy history

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THE good news is that Dover is awash with cod, herring, ray and sole. The bad news is that the fish date from the 12th century.

A medieval fish processing centre, where archaeologists believe the same families worked for generations in cramped sheds, has been found in the heart of Dover. The site, which reveals a previously unknown aspect of life in Britain's most important medieval port, is due to be concreted over next week for a BP filling station.

The wealth of archaeological evidence came as a complete surprise to the team from Canterbury Archaeological Trust, which is carrying out developer-funded rescue archaeology before building starts.

The site is contemporary with Dover castle.

"Here, within eyesight of one another, you have the very best, and the very worst of medieval building techniques," excavation director Keith Parfitt said.

His team has discovered the remains of small, flimsily-built sheds, reconstructed on the same foundations between the 12th and 13th centuries.

Although some had hearths, and one was apparently burned down by its oven, they do not appear to have been homes. The enormous concentrations of fish bones and shells must mean that this was an industrial site, a commercial fish-processing area, on what was then the waterfront at the edge of the old Roman port.

The buildings were re-floored with chalk from the cliffs stamped down and covered by shingle from the beach. Mr Parfitt says working conditions would have been vile, with workers standing up to their knees in rotting fishguts.

The archaeologists are now racing against time to extract as much information as possible before they leave on Sunday.