

City official on verge of unlocking secret to whereabouts of Ithaca - the home of mythical Greek hero Odysseus

Referee's epic quest to solve ancient riddle

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EASTER ROAD erupted as the man in black reached into his pocket to deliver his red card, sending Hearts' Edgar Jankauskas to the dressing room and paving the way for a famous Hibs victory.

For SPL veteran referee John Underhill it was another fiery weekend at the centre of the football action, a chance to enjoy his sporting hobby in the red hot cauldron of an ill-tempered Edinburgh derby.



MARCHING ORDERS: John sends off Edgar Jankauskas

It was October 2005, and it couldn't have been further removed from the gentle sound of waves lapping against the unspoiled shore of a baked Ionian peninsula.

Yet the referee's role in the game at Easter Road was nothing compared to the dramatic

impact he is about to have on this sleepy Greek outcrop.

And few ... if indeed any ... of those derby match football fans could possibly imagine that the man brandishing the red card at the Hearts favourite might really be some kind of modern day Indiana Jones, hunting for clues to ancient civilisation, unravelling centuries' old riddles.

Today John is edging to within touching distance of solving a perplexing Greek mystery that has confounded scholars and sent archaeologists on a wild goose chase for two millennia. If the theory he is working on proves to be correct, the whistler and his two colleagues will be feted the world over for having made the greatest classical find since the discovery of the site of Troy 130 years ago.

And Paliki, that sleepy peninsula jutting westwards from Cephalonia ... the island made famous by Captain Correlli's Mandolin ... could suddenly find itself at the heart of a real life major Greek saga.

Today John is in his office at Edinburgh University's School of Geoscience, looking back on a refereeing career that has placed him at the top of the Scottish game.

"I've been lucky," he says. "I've got two hobbies, football and geology, that I've been able to enjoy at a high level. And they complement each other perfectly."

Now 46, he is looking towards ending his refereeing career in the next 12 months;



ITHACA OR BUST: Geologist John Underhill, who is also an SPL referee, hopes to prove Paliki was once the home of Greek general Odysseus. Picture: KATE CHANDLER

winding down from the world of whistle-blowing just as the spotlight turns towards his geological role as historical detective and his work analysing rock formations and land masses in a bid to track down a key site mentioned in one of the world's greatest literary epics ... Homer's *The Odyssey*.

Ithaca, wrote Homer, was the home of the hero of Troy, Odysseus, the Greek general who cunningly tricked the Trojans with a wooden horse. The poet described it specifically: "Ithaca itself lies low, furthest to the sea towards dusk; the rest, apart, face dawn and sun." But while other islands and

locations mentioned have been identified, mystery always surrounded the exact location of the island and the site of Odysseus' palatial home.

Yet within 18 months John, along with amateur historical sleuth Robert Bittlestone and Cambridge University professor of Greek and Latin, James Diggle, hope to unveil proof that Paliki is the real ancient Ithaca, using modern geological methods to show it was once an island.

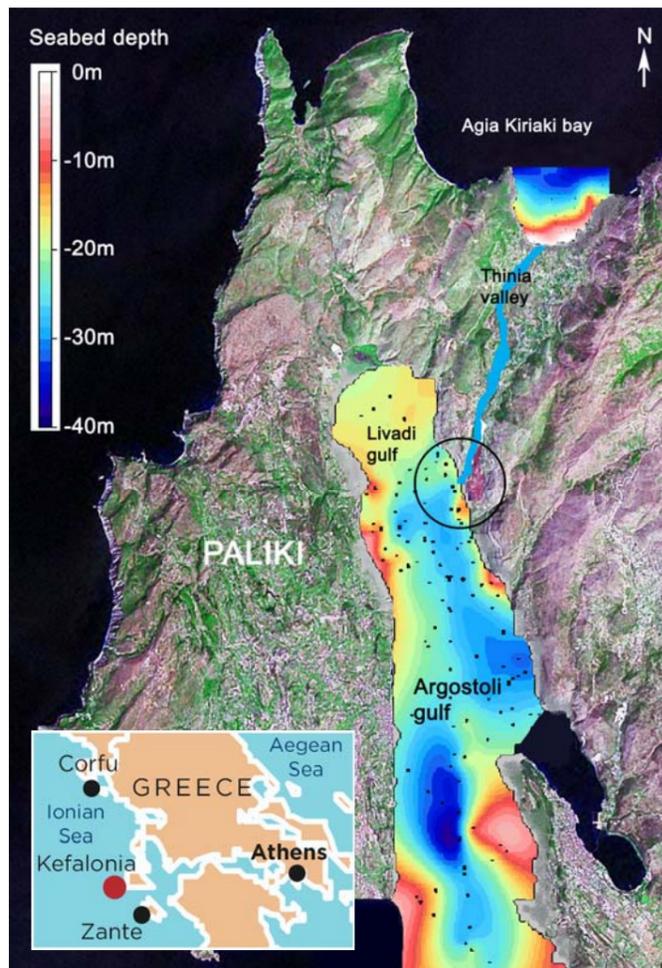
Just why the location of a place which may or may not have existed in 1200 BC is of such interest might well baffle some. But as John explains, finding Ithaca has been one of the biggest challenges for scholars and historians down the ages. "In terms of classical Greek scholarship and Western literature, Ithaca is the Holy Grail," he says.

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JOHN UNDERHILL

John's involvement in the search for Odysseus' homeland came about by the most modern of means.

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"I had worked on the geology of Cephalonia a while ago," he says. "The others had this theory and wanted to work on it. They typed Cephalonia and geology into Google and my name came up.

"James had re-translated ancient Greek text of *The Odyssey* and looked specifically at geography references ... all because of what Robert had suggested as a possible

explanation for this 2000-year-old conundrum."

Their theory ... published last year in their book, *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca* ... argues that the Paliki peninsula was once an island separated from Cephalonia by a narrow strait of water. Using John's geological expertise, they have analysed the argument that major landslides and earthquakes had combined to seal the strait, linking what was once the separate island of Ithaca to the main island.

"The more I looked into it ... including drilling a borehole at the end of last year ... it became more possible," says John. "The results of that borehole in particular are very supportive that the western peninsula was once an island."

His geological survey of the area revealed the connecting strip of land is composed of loose rockfall and landslide material ... supporting the idea it was once a waterway filled in as the result of rockfalls triggered by an earthquake.

A further marine survey of the bays at each end found an offshore marine valley which lines up with where the ancient waterway would have run.

But the biggest boost to the theory emerged this week, when a major geoscience specialist company, Fugro, joined the search, bringing

For further information and details of the book, see:

www.odysseus-unbound.org

the latest geological technical equipment and massive resources to the hunt for Ithaca.

The Edinburgh link was strengthened when the company agreed to sponsor an Edinburgh University PhD student, Kirsten Hunter, to work full time on the project. Soon it's hoped industry-scale geophysical techniques will be brought to the site, enabling a "full body scan" of the six-kilometre long isthmus.

"The next 18 months are crucial", says Portsmouth-born John, who now lives in Newington with his wife, Rosemary, a teacher at Hope Cottage Nursery School, and his children Laura, 13 and Matthew, 11.

"This is a conundrum that has taxed people for 2000 years and now the technology is there to help solve it."

THE HERO RETURNS HOME

THE year is 1200 BC, the Trojans have been vanquished thanks to a heroic Greek general called Odysseus and his ingenious wooden horse plan.

Homer's first epic poem, *The Iliad*, has already set the scene ... now *The Odyssey* charts his return to his palace on the island of Ithaca and his battle to regain his crown and be reunited with his patient wife, Penelope.

But first he must negotiate Circe, a goddess who turns men into pigs and Calypso, who is so besotted that she offers him the gift of immortality if he will be her eternal lover.

Eventually, only a message from Zeus sets him free and returns him to his homeland. Written sometime between 800 to 600 BC by the blind poet, *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* form two of the world's oldest surviving texts.

While some locations in each book have stood the test of time, others, such as Ithaca, Odysseus' homeland, have remained a mystery.