



Text and photos by Lawson Wood

One of the best shipwrecks off the west coast of Scotland, the SS *Seniority*, has a tale to tell from her days as an Empire ship built during WWII in Great Britain.

During World War II, a number of merchant ships were drafted into the military service by the British government, specifically, the Ministry of War Transport (MoWT). They were allocated to serve various shipping companies that were involved in the war effort. This range of ships was prefixed by the name 'Empire'. One such ship was the *Empire Boswell*, a 2,876 GRT cargo ship built in 1942.

With a length of 96.11m, the *Empire Boswell* was fitted with a triple expansion steam engine. It was designed as a Scandinavian-type cargo ship of the three-island class, which meant that the cargo handling was grouped around the three 'islands' of the ship—the stern, bow and amidships. [There is some discrepancy over her yard works number as some sources have it listed as #738 and Wikipedia has it as #1135].

The ship was 96.11m (315ft, 4in) long. She had a beam of 14.15m (46ft, 5in) and a depth of 7.01m (23ft). The vessel had a triple expansion steam engine with cylinders of 51cm (20in); 86cm (34in) and 140cm (55in) bore by 99cm (39in) stroke. This engine was built by the Central Marine Engine Works, also from West Hartlepool. The ship's official UK registra-



World War II Wreck **SS Seniority** — Off Scotland's West Coast

tion number is 168945.

Empire Boswell had a successful career under the MoWT where she was operated by the Currie Line Ltd until

1945 and then the British India Steam Navigation Company until 1947, when she was sold into the Merchant services to the Aviation and Shipping Company

Ltd and changed her name to the SS *Aviswell*. Here she was operated by the Purvis Shipping Company Ltd until 1949 when she was sold to FT Everard until

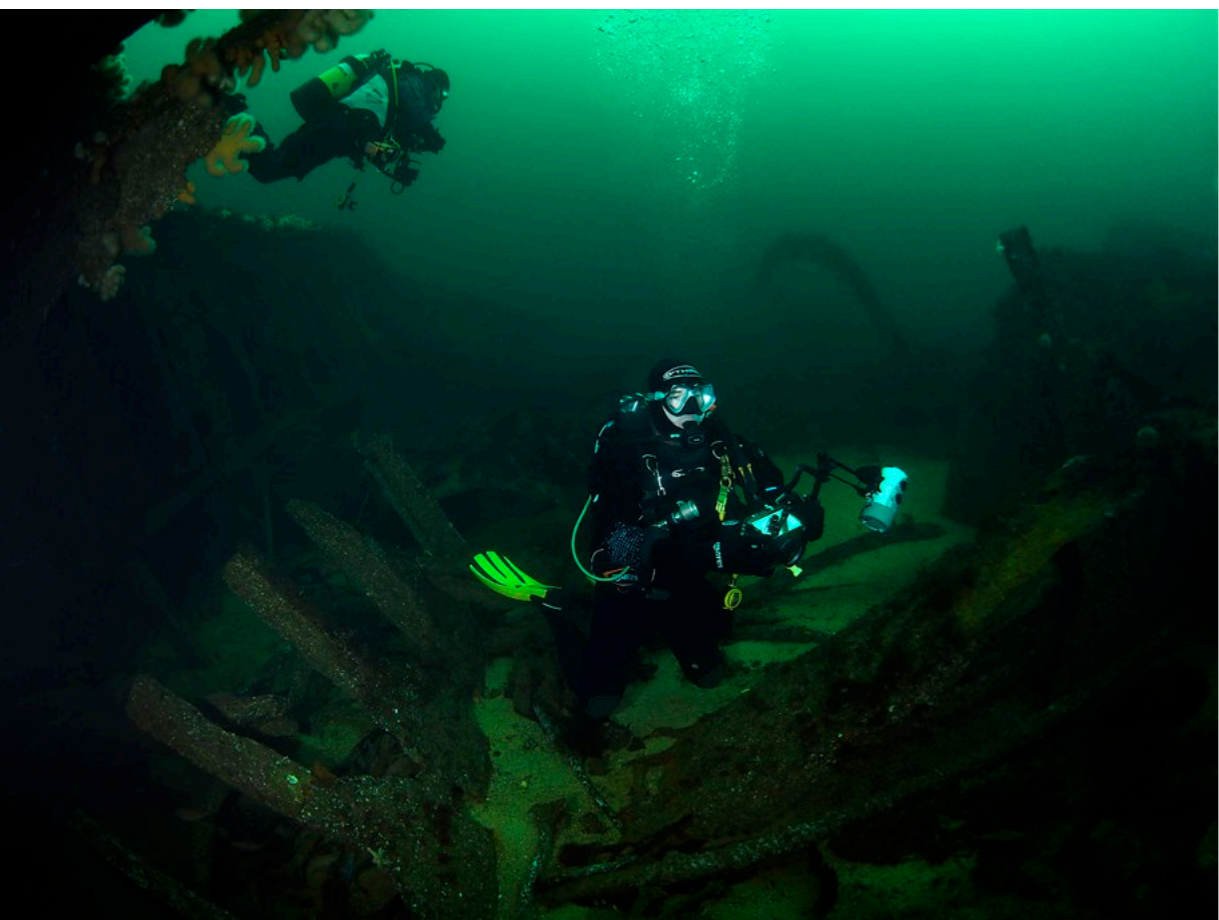
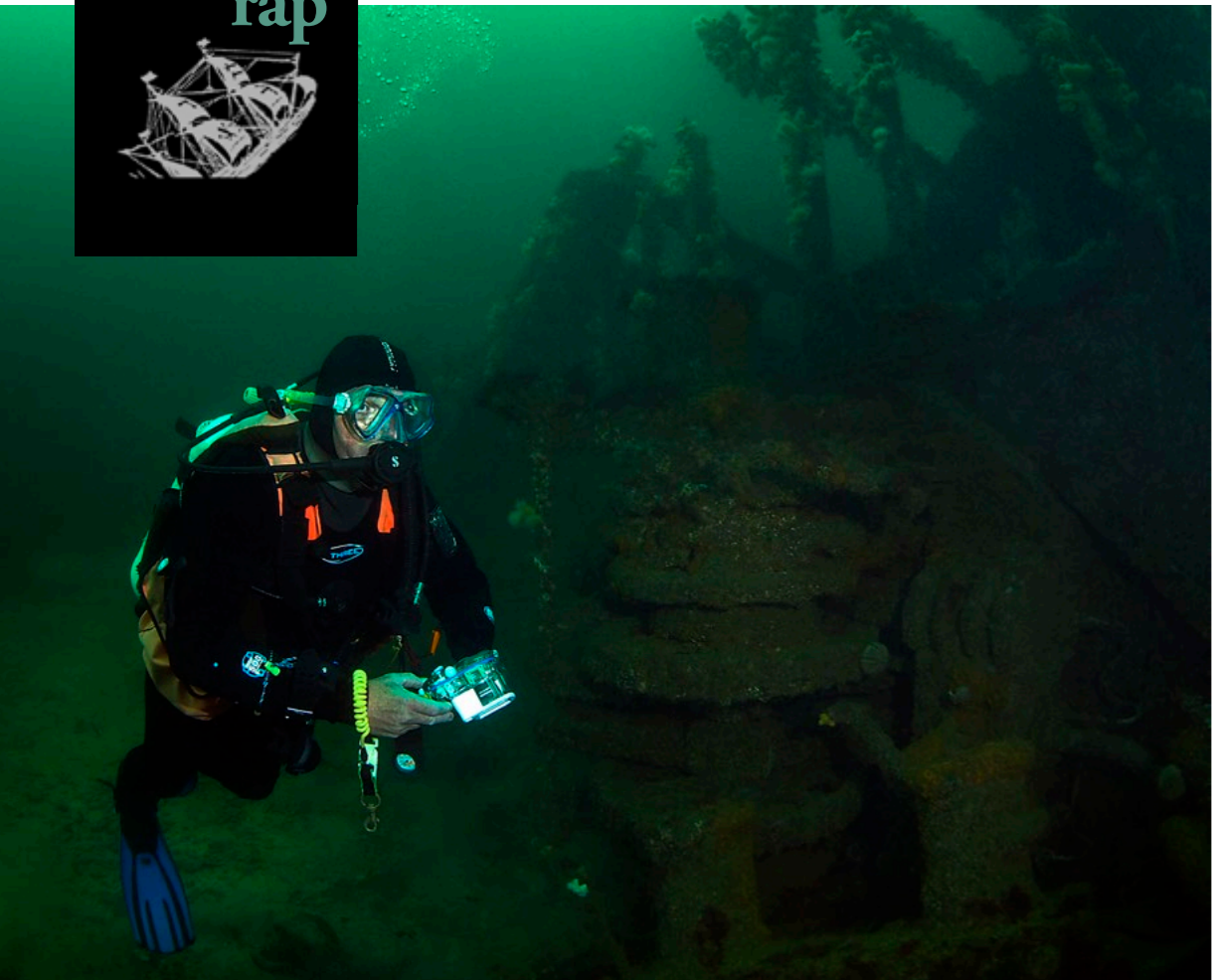
her demise under her new name the SS *Seniority*.

During WWII, *Seniority* was placed in a number of successful convoys, although





THIS PAGE: Scenes from the dive on SS *Seniority*



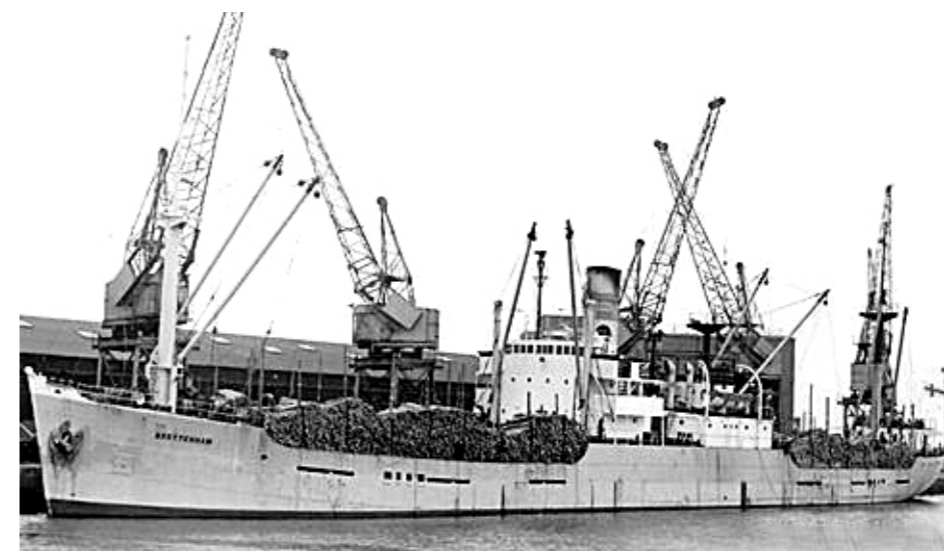
she was noted as a 'straggler' on her way to Canada in Convoy 160 in 1943. She came back to the United Kingdom in convoy SC129 from Halifax, Nova Scotia and only took her 19 days to reach Liverpool. In convoy UGS18, she had quite a trip leaving Hampton Roads in the United States and travelled directly to Port Said in October 1943 at the height of the war and then joined the convoy from Gibraltar to Algeria.

Whilst travelling to Ellesmere Port in ballast, the steamship *Seniority* ran aground on 7 November 1950 at Leinish Point in the Outer Hebrides, and although she was refloated, she foundered once more off Bo

Vich Chuan Rock off the south-east coast of Barra and sank on 8 November 1950.

The *Glasgow Herald* on Thursday 9 November 1950 recorded the event:

"The crew of the London steamer *Seniority*, which was wrecked off the coast of Barra, Outer Hebrides late on Tuesday night during a gale, have been landed at Castlebay, Barra,



Historical photo of the SS *Seniority*



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THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the steamship *Seniority*

2895-ton London cargo steamer *Seniority*, which went ashore off Barra on Tuesday night, disappeared in 10 fathoms of water. The Master of the *Seniority*, Captain I. Anderson, North Shields, who, with his crew of 30 were taken off by the Barra lifeboat and given shelter at Castlebay, intended to return

to his ship on Thursday when it was expected that tugs would try to refloat her."

Finally, *Seniority's* fate was recorded in the *Glasgow Herald* on November 9:

"The London cargo steamer *Seniority*, which was wrecked on rocks off Barra, Outer Hebrides,

by Castlebay lifeboat. A message recovered by Lloyds late yesterday stated that the vessel was aground on the rocks. Her pumps had broken down and she was settling well on her stern. Her afterdeck was fully awash. The situation, it was stated, was serious. It was reported later from Duntulm lifeboat station, Skye, that the crew of 30 had been taken off by the lifeboat. The steamer was wrecked on the rocky east coast of the island, three miles northeast of Castlebay at a spot where a Greek and Canadian ship ran ashore within 24 hours of each other during the Second World War."

The *Oban Times* on the same day had the following information: "Stranded Ship Sinks off Barra: During gales early on Thursday, the



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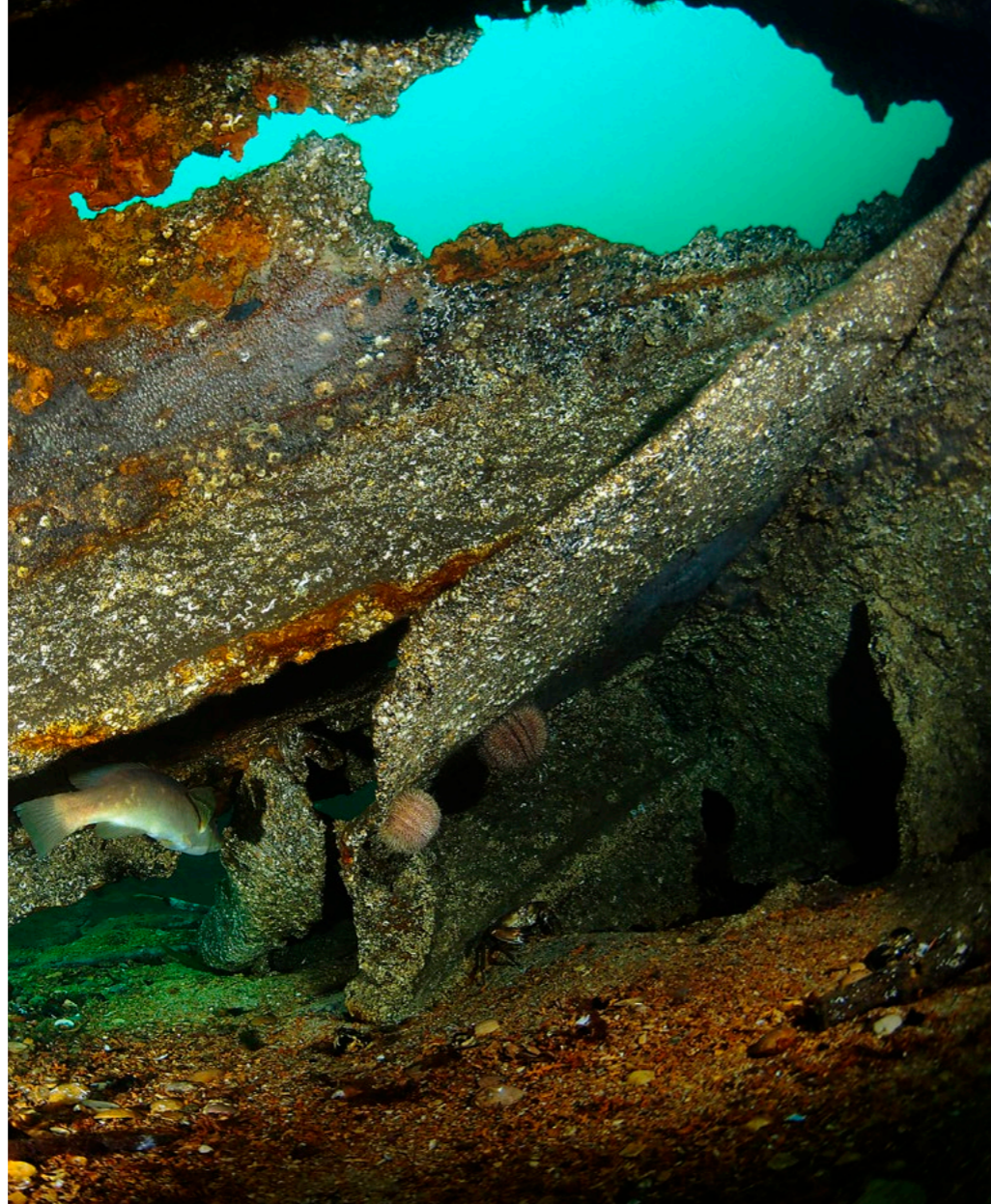
Scene from the wreck of the steamship *Seniority*

on Tuesday night, sank in about 10 fathoms early yesterday during a gale. The vessel's captain and her crew of 30 were rescued by Castlebay, Barra, lifeboat on Wednesday."

Clearly here, the crew were unable to get back to the ship; she was gone—for now.

Diving the wreck

It was whilst exploring the Outer and Inner Hebrides on the *Elizabeth G* in September 2014 that



Rob Barlow, the owner and skipper of the liveaboard suggested that we may "quite like" the dive on the steamship *Seniority*. Knowing how avid a photographer I am and my interest in shipwrecks, this seemed like a perfect opportunity to dive a relatively undived wreck in calm, sheltered waters.

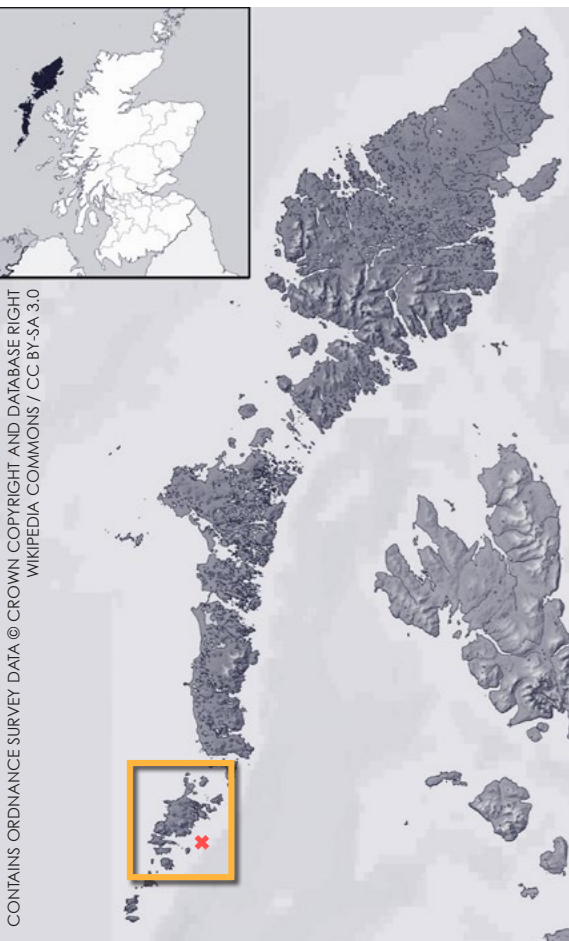
Overnighting in a bay off the south coast of Barra, near Castlebay, we discussed the forthcoming dive, but there was very little information available on the wreck, other than that she was in 18- 21m (60-70ft) of water, with normally good visibility, and that the ship wreckage was well strewn out over the seabed.

There's not too much planning involved in this dive—just jump in

with your buddy, swim down the shotline and explore the shipwreck until it was time to come up—perfect!

On entering the water for the first dive on the wreck, we were immediately struck by the great visibility encountered here, and even on the surface, we could see the ship quite clearly on the seabed. To our right (east) was the bows, which were lying over to the starboard side and deeply embedded in the sand and shell seabed. Just back from the bows were the start of the winching gears, anchor chain locker and forward mast. The forward hold was exposed and easily accessible.

Directly under us were a series



Location of Barra and *Seniority* wreck, Outer Hebrides, Western Isles, Scotland

BREATHTAKING EXPERIENCES



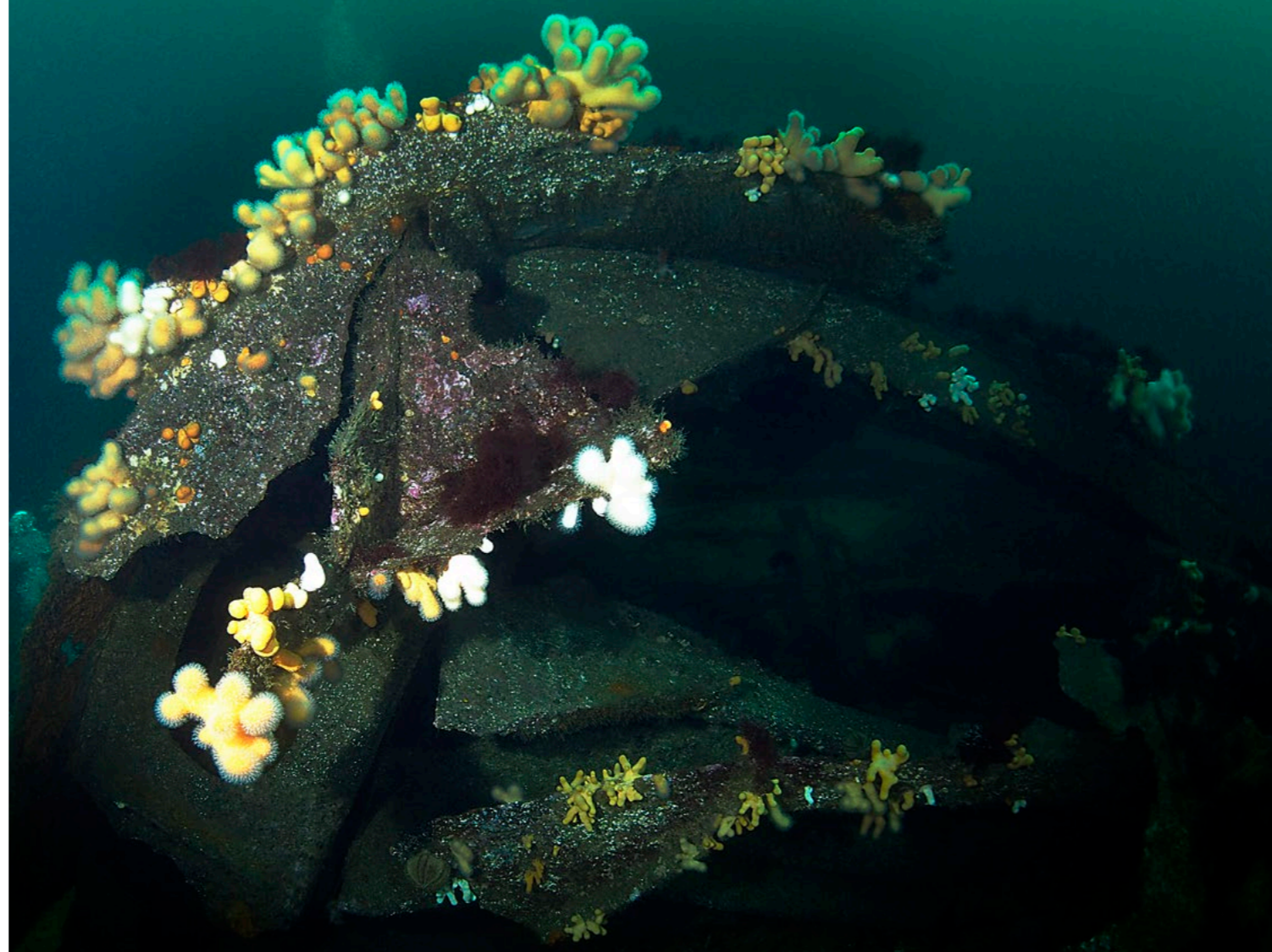
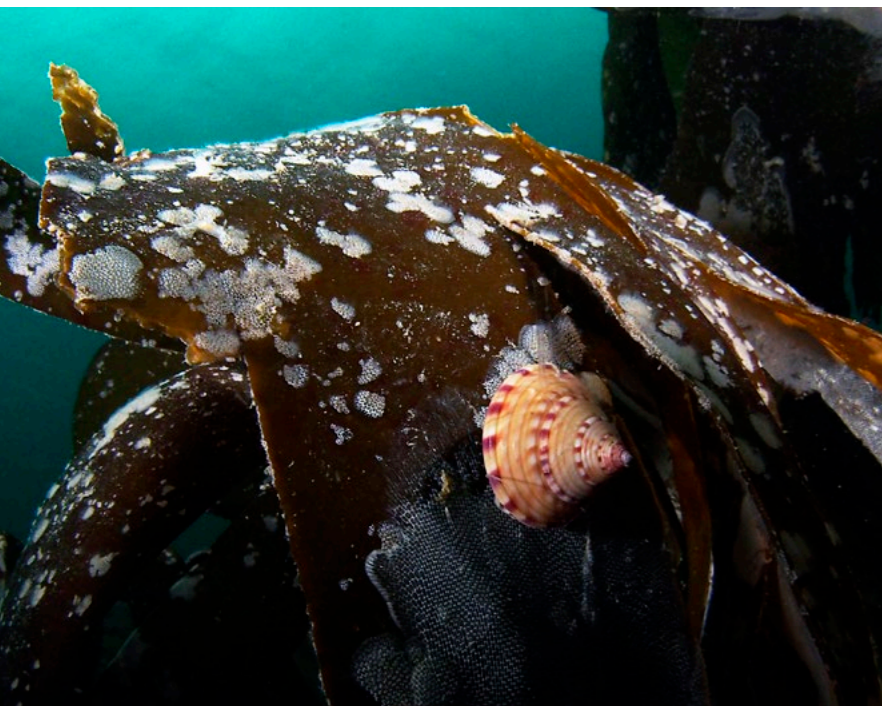
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THIS PAGE: Marine life thrives on and around the wreck of the steamship *Seniority* including dead man's fingers (right), painted topshells on fronds of kelp (below), ling, cod and wrasse



of flat plates, which looked like they may have interesting nooks and crannies, and to our left (west) and ahead (north) the remainder of the ship's upturned hull could be seen.

This is a large shipwreck, and unsurprisingly, has suffered over the years. Many of her ribs are exposed, but there

are large sections of upturned hull that allow you access into a calm interior, with the metal parts simply covered in sea squirts.

The rear parts of the hull are completely laid open, and the propeller has been removed—or certainly not found on the two dives we did on the ship. The large triple-expansion boiler was very evident sitting amidst the wreckage, with the quite large 'donkey' boiler sitting next to it.

Marine life

With such clear water, there was good kelp growth on much of the superstructure, and the entire area was a haven for fish life. Predominant fish were several ling, cuckoo wrasse, ballan wrasse,

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wreck rap

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Common lobster; Dahlia sea anemone; Flounder; Feather star



poor cod and thousands of sprats of unknown species of white fish. The seabed had large dahlia anemones, plenty of starfish and shell debris from scallops, queen scallops and mussels. This is quite clearly a very productive site with a high yield of marine life.

With my dive buddy, Phil Sturdy, we first explored the bows and winch gears and followed our route around the first hold and were amazed at the number of ling that were swimming about in the open; cuckoo wrasse were everywhere, particularly the

males, sporting the incredibly colourful blue markings on the head and tails. Under the exposed hold sections, poor cod, ballan wrasse and tons of white-bait were all over the place. The plates of steel on the seabed had ling hiding underneath and the seabed was dotted with anemones, large starfish, scallops, and even small seapens.

Big hermit crabs, razor clams and burrowing anemones were dotted around the wreckage, and inevitably, we were drawn towards the larger ship parts. The stern was fairly far to

the north, and although we were unable to find her propeller, the drive shaft and gearing mechanisms for the engine room were very evident. The larger hull parts had pin-cushion starfish (*Porania pulvillus*) and most of the covering kelp had painted topshells (*Calliostoma zizyphinum*)



and several species of nudibranch.

Soon enough, time was over on the ship's exploration and we returned to the *Elizabeth G*, happy and satisfied after diving on one of the best shipwrecks off the west coast of Scotland. ■

SOURCES: PLIMSOLL SHIP DATA, WIKIPEDIA

Lawson Wood is a widely published underwater photographer and author of many dive guides and books. For more information, visit: www.lawson-wood.com.

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Eight escudos gold coins with profile of Philip V of Spain, dated 1730

Divers find \$4.5 million in 18th century gold coins off Florida

Around 350 gold coins were recovered 300 years to the day after 11 Spanish ships sank in a hurricane off the coast of the US state of Florida at Sebastian. A salvage company, 1715 Fleet Queens, led by CEO Brent Brisben, owns the rights to the 1715 Fleet shipwreck site.

Brisben said, "These shipwrecks were pushed by the hurricane into the outer edge of the reef and then they were utterly destroyed by the wave action, so pieces of these ships have floated for miles all the way into the beach up into the dunes."

Diver William Bartlett, who was the first person to stumble upon the gold in just in just 2m (6ft) of water, was on his third dive on the shipwreck site, along with Brisben and Jonah Martinez, when he made the discovery on

July 30.

Nine of the gold coins are very rare Royals. Valued at US\$300,000 each, these coins were made for the King of Spain in the 18th century. Bartlett told reporters, "They were specifically made for King Philip V, incredibly rare, only 20 known to exist before we found these nine."

Brisben said not since 1998 have artifacts such as these been found. "These Royals are perfect specimens of coinage of the time and they were made on royal order for the king of Spain to be mostly given out as [a] presentation piece."

Twenty percent of the find will go to the State of Florida to be displayed in a museum for public viewing. ■

SOURCES: CATHOLIC.ORG, THEGUARDIAN.COM, WILX.COM

Finders of SS *Central America* cannot keep gold hoard

Federal judge in the US state of Virginia has ruled that the explorers cannot cite "finders keepers" as justification for claiming that treasure as their own.

SS *Central America*, known as the Ship of Gold, was a 280-foot (85m) sidewheel steamer that sank in a hurricane off the coast of the Carolinas in September 1857, along with more than 420 passengers and crew and 14 tonnes of gold with an estimated value of US\$300 million on today's market.

With so much money on the line, ownership of the loot has been entrenched in legal battles ever since its discovery by Columbus-America Discovery Group in 1989.

In 1990, a Virginia federal court awarded 90 percent of the gold to salvor-in-possession, Columbus-

America Discovery Group, with the remaining 10 percent to be divided among insurance underwriters. Significant amounts of gold and artifacts were recovered and brought to the surface. Thirty-nine insurance companies filed suit, claiming that because they paid damages in the 19th century for the lost gold, they had the right to it.

The team that found it argued that the gold had been abandoned. After a legal battle, 92 percent of the gold was awarded to the discovery team in 1996.

In March 2014, Recovery Limited hired the Odyssey Marine Exploration group to conduct further archaeological recovery and conservation of the remaining shipwreck. Those operations managed to find and recover gold and artifacts which had initially gone overlooked, including an 80-pound gold ingot that sold for \$8 million.

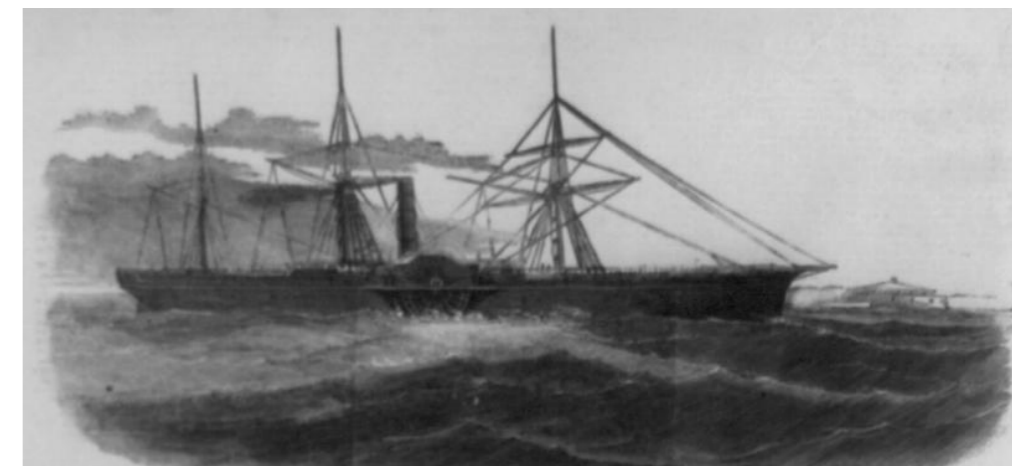
Denied title

But US District Judge Rebecca Beach Smith on August 11 denied Recovery Limited title to the wreck, finding that salvage rights preclude the maritime law of finds, which was intended for naturally occurring valuables, such as ambergris and whales.

"A free finders-keepers policy is but a short step from active piracy and pillaging," Smith wrote. "Were this court to allow Recovery

Limited Partnership, the current salvor-in-possession, to enjoy immediate title to the artifacts it has recovered since early 2014, then the court would risk an 'unsupervised rush to the site to recover anything that could be grabbed.' The public interest in historic shipwrecks would be diminished, if such an 'unsupervised rush' to sunken treasure were to result." ■

SOURCE: LAW.JUSTIA.COM



SS *Central America* sank in a hurricane in September 1857.

Bell from WWII battleship HMS *Hood* recovered

On 7 August, 2015, a research team led by US philanthropist and entrepreneur Paul G. Allen successfully recovered the bell of the battlecruiser HMS *Hood*, which sunk in 1941 during World War II.

The bell was successfully recovered the 7 August. Allen's team led the operation using his yacht MY *Octopus*, which is equipped with a state-of-the-art remotely operated vehicle (ROV). Once restored, the bell will respectfully serve as a tangible and fitting memorial for the 1,415 lives lost when

the *Bismarck* sunk the ship in the North Atlantic.

The bell was first discovered and photographed in July 2001. The bell was found lying on the seabed well away from the parts of the battlecruiser's hull. A 2012 Allen-led expedition to recover the bell was hampered by prevailing weather conditions and technical difficulties. The bell is in good condition but will require a year-long expert conservation and restoration effort because it has spent so long in deep seawater.

Sunk by *Bismarck*

HMS *Hood* is the largest Royal Navy vessel to have been sunk, causing the largest loss of life suffered by any single British warship and the recovery is fully supported by the HMS *Hood* Association whose members include veterans

who served in the ship before her final mission in 1941, and relatives of those lost with her.

In May 1941, she and the battleship *Prince of Wales* were ordered to intercept the German battleship *Bismarck* and the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*, which were en route to the Atlantic where they were to attack convoys. On 24 May 1941, early in the Battle of the Denmark Strait, *Hood* was struck by several German shells, exploded and sank. ■

SOURCE: PR NEWSWIRE



HMS *Hood* was the last battlecruiser built for the Royal Navy.





JOHAN RÖNNBY/MARIS | BLEKINGE MUSEUM

Considering it sank more than 500 years ago, the wreck is still in good condition.

Sea monster figurehead from a 15th century Danish warship wreck salvaged

The *Gribshunden* (*Griffin*) is thought to be the world's best-preserved, late Medieval Age ship. *Gribshunden* was a Danish warship and the flagship of King John of Denmark, who ruled in 1481–1513. *Gribshunden* sank in 1495 in the Blekinge archipelago (in southern Sweden) after catching fire off the coast of Ronneby.

"It's a sea monster—and we have to discuss what kind of animal it is," said Johan Ronnby, professor of marine archaeology.

"I think it's some kind of fantasy animal—a dragon with lion ears and a crocodile-like mouth. And there seems to be something in his mouth. There seems to be a person in its mouth and he's eating somebody,"



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Figurehead from the wreck of 15th century Danish warship *Gribshunden* was carefully lifted from the seabed.

he added.

The wreck was first found by sports divers in the 1970s, but unaware of the identity and significance of the wreck, it was not until much later, in 2000, that archaeologists learned about the discovery. In 2013, archaeologists identified the ship as the *Gribshunden*. The wooden ship is in remarkably good condition, left relatively free of sea worm damage and is among the best-preserved ships from the early modern period. ■

SOURCE: BLEKINGE MUSEUM

National Historic Site in Nunavut for Franklin wrecks

Adding the wrecks of the *HMS Erebus* and *HMS Terror* to the National Historic Sites of Canada list provides the site with the protections afforded by the Canada National Parks Act and its regulations.

Parks Canada plans to create a new National Historic Site around the wrecks of *HMS Erebus* and *HMS Terror*. On April 8, the Canadian government amended the National Historic Sites of Canada, registering the 10km by 10km area around the place where Franklin's ships are both thought to have sunk.

"The story of John Franklin has captured the imagination of Canadians and the *HMS Erebus*

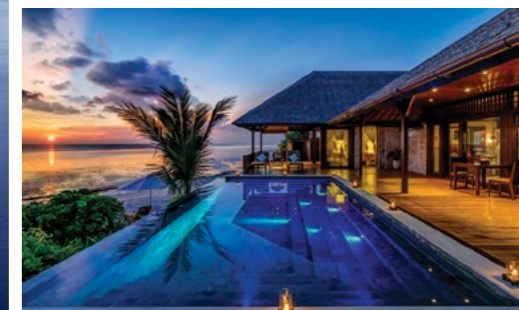
shipwreck is regarded as significant to the story of Canada. There is therefore a cultural benefit to Canada from protecting this important national historical site and its artifacts," said the agency in a statement.

Fines up to \$100,000.

The order will provide the federal government with the authority to prevent unauthorized access to protect the site of the shipwreck,

the shipwreck itself and its artifacts, as cultural and historical resources, and to allow for the application of enforcement powers, offences and penalties under the act. This includes fines of up to CA\$100,000.

A management plan will be completed within five years. Summer dive operations involve both scuba-diving and surface-supplied diving from small vessels anchored to blocks carefully placed around the site. ■



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