

The discovery of the Great Storm wrecks by David Chamberlain January 2024

In the early months of 1979, Tommy Brown, skipper of the 45 foot Ramsgate trawler, Shelandra, decided to share some of his uncharted wreck marks that he, and his fellow fishermen, had found. He took out a group of divers which comprised of local coalminers Paul Fletcher and John Chamberlain, along with Roy Kennett, Keith Young and John Cazier. Their finds, on that epic day in June, 1979, would become of great historical value, which, in some people's minds, were equal to the discovery of the Mary Rose.

Along with the divers, the Shelandra had left port at 7.15a.m. and reached the uncharted wreck site on the Goodwin Sands shortly after. Once they had completed their dive, they were comparing notes of their discoveries with each other. What they had found was a large wooden wreck, with around 20 cannons and shot on its deck. The shipwreck appeared to be emerging from a sand wave which left a large part of her port side exposed. Although her starboard side was still buried in the sand there was 20 feet of hull protruding from the seabed. Scattered around the wreck site were onion shaped wine bottles and some tin plates. In only ten feet of underwater visibility they had picked-up the smaller items, along with what they surmised were cow bones. On the surface they viewed their finds and realised the tin plates were made from pewter and the 'cow' bones were human leg bones. Looking at the shape of the wine bottles it was thought they were dated late to early 17th and 18th century.

Throughout the summer months of 1979, many more dives were undertaken on this mysterious and secret wreck with a lot more artifacts recovered. It was because of this, the divers consulted with Dave Perkins from the Isle of Thanet Archeological Unit - who believed this wreck might be one of the four naval ships lost in the 'Great Storm' of 1703. When they discovered the ship's bell, which weighed 101kg, and lifted it aboard the Shelandra, they felt the ship's name would be revealed. However, all that could be read from it was a date of 1701 and an admiralty broad arrow stamped upon it. Other large items were recovered, such as a bronze cannon and a 120 gallon copper kettle, which had provided hot water for cooking the crew's meals. Dave Perkins decided that there was enough material for him and his team to conserve and investigate, and no more items should be lifted.

With their research, they established that the third rate, 70 gun, Stirling Castle which was rebuilt and refurbished in 1701, matched the bell, and a pewter plate with the initials of JJ belonged to the lost warship's captain, John Johnson. With this mystery solved, they looked forward to further investigation the following year. On the 12th of February, 1980, their secret wreck of the Stirling Castle was featured in the Guardian newspaper and the story retold after all those years under water. Nevertheless, at the beginning of 1980, nature intervened with gales and storms and when the divers visited the site they found that the sand wave had once again engulfed the shipwreck. Not to be deterred they investigated another two wrecks close by which turned out to be more 1703 'Great Storm' victims', third rate Restoration and Northumberland. These wrecks were in no comparison of their first find as they had degraded with very little of the ship remaining.

It would not be until a decade later that the sand wave would start to leave and show the wreck once more, to be investigated in the late 1990's. Over the years the Stirling Castle has succumbed to the elements and what is left of her now is buried by the ever moving Goodwin Sands.