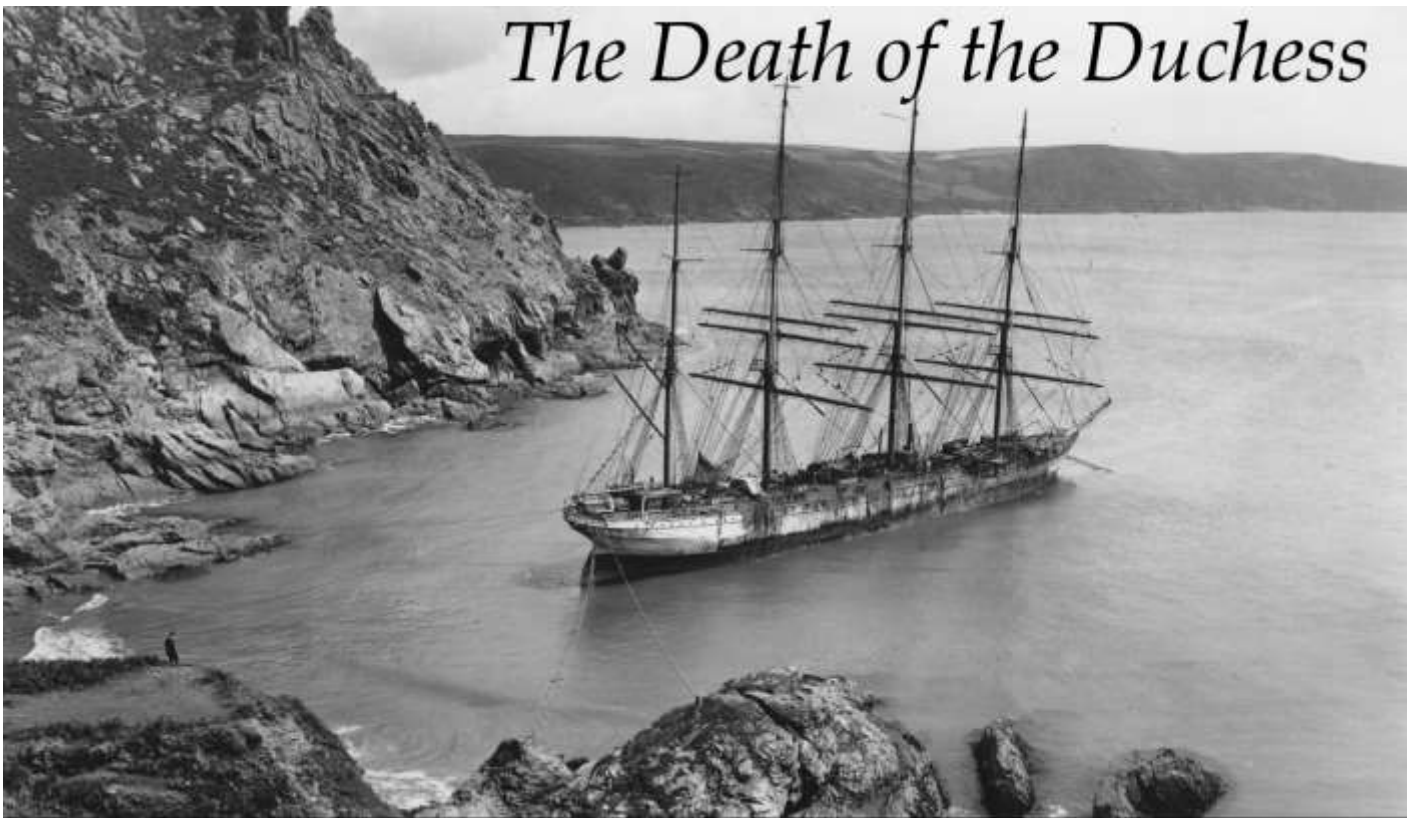


# The Death of the Duchess



The Loss of the *Herzogin Cecilie*  
1936



# *The Death of the Duchess*

The story of the last voyage of the famous  
Finnish windjammer *Herzogin Cecilie*  
and the attempts to salvage her after she  
stranded off Soar Mill Cove  
on 25th April 1936

---

From a slideshow presented in Salcombe  
on 25th April 2016

by Roger Barrett  
to mark the 80th Anniversary





In April 1936 the famous Finnish Windjammer *Herzogin Cecilie*, affectionately known as the Duchess, ran aground in Soar Mill Cove. She had just completed a fast passage of 86 days from Australia to Falmouth and was the winner of the annual Australian grain race. The next 86 days were a struggle for survival as attempts were made to salvage her. Sadly these were to no avail and she ended her days here in Starehole Bay, her final resting place.



The *Herzogin Cecilie* in full sail. She was the most celebrated and best loved of all the windjammers



The *Herzogin Cecilie*  
becalmed.

Staunch, fast and  
seaworthy she  
combined grace,  
power and beauty





## *Herzogin Cecilie*

### Some key facts 1

- A four masted steel barque
- 3242 gross tons, length 310ft.
- Built in 1902 by Rickmers in Bremerhaven
- Named after German Crown Princess, Duchess Cecilie of Mecklenburg-Schwerin
- Built for the German shipping company Norddeutscher Lloyd
- Employed as a sail training ship until 1914
- Interned by Chile at the outbreak of World War I
- Given to France as reparation in 1920

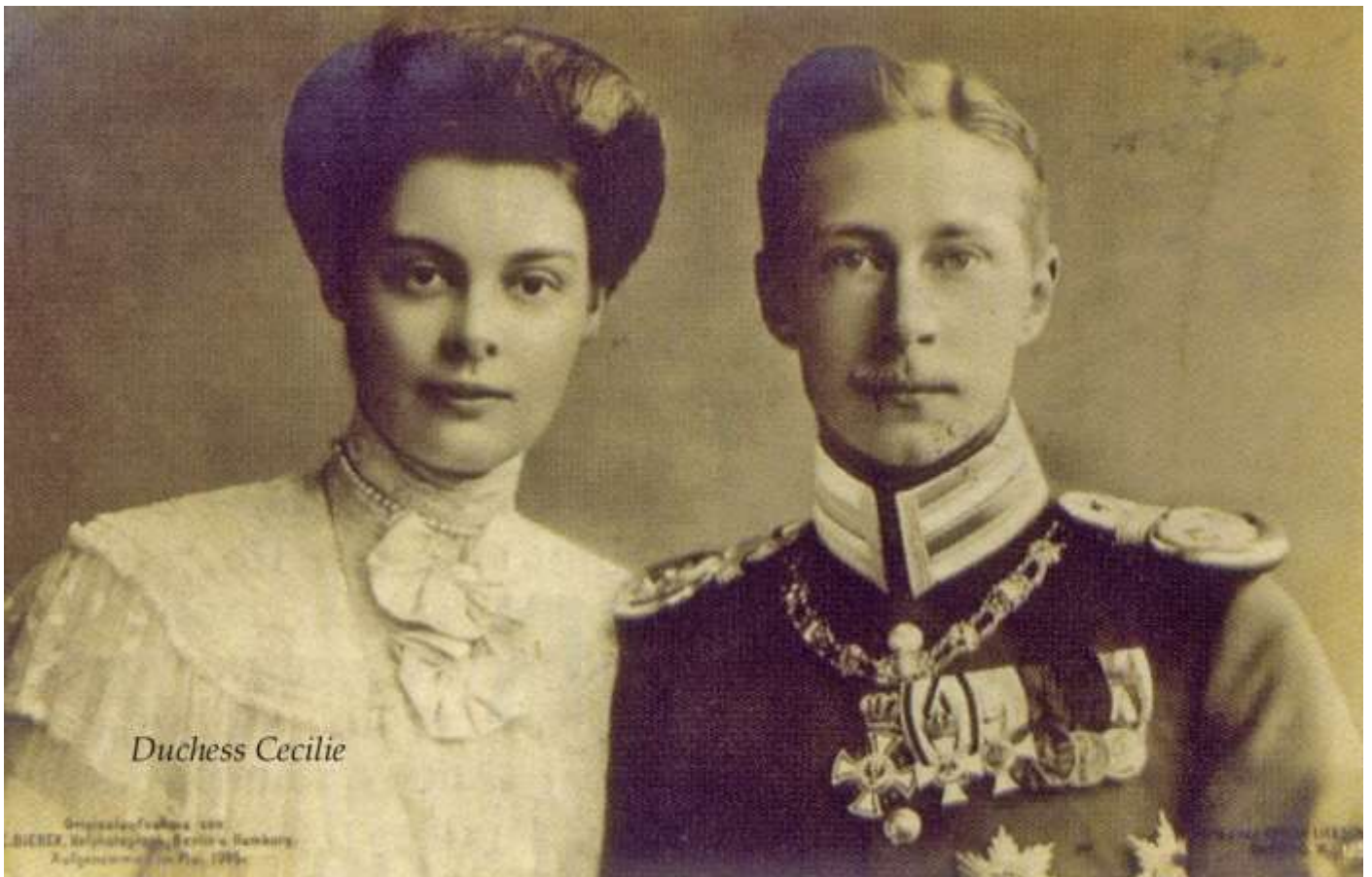


## *Herzogin Cecilie*

### Some key facts 2

- Sold to Gustaf Erikson of Finland for £4250 in 1920
- Home port: Mariehamn, Aland Islands
- Employed by Erikson in the Australian wheat trade, carrying grain from Australia to Europe.
- One of the fastest windjammers ever built: she once logged 21 knots
- 'Won' the Australian Grain Race four times prior to 1921, and four times in eleven trips from 1926 to 1936.





Herzogin Cecilie of Mecklenberg-Schwerin, with her husband Crown Prince Wilhelm son of Kaiser Wilhelm II (Herzogin is German for Duchess) If Kaiser Bill had not lost the First World War and been forced to abdicate she would have become Empress.





Gustaf Eriksson, the owner of the Duchess. Before retiring from the sea he was master of number of sailing ships and after the First World War he started buying sailing ships at the time when everyone else was getting out of sail. There was a glut of redundant tonnage at the end of the war and sailing ships could be bought for near scrap value. Eriksson was able to make them pay by keeping costs low. He didn't insure his ships, he kept as management overheads low by working from home and he took on a bare minimum of crew. The Aland Islands had a long tradition of producing fine tough seaman and many of the young men of the islands were willing to work for low pay in order to serve the compulsory three years in sail before applying for their mate's certificate.



The Åland Islands are an archipelago of 6,500 islands in the Baltic Sea between Sweden and Finland. They are an autonomous region of Finland but entirely Swedish speaking.

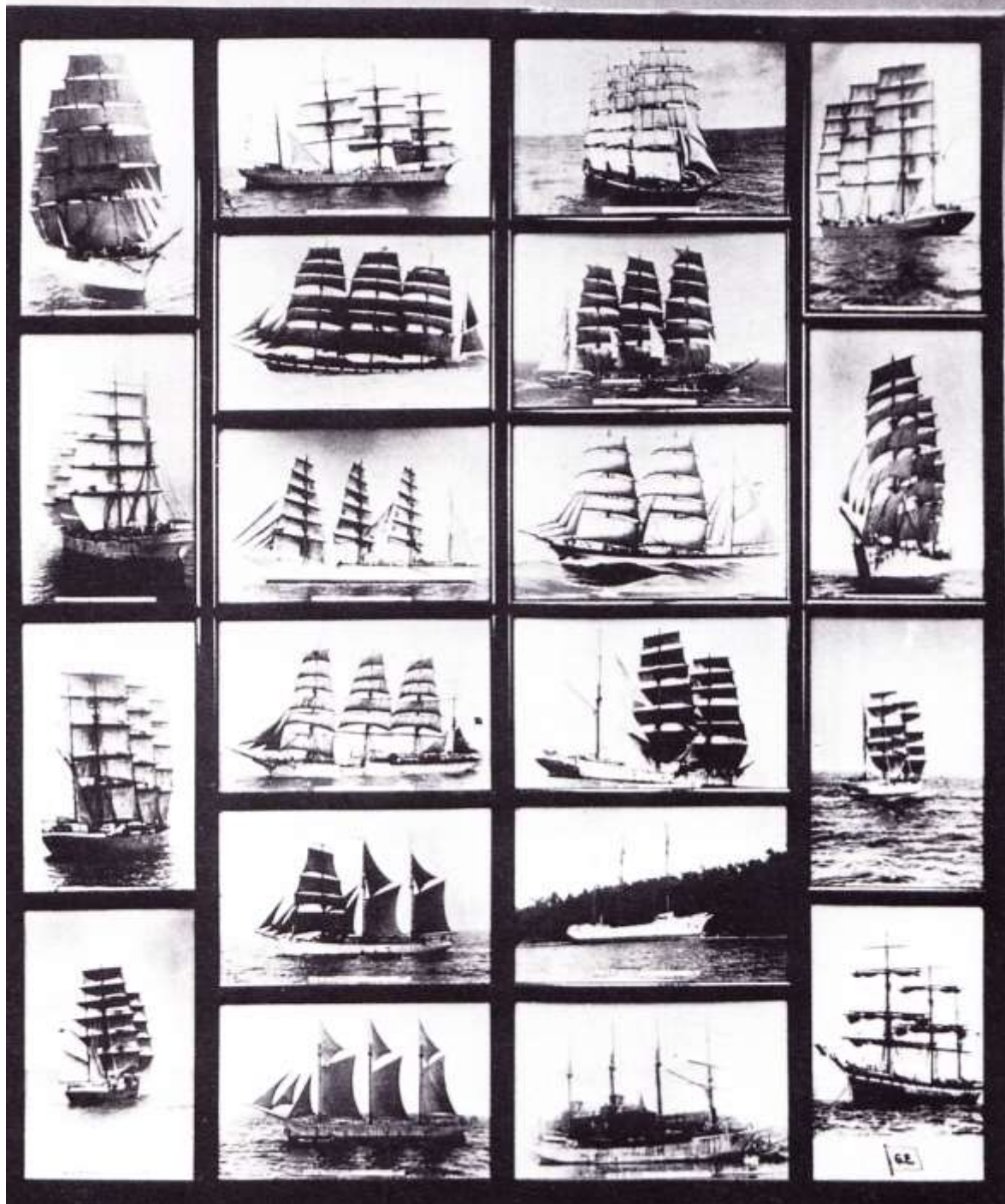


# GUSTAF ERIKSONS

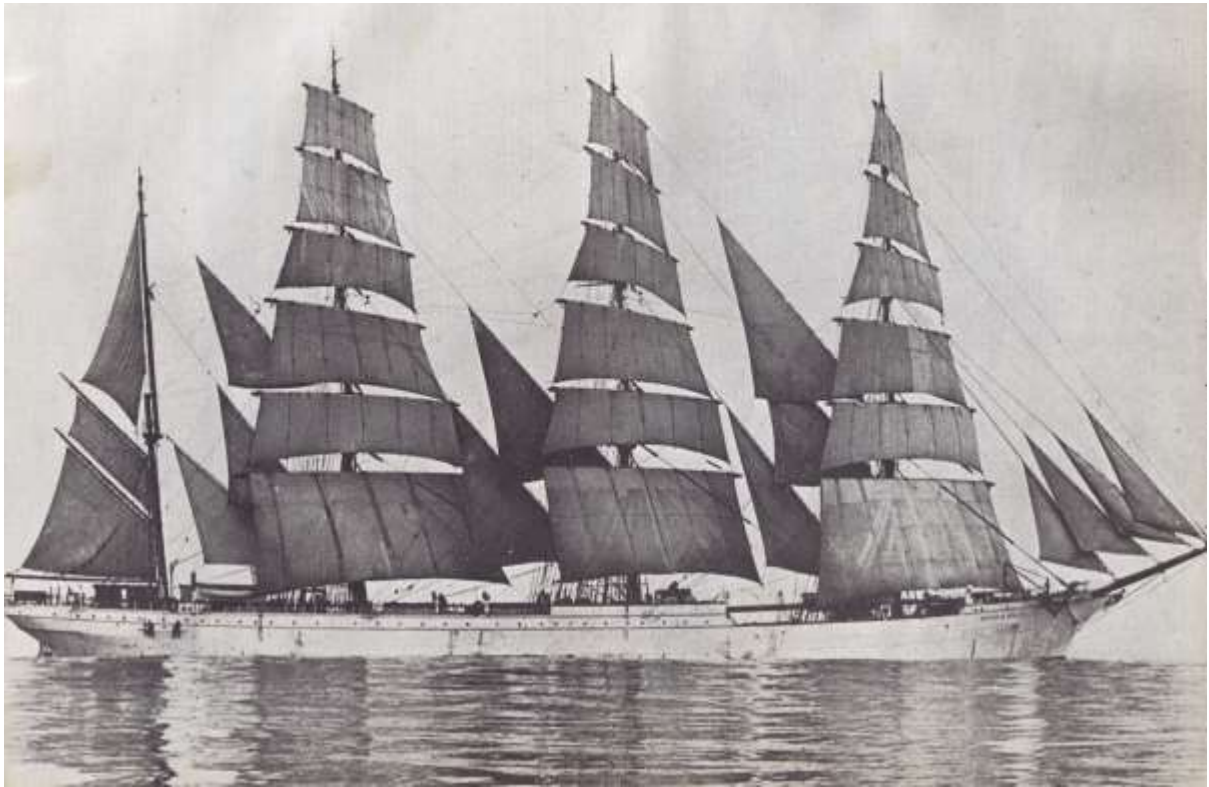


GUSTAF ERIKSON  
Ågärdsgatan, Skogsmåleri och Skulpturverkstäder,  
Mariehamns Hamn, Finland. Bild 1943

# SEGEL FLOTTA



By the 1930s Gustaf Eriksson had built up a substantial fleet of steel square riggers including such famous ships as the *Archibald Russell*, *Lawhill*, *Moshulu*, *Pamir*, *Pommern* and, of course, the *Herzogin Cecilie*



The *Herzogin Cecilie* carried a huge spread of canvas, 35 sails, 45,000 square feet of canvas- that's over an acre. She carried identical sails on four main mizzen masts – royal, two t'gallants, two topsails and the course, fore, main and crossjack. Right aft was the jigger mast with spanker and gaff sails. There was also an array of fore and aft stay sails and fore sails. Because she had been built as a cadetship she had a very long poop deck with lots of cabin space. This was a godsend for the smaller crews that worked in the grain trade. Rather than having to berth in the wet forecastle they had relatively dry accommodation amidships..







Sven Eriksson with his trusty Alsatian dog, Paik. He was only a distant relative of Gustaf Eriksson, the owner. *Herzogin Cecilie* was his first command when he joined the ship in 1929.

Elis Karlson the first mate. He was not popular with the crew, and said to be too fond of using his fists.





Travelling with Eriksson on his 1936 voyage was his wife Pamela Eriksson. Her maiden name was Pamela Borne and she had married the captain in the Aland Islands and this was their honeymoon voyage. She was the daughter of the South African Minister of Defence and was an Oxford graduate. A very strong willed, determined lady who was later to prove the driving force in attempts to save the Duchess.



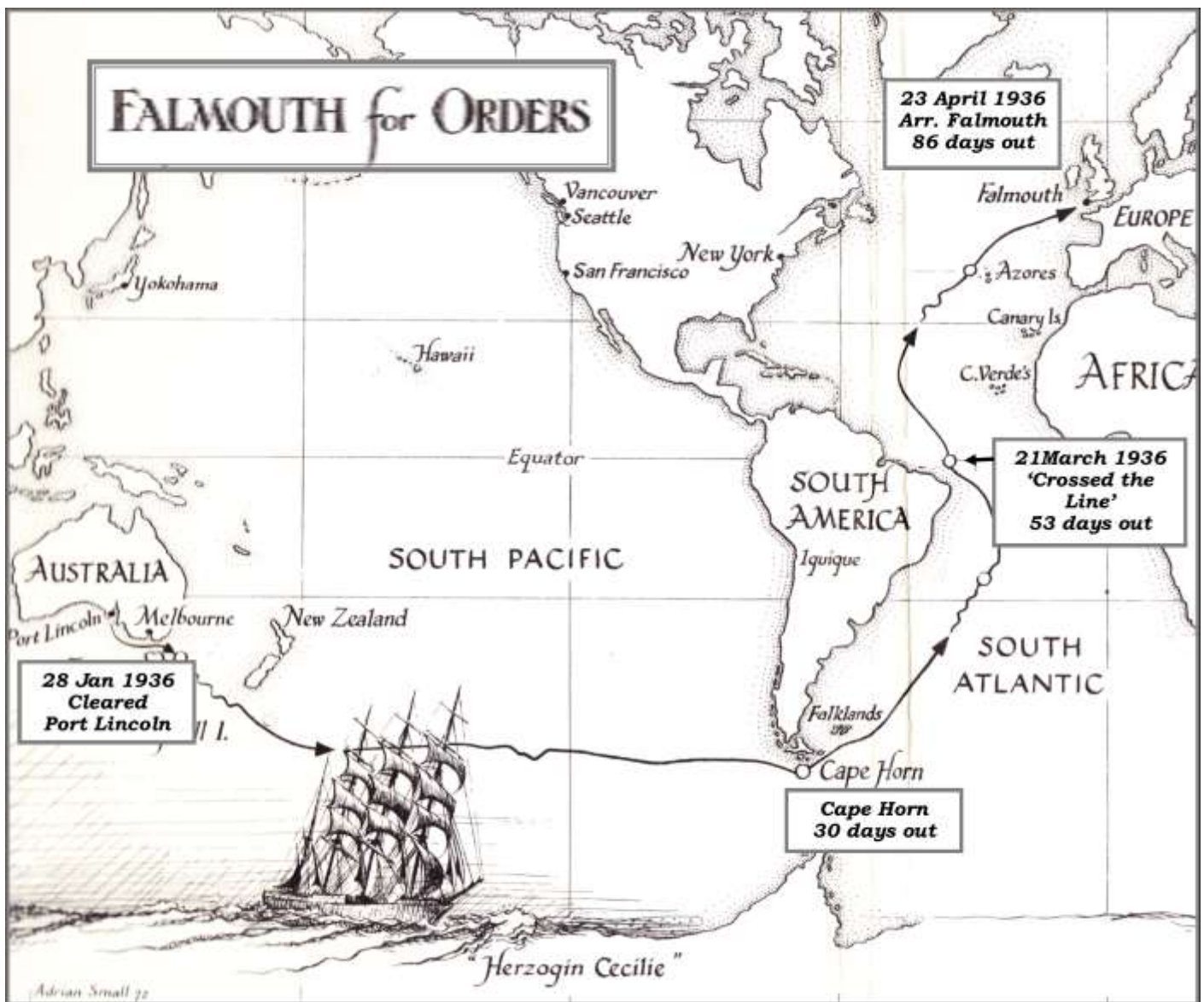




The young men who made up the crew would have been very similar to those who sailed on her in 1928. Mainly young Alanders or mainland Finns - many of them hoping to become shipmasters themselves.

Because she had been built as a cadetship there were very few labour saving devices and the lack of brace and halyard winches meant very hard work for the much smaller crews that manned her in the grain trade... None of Eriksson's ships were ever fitted with auxiliary engines.





In 1936 *Herzogin Cecilie* was taking part in her eleventh grain race leaving Port Lincoln on 28 January. Making a fast time to Cape Horn in 30 days she reached the line in 53 days but was delayed in the north Atlantic by headwinds. Even so she managed to reach Falmouth in 86 days, just three days short of the record set by *Parma* in 1933.

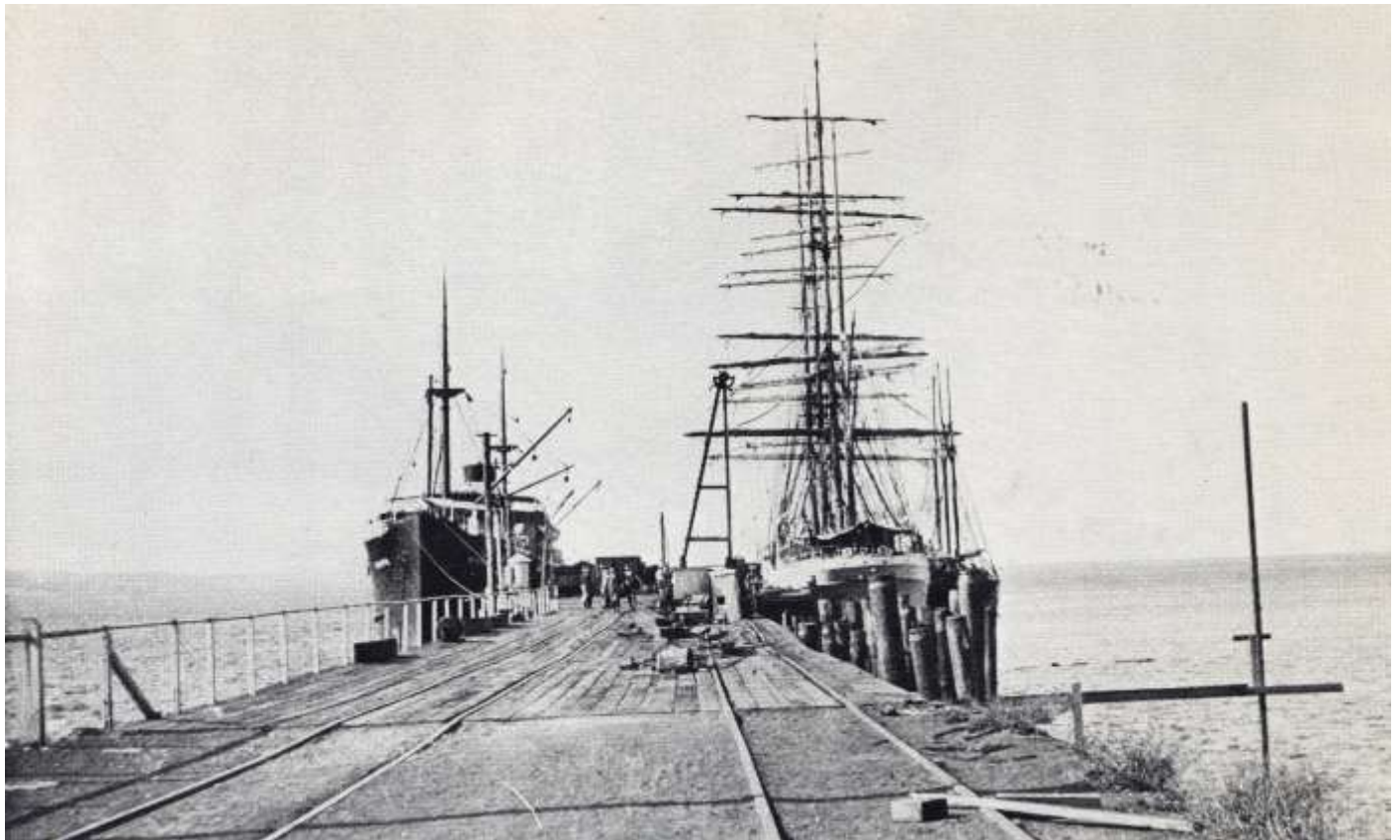




## Port Lincoln to Falmouth

28 January to 23 April 1936

- . Crew of 27 (Finns and 4 Danes) plus Captain and his wife, Pamela Eriksson
- . Ship not insured
- . Cargo: 4295 tons of wheat (insured)
- . No brace-winches so heavy work for the crew
- . Steam donkey engine to power cargo winches, windlass and pumps



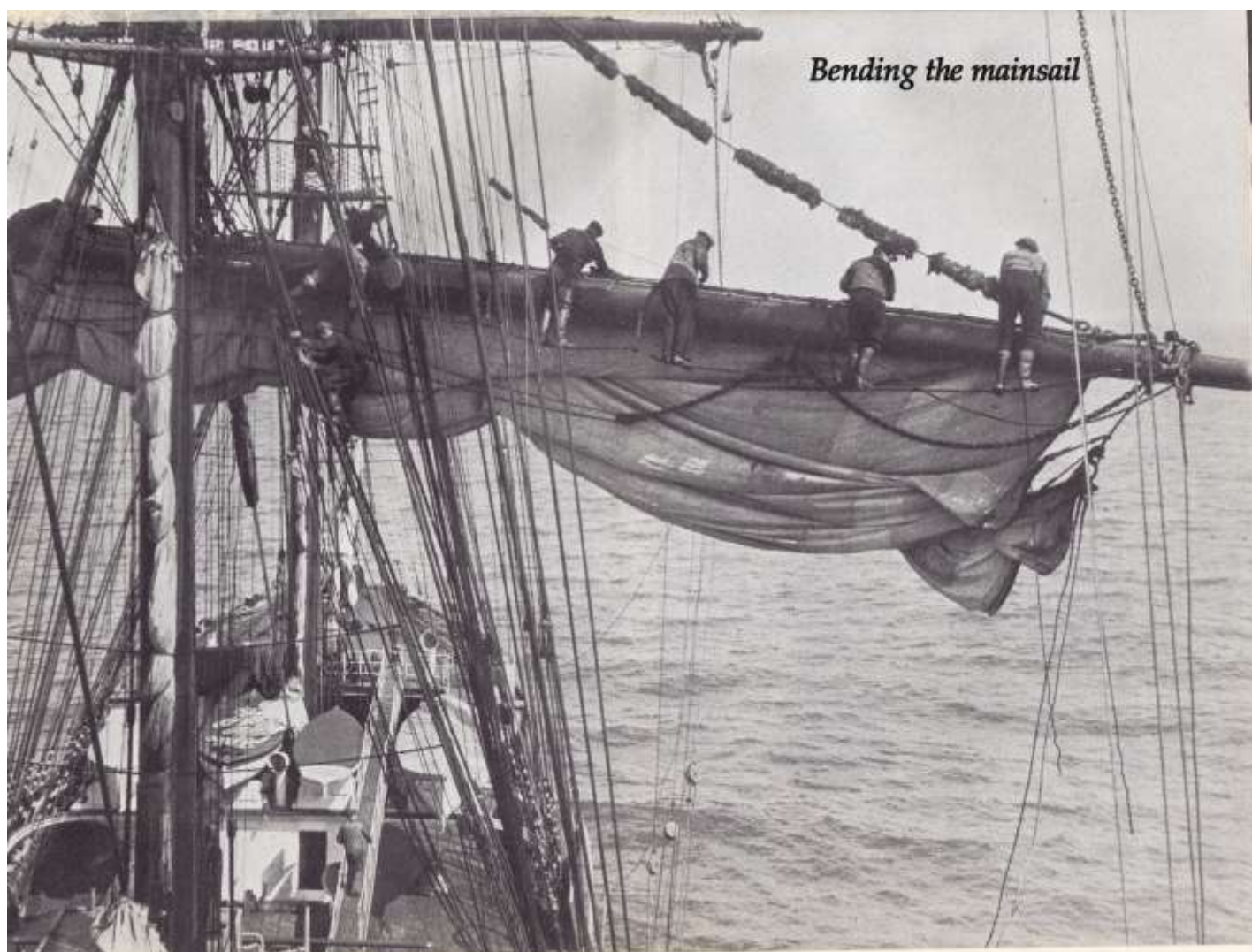
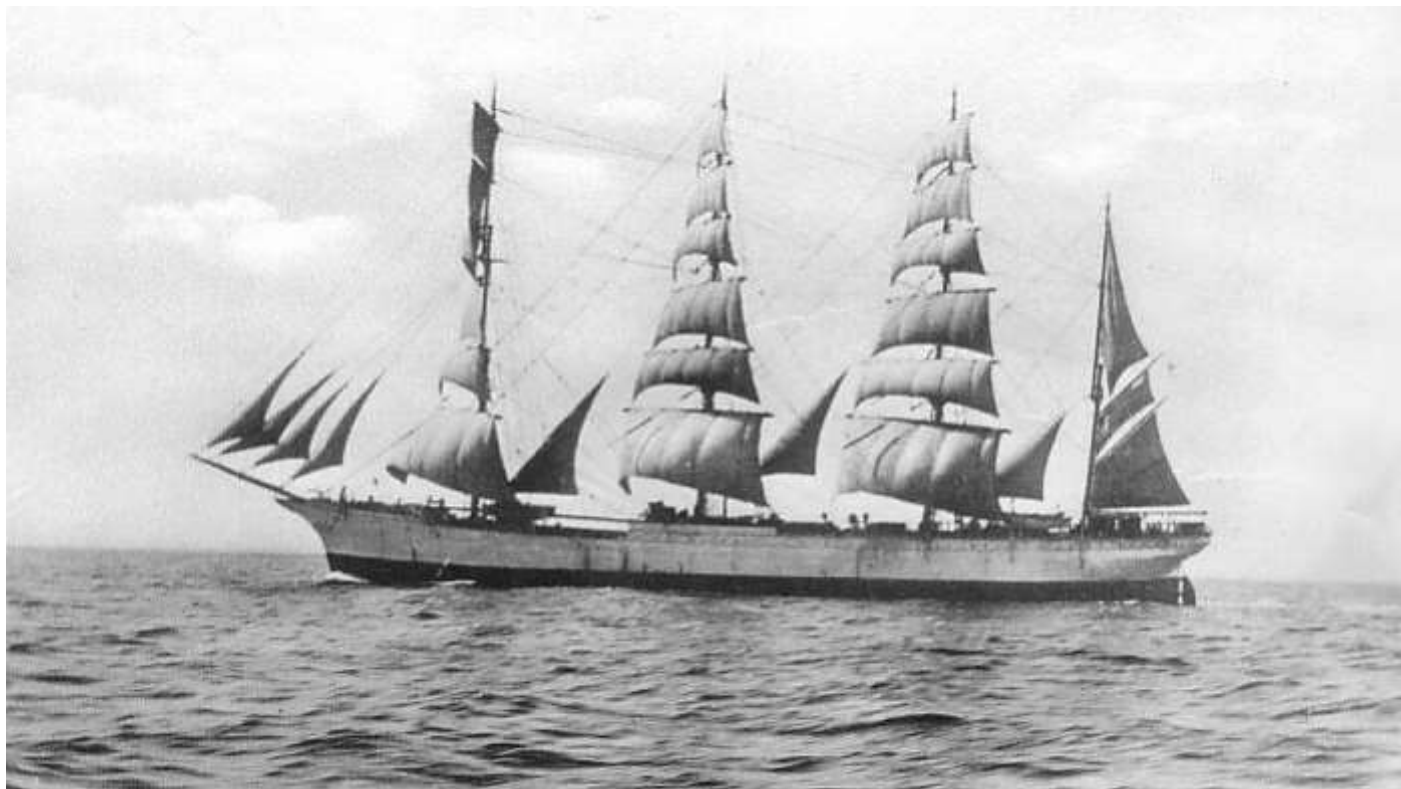


*Loading grain at Port Lincoln*

*Herzogin Cecilie* loading in Port Lincoln 52,500 bags of grain. The wharf lumpers at Port Lincoln didn't tend to overexert themselves. It could take over six weeks to load and this is one of the reasons why sailing ships were able to compete with steam. It would have been an economic for a steamship to be in port for such a long time.









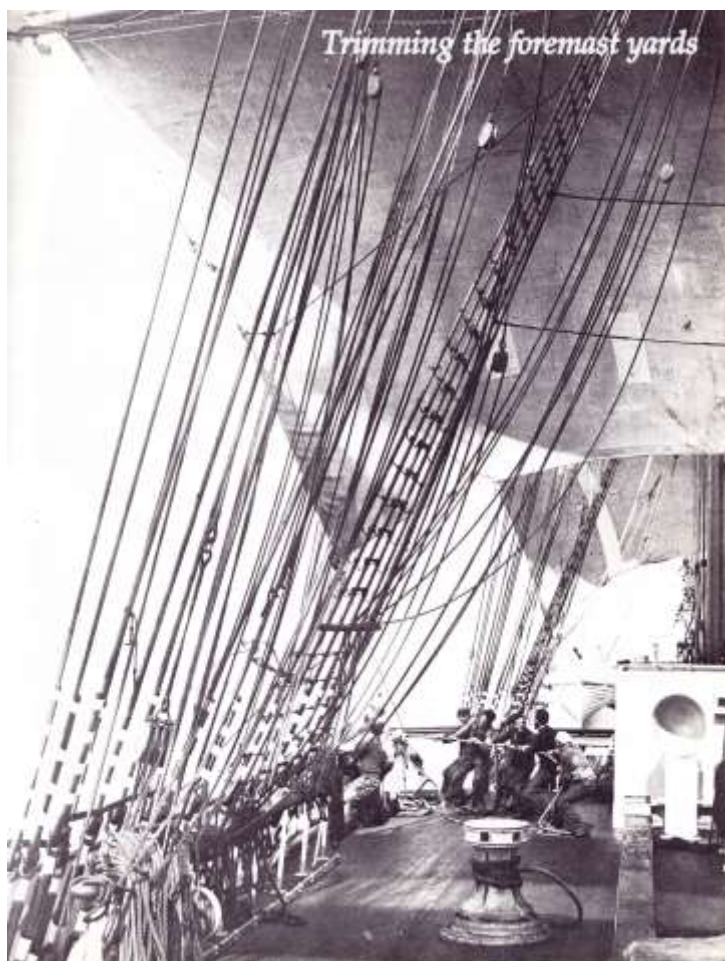


*Herzogin Cecilie under full sail*



*Sailing at 20 knots in 1931*







*The 'Duchess Cecilie'*



*Off Cape Horn*



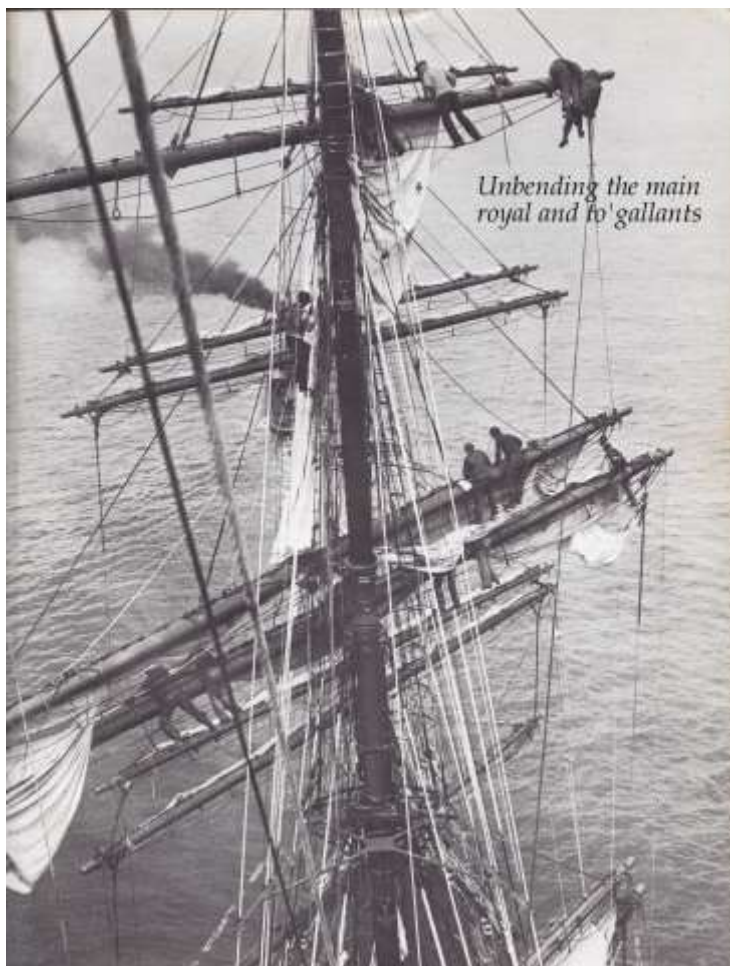
*Off the Horn*



*The Mizzen Yards Squared*







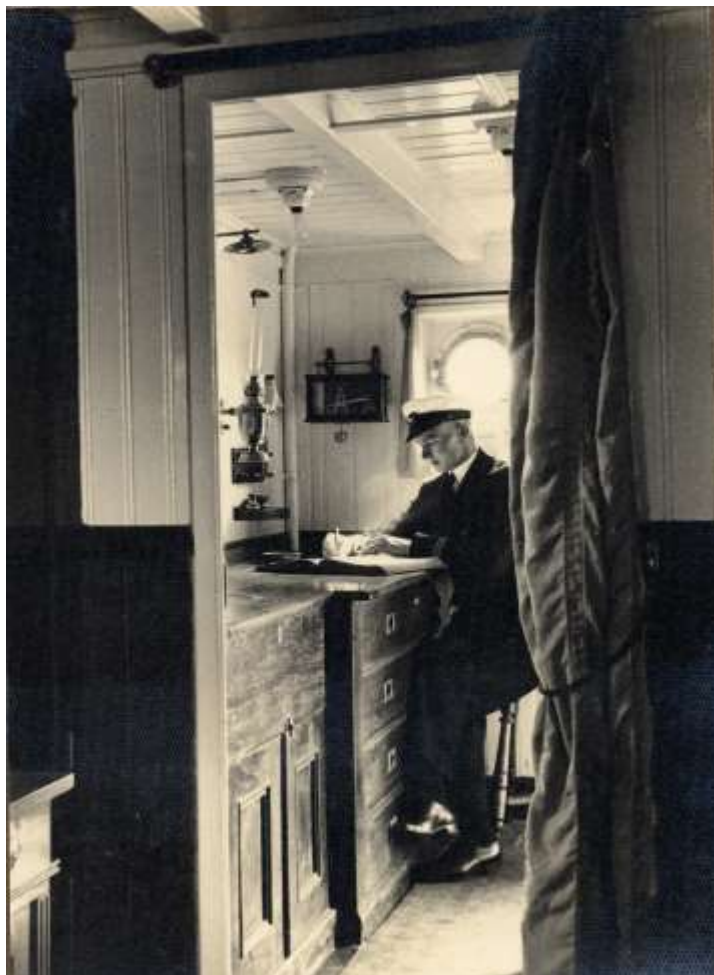




## Falmouth Thursday, 23 April

11.40am: *Herzogin Cecilie* anchors in Falmouth Roads after a fast passage of 86 days

- . One day faster than her nearest rival *Passat*
- . Three days short of *Parma's* record of 83 days in 1933



*Herzogin Cecilie in Falmouth Roads*





## *HERZOGIN CECILIE*

1902-1936

The Final Chapter

86 DAYS TO WIN THE  
RACE

*followed by*

AN 86 DAY FIGHT  
TO SURVIVE



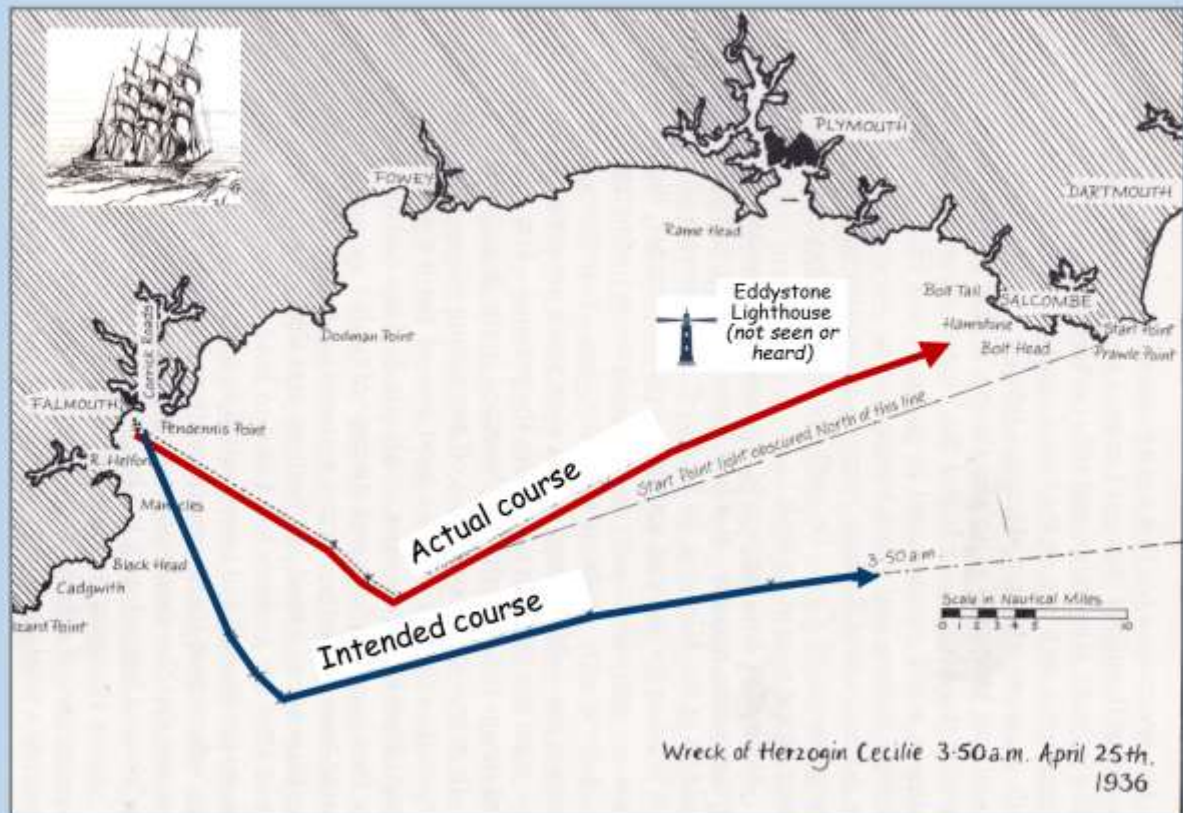
Day 1

Friday, 24 April

4pm: Capt. Eriksson gets orders for Ipswich,  
Diana Firth joins ship as passenger.

8.20pm: crew heave anchor and set all sail  
Wind WSW, force 2-3, Misty and light fog

## Falmouth to Soar Mill Cove: April 24-25



## Day 2 AM, Saturday, April 25

2am: thick fog

3.50am: dark object sighted on port side

- . both watches on deck, sails furled
- . distress signals fired
- . both anchors put out, stern goes aground

5am: lifeboat comes alongside



AM, 25 April, Herzogin Cecilie hard aground with the Ham Stone on the right



*Extract from Falmouth for Orders by Alan Villiers*

'The Mate suddenly saw a dark mass of land reach out from the murk to port. Within moments she had struck, despite urgent efforts to alter seawards. A steel ship of over 3,000 tons full of 4,000 tons of wheat hits rocks hard: she swung off, gravely damaged. Her two great anchors were let go but they could not hold: she swung round out-of-control, driving with sternway in the heavy swell, always toward the point of further danger; she took the ground again, pivoted on a pinnacle of rock, swung broadside to the sea and stuck hard and fast less than 50 yards from the 300-foot cliff that is the west face of Bolt Head — a fool place for a good ship to find herself at any time.'

## The Wreck of the *Halloween* 18th January 1887



*Herzogin Cecilie* stranded just 100 metres from the grave of another famous clipper ship, the *Halloween*





The coastguard at the Greystone lookout saw distress signals from the direction of Sewer Mill Cove and telephoned his colleague at the Steeple Cove lookout, who in turn phoned the Bolt Head coastguard station. There was no reply - the duty coastguard at Bolt Head had failed to connect the alarm to his phone and was fast asleep. So the Steeple Cove coastguard phoned Higher Sewer Farm. Sixteen year-old Betty Smailes



answered the phone and volunteered to run up to the Bolt Head coastguard station to wake them up. Coastguards then phoned Salcombe lifeboat station and the Salcombe lifeboat was launched.

*The Alfred and Clara Heath 1930-8*  
*Salcombe's first motor lifeboat*



A.M. Day 2

Saturday, April 25th 1936

4.30am: Salcombe Lifeboat launched

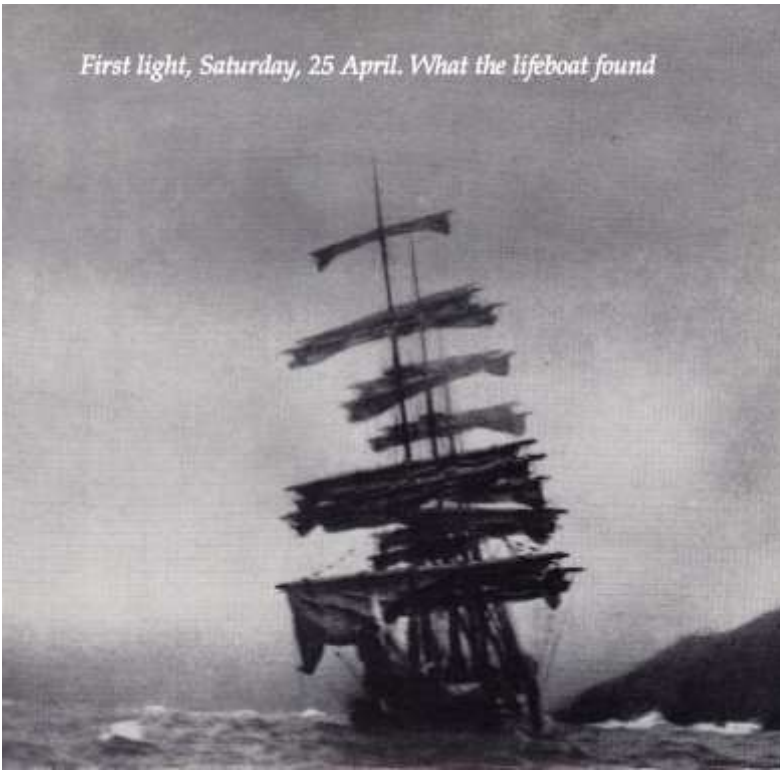
5am: Lifeboat arrives on scene

8am: Lifeboat takes off 21 crew + Diana Firth

12am approx: Lifeboat returns and stands by  
until 2.30pm



First light, Saturday, 25 April. What the lifeboat found

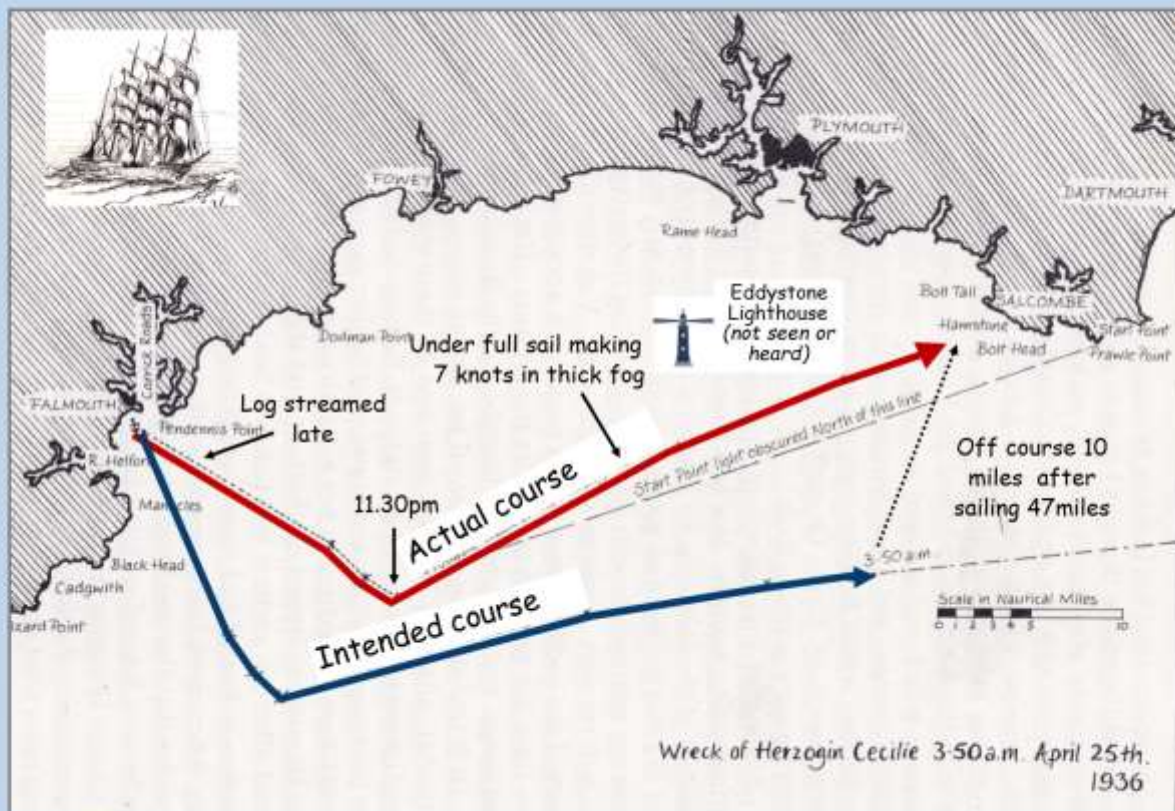


The lifeboat crew did not know what they'd been called out for - only that distress signals had been seen. As they approached Soar Mill Cove the fog lifted and there before them was a full rigged sailing ship. They thought it was a phantom ship - perhaps the ghost of the *Halloween* sunk there 50 years ago.



The 21 crew of the *Herzogin Cecilie* that were taken off were cared for by the Shipwrecked Mariner's Society and by the people of Salcombe..  
(Picture taken at the end of Union Street)

## Falmouth to Soar Mill Cove: April 24-25



## Why was the ship so off-course?

### 1. PHYSICAL FACTORS

- Compass magnetism in the rocks - unlikely
- Compass affected by Magnetic interference from the Northern Lights overhead - possibly. The Northern Lights were reportedly active at the time, although obscured by fog,
- Unusually strong tidal set - possibly. Tidal modelling shows that the N-NE tidal stream towards land, was at its strongest at the time of loss\*
- \* source: An Investigation of the Tidal Conditions at the Loss of the World's Most Impressive Sailing Ship, Small Publications in Historical Geophysics No. 9, Martin Ekman, Summer Institute for Historical Geophysics, Aland Islands, 2002)



# Why was the ship so off-course?

## 2. HUMAN ERROR??

*The following reasons have been put forward in various sources including statements made by members of the crew:*

- . Insufficient allowance made for leeway and tidal set - likely
- . Magnetic variation not applied?
- . Log streamed late?
- . 'Officers not completely sober' after celebrating winning the grain race in Falmouth??
- . Some ill-feeling between crew and officers - with crew not feeling they could express concerns?

Some statements by the crew about the loss:

*Helge Aaltonen:* "I was not on good terms with Eriksson. Everyone would have stayed on the ship if the atmosphere on board had been better. We thought it was faulty navigation in the fog that caused it. The officers were not completely sober when they came on board in Falmouth but they were not staggering. They were more talkative than usual."

*Pehr Hjelt, helmsman:* "Why we hit the rocks I cannot tell, but I suspect that they had not allowed correctly for the tide. We did not sail courses like those drawn on the chart. We who left were so angry and fed-up with the captain and the first mate that we did not give a damn about the ship. There was too much damn discipline on board that ship. Both the captain and first mate were slave drivers"

*Erkki Koskivaara, apprentice:* "The mate Elis Karlsson was somehow odd. I did not understand him, he attacked one now and then. And Sven Eriksson was of the same kind."



P.M. Day 2

Saturday, April 25th 1936

- . Captain and Mrs. Eriksson, Mate, Second Officer, 3 Danes and an Alander remain on board
- . Coastguard rig breeches buoy
- . Night- cold rain
- . Coastguard spend night under tarpaulins











## Day 3

Sunday, April 26th 1936

- Calm sea. Rising tide. First 2 holds flooded, third with 17ft water.
- Captain hopeful of salvage
- Thousands flock to see the wreck
- 4000 cars park at head of Sewer Mill Lane
- International media sensation
- Two French tugs (*Abeille 16* & *24*) from Havre, and powerful German salvage tug (*Seefalke*) from Queenstown arrive but decline to attempt salvage
- Coastguards maintain night vigil

Thousands flock to see the wreck







Day 4

Monday, April 27th 1936

- . Calm sea
- . Royals brought down - end of hopes of salvage?
- . PM. Bosun's chair rigged from jigger mast.
- . Coastguard breeches buoy dismantled.
- . Various personal effects landed



Pam Erikson came ashore and met up again with her friend Diana Firth who lived at Bradley Manor, outside Newton Abbott. Now a National Trust property, it is worth visiting see one of *Herzogin Cecilie's* wheels and other artefacts.



Ship's papers and personal belongings being carried away. Unfortunately there was some pilfering.



HERZOGIN CECILIE  
THE FAMOUS WINDJAMMER  
ON THE ROCKS AT SOARMILL COVE  
DEVON 1222



HERZOGIN CECILIE  
ON THE ROCKS SOAR MILL COVE DEVON 1220





Day 5

Tuesday, April 28th 1936

- . 20 feet of water in the after holds at high water. *Herzogin Cecilie* held fast, suspended on rock for two-thirds of her length forward of the mizzen mast.
- . Thousands of tons of sodden, swelling grain inside her.
- . Sails and ship's gear brought ashore.





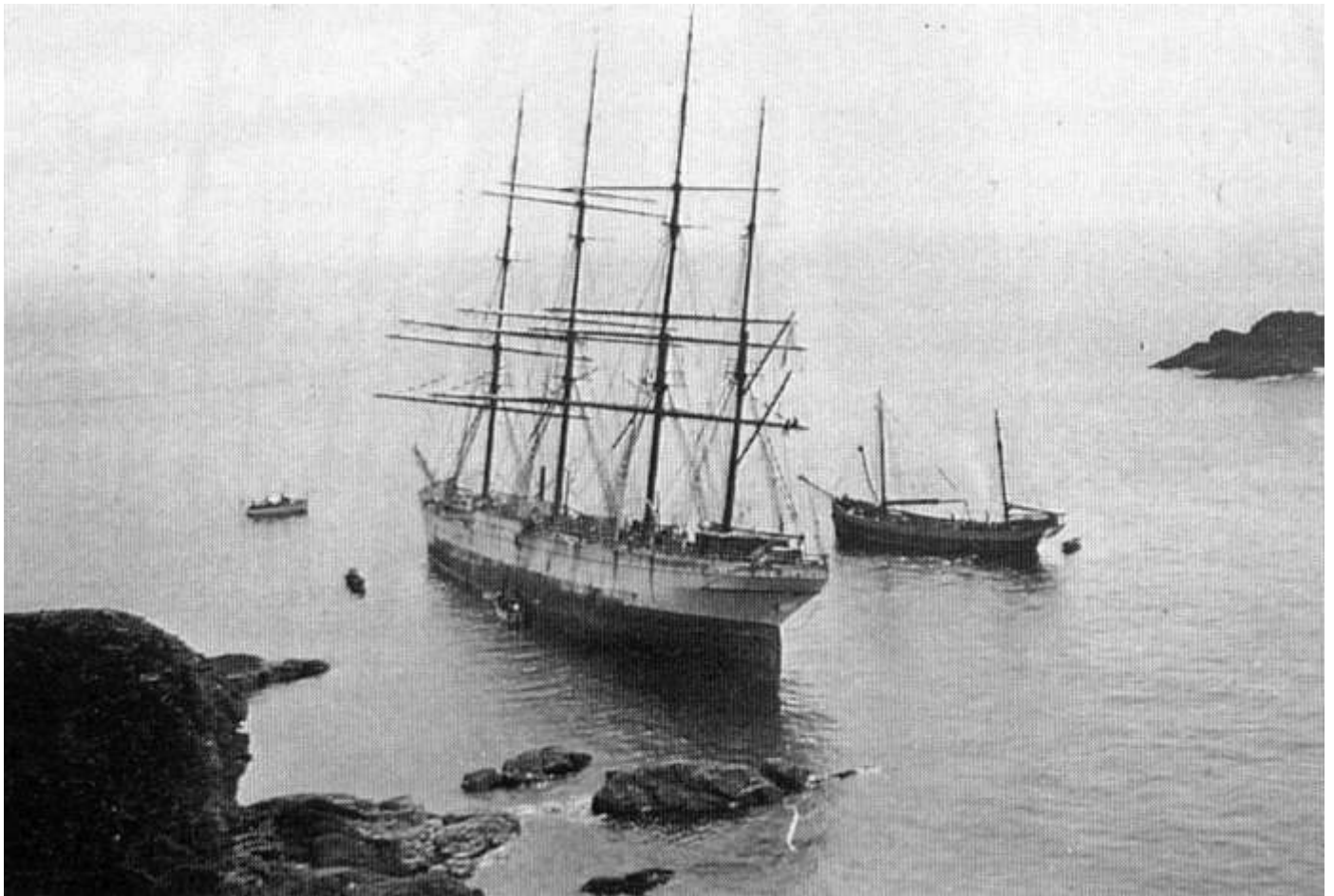
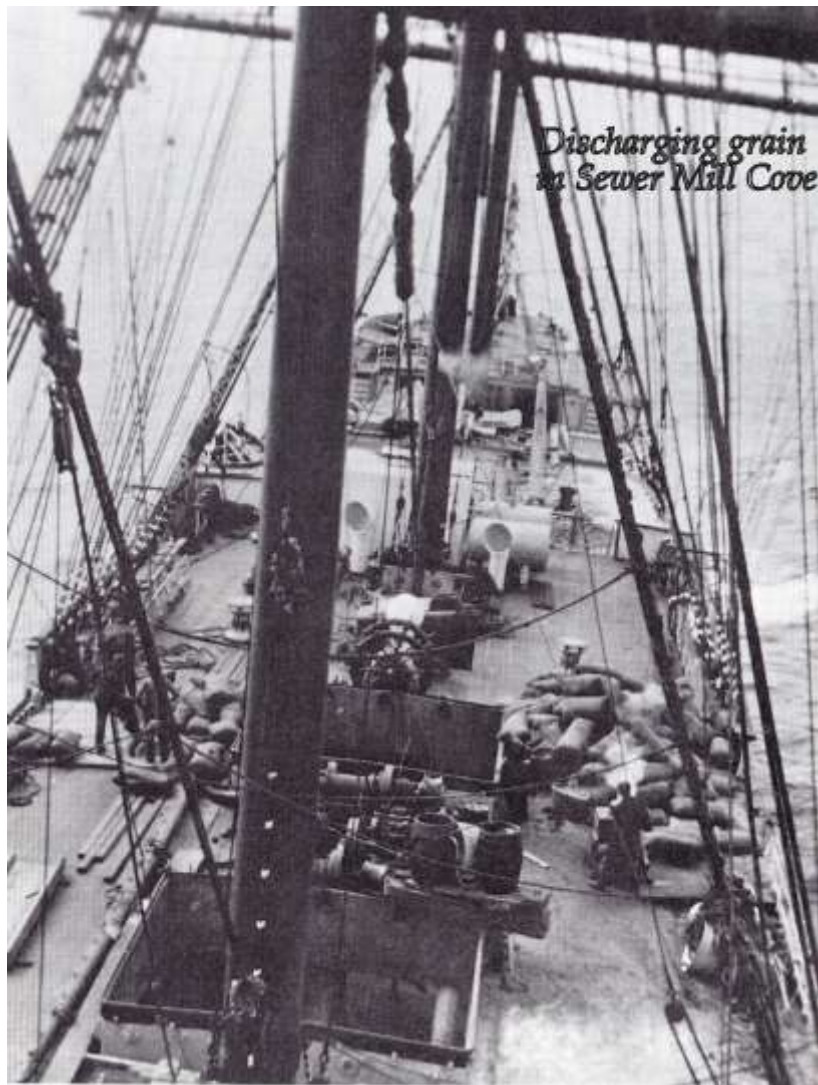
Day 6

Wednesday, April 29th 1936

- . Work commences by a Southampton salvage company, Risdon Beazley of Southampton.
- . Lighters arrive for removal of cargo









Day 9

Saturday, May 2 1936

- . Huge crowds gather
- . Roads congested, particularly near Langworthy crossroads
- . Lady Houston offers to save *Herzogin Cecilie* on condition that the Admiralty will use the barque as a naval training-ship.
- . First Lord of the Admiralty replies, saying it is 'not our policy to provide sail training in the Royal Navy'.



Days 11-17

May 4-10 1936

- . Good weather continues
- . Ship's gear removed
- . About 500 tons grain transferred to Thames barge *Lady Daphne*, the Tamar barge *Triumph* and the motor-vessel *Roselyne* and shipped to Plymouth.
- . Value of dry wheat about £6 per ton, wet wheat £2 (used for pig food)



*May 10, a diver about to examine the hull*



HERZOGIN CECILIE

MARIEHAMN

BRUTTO TONS 231

NETTO " 234

I

den

DIVERS REPORT. May 10th, 1936

#### Starboard Side.

From the turn of the forefoot back for ten feet she is standing in a cleft of rock, her keel clear by one foot. The cleft reaches up about six feet on either side.

From ten feet back to the foremast she lies on sand. At that point under the foremast she bears heavily on rock.

Under the second hatch she is bearing against rock. From the foremast to this point she is laying on sand.

From the second hatch to the main rigging nothing but sand in which the vessel is settled.

Under No 4 hatch bearing against a fair sized rock.

From the fore part of No 5 hatch to the stern the vessel is bearing on a flat ridge of rocks.

#### Port Side.

Under the after part of the fore-rigging can be seen a very large rock about 8 feet wide and eight feet high extending under the vessel. There was no trace of holes but vessel may be penetrated further under her bottom at this point.

The forepart of the vessel including a part of the keel (about 10 feet) can be seen as on the starboard side.

Under the break of the poop a large rock extends under the vessel and shorewards for several feet. About six feet aft of this is a smaller rock on which the vessel is bearing. This small rock has indented the plates under the turn of the bilge and the indentation appears to extend towards the keel.

Under No 3 hatch another very large rock is bearing under the turn of the bilge.

Under the mizzen mast the ship is bearing heavily against a large rock which extends under the bilge.

Under No 5 hatch the ship is resting on a large rock which at low water is only a foot below the surface beside the ship where it is visible from deck. Here the ship is bulged in by the rock, but the plates do not appear to be pierced.

From No 5 hatch right down to the keel to aft the vessel can be seen and everything appears to be in order. No trace of damage to the rudder.

Contractor.

*W. Phillips* Diver.

Salcombe, May 10th, 1936.

*E. I. Adams*





## Day 32

### Sunday, 24 May 1936

- . Appeal launched in a Sunday newspaper for contributions to a salvage and repair fund.
- . Gustaf Erikson guarantees to take up to ten British apprentices yearly, free of all fees if the public help the "Duchess" sail again.
- . Ship opened to public visits at 1/6 per head
- . Souvenir hunters a problem.

#### GUSTAF ERIKSON

##### THE DUCHESS CECILIE APPEAL

Early in the morning of the 25th of April, 1936, the fourmasted barque "Herzogin Cecilie" went ashore at Sewer Mill Cove on the rugged Devon Coast.

The Finnish owner, Sjöfartsrådet Gustaf Erikson, while willing to spend up to £ 2000 on the ship when he knows the vessel can sail again is not willing to take the risks attendant on preliminary salvage operations.

The master of the vessel, Captain Sven Eriksson, with the consent of the owner, has arranged for these preliminary salvage operations to be commenced, aided by a powerful backer, who wishes to remain anonymous.

While all salvage operations are a gamble, the backer has expressed the opinion that the preliminary operations will prove successful, unless unlikely circumstances, such as abnormal weather or greater damage than is at present revealed by the first rough survey, occur.

With the arrangements for the preliminary salvage complete it is resolved to appeal to the public for fund to help repair the damage done. In consideration of the money which is required being raised by public subscription in this country, Captain Erikson has further arranged with the owner to undertake to accept six to ten British apprentices on the Herzogin Cecilie every year for one round voyage free of all fees until the whole of the moneys raised by this appeal have been repaid, the basis to be £ 50 per cadet, being the fee which is usually charged. The owner will take these apprentices only as long as he is able to run the "HERZOGIN CECILIE" at a profit.

Representatives of British sea training are being approached to form a committee to deal with the choice of apprentices.

The money which is being subscribed will not be used until the vessel has been surveyed by qualified surveyor and pronounced repairable within the limits on the moneys available. If the fund should not prove sufficient the money will be returned to subscribers and anonymous and collective subscriptions presented to some seafaring charity.

Cheques should be made payable to the  
Duchess Cecilie Appeal  
Lloyds Bank Ltd.,  
Salcombe.  
South Devon.

The treasurer of the fund is the manager of the above Bank,  
H.O. Young, Esq.





HERZOGIN CECILIE ON THE ROCKS SEWERMILL COVE, MALBOROUGH.



Two fine old ladies - the *Queen Mary* comes in close



Day 48

Wednesday, 10 June 1936

- . 10am: Attempt made at high water to refloat the ship by two tugs, *Trevol* and *Alexandra*, connected up with the stern of the barque.
- . All efforts fail as the tide falls away



Day 53

Monday, 15 June 1936

- . Six Cambridge undergraduates board the *Herzogin Cecilie* to help with salvage efforts

Day 55

Wednesday, 17 June 1936

- . Salcombe UDC protest against dumping of sodden wheat from *Herzogin Cecilie* on the Council Quay

Practical as well as financial help is now being offered. Public authorities such as HM Customs are obstructive - Pam Erikson rails against 'pettifogging' bureaucracy in her book 'The Duchess'. Local people though are considered to be generally kind and helpful.



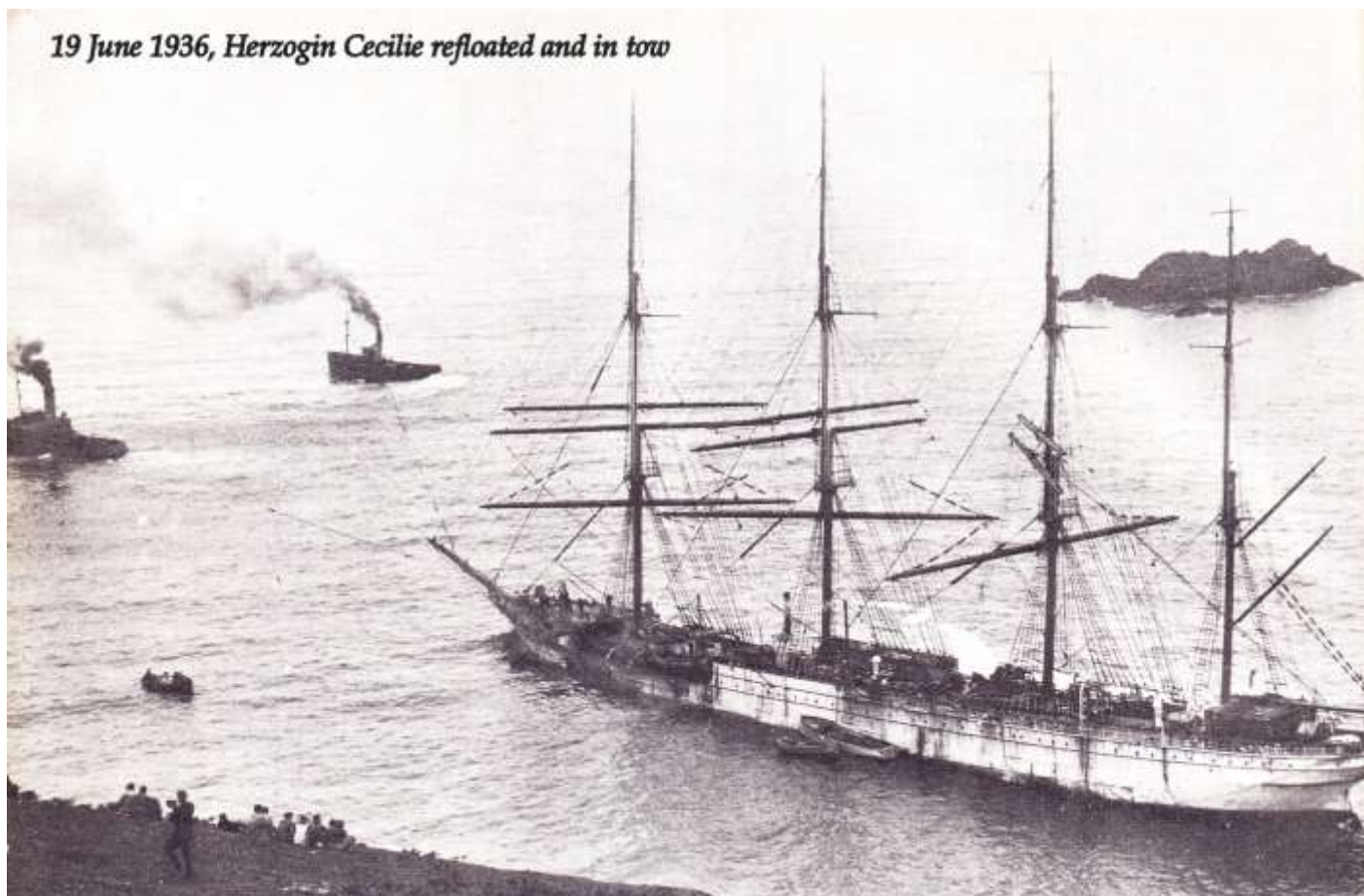


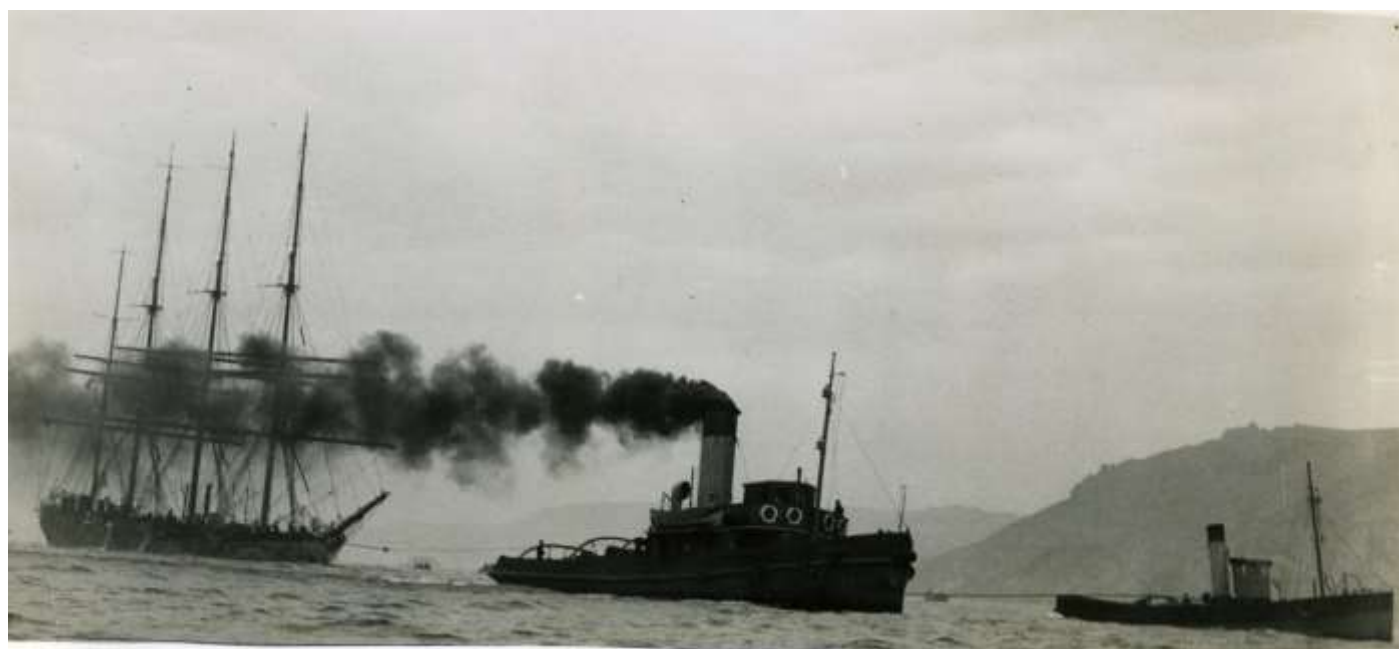
Day 57  
Friday, 19 June 1936

4pm: The tugs *Alexandra* and *Trevol* arrive and churn the water without success

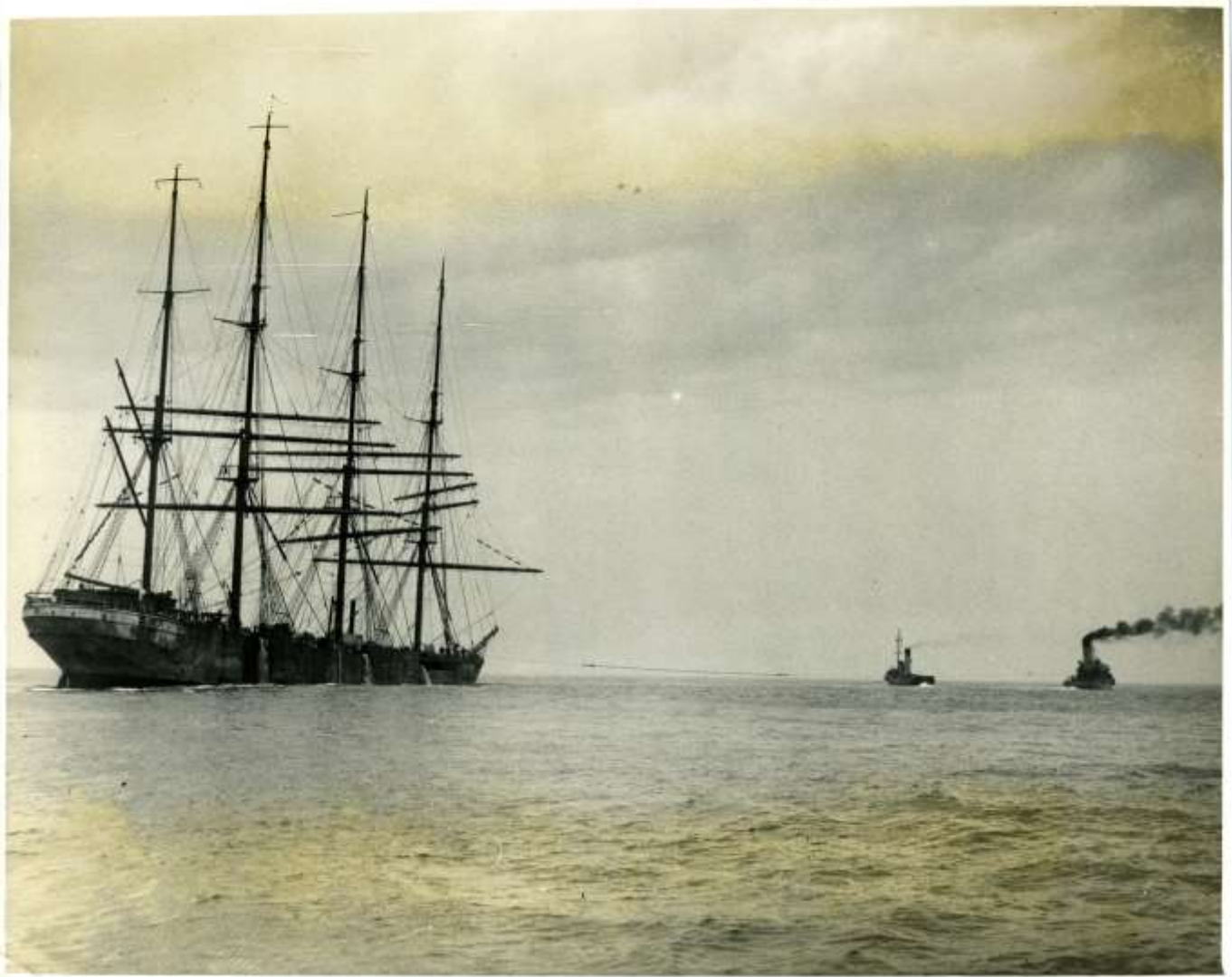
5.40pm: Finally the ship is free and she is towed in triumph around Bolt Head to Starehole Bay.

19 June 1936, *Herzogin Cecilie* refloated and in tow





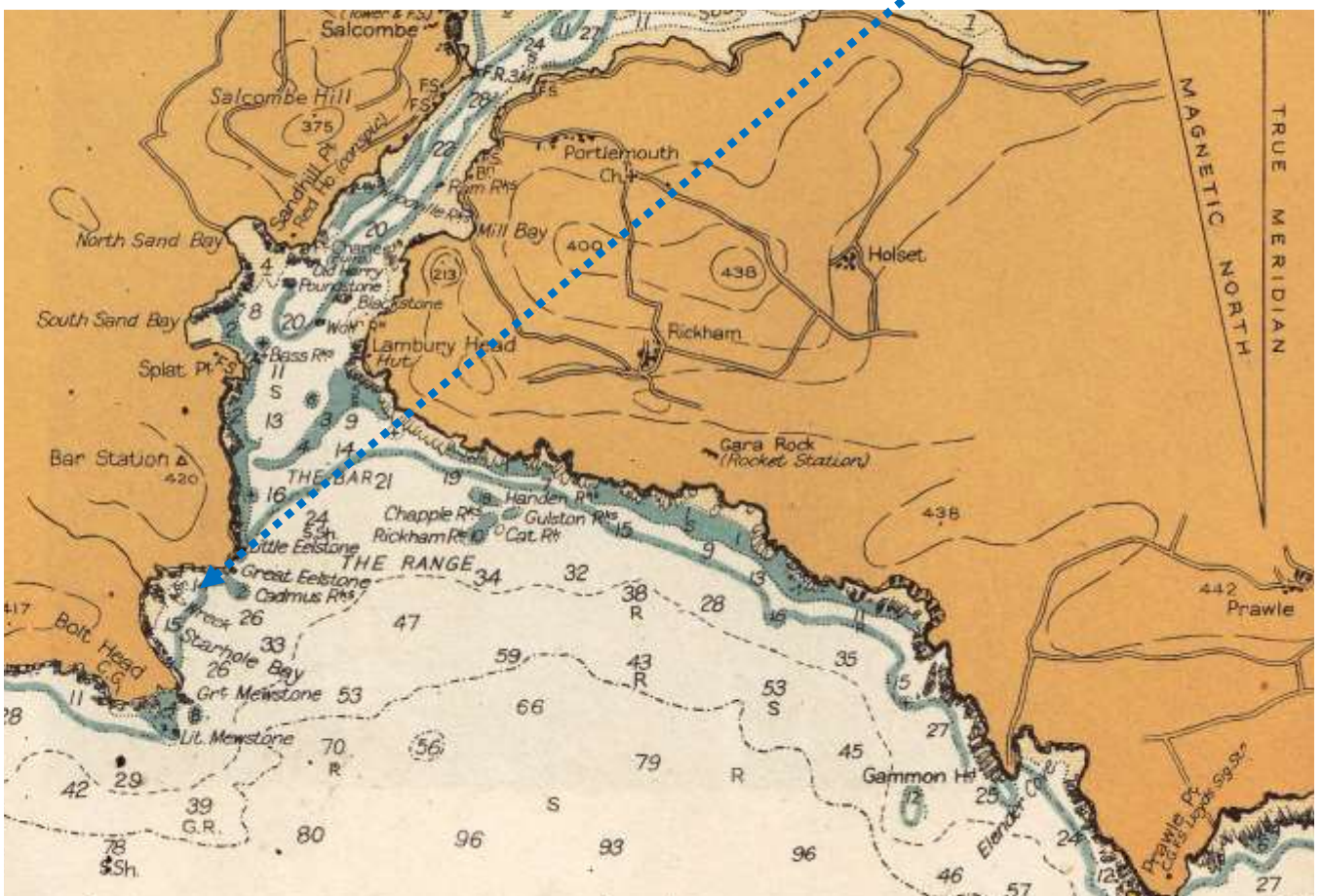








The harbour entrance. The plan was to empty as much cargo as possible to lighten the ship, do some basic patching of the hull and then tow the HC to dry dock in Plymouth or Falmouth. Salcombe Urban District Council refused entry into the harbour and so it was decided to beach her on a sandy bed in Starehole Bay, which was sheltered except from the south-east.







*First mate Elis Karlsson  
on the 3-strand rope bridge*



A rope bridge was rigged to provide access to the shore. It presented no problem for the crew but some of the visitors paying their 1/6 to visit the ship found it a bit 'hairy.'



*Throwing the rotting  
grain overboard*

The Cambridge graduates at work



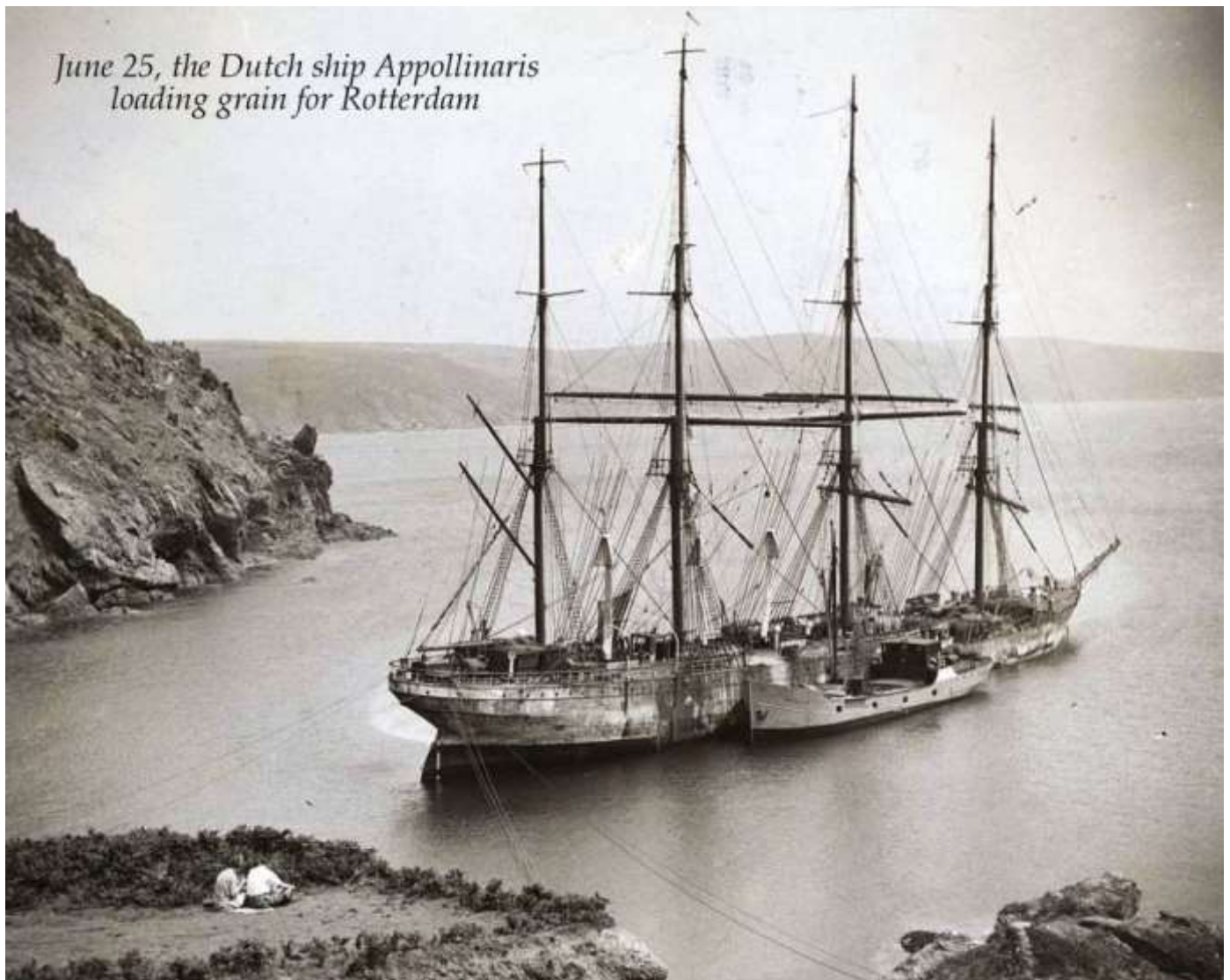
Salcombe Council objected to grain  
being dropped over the side, but  
the work carried on.





Day 62  
Thursday, June 25

- . the Dutch ship *Appollinaris IV* loads grain for Rotterdam
- . workers are suffering from the fumes and their eyes are affected.



The *Appolonaris* carried the spoilt grain to Rotterdam for pig food – one way of getting salted bacon!



Day 68  
Monday, June 30

- . the local Medical Officer claims that gases given off from the rotting grain are inflammable and liable to explode.

Day 82  
Tuesday, July 14

- . Captain Eriksson is overpowered by gas fumes in the lower hold, and is found lying in water. Although not wearing a mask, he soon recovers.



The medical officer's report on June 30 causes the local labourers employed to remove grain to down tools. This slows down the rate of removal.





Days 85 & 86  
Night of Friday, July 17/  
Saturday, July 18

- . Gale force S.E. winds lash the ship. Salvage men are sent ashore
- . the violent ground-swell causes the HC to work deeper into the sand finally resting midships on an exposed rib of rock
- . Rivets fly as the HC breaks her back
- . The skipper, his wife and the two mates abandon ship



The weight of the ship meant she had already worked her way down through the sand by 12 ft. (4metres)



Friday, 24 July 1936

- . The position of the *Herzogin Cecilie* is now considered hopeless and she will be stripped of all fittings.



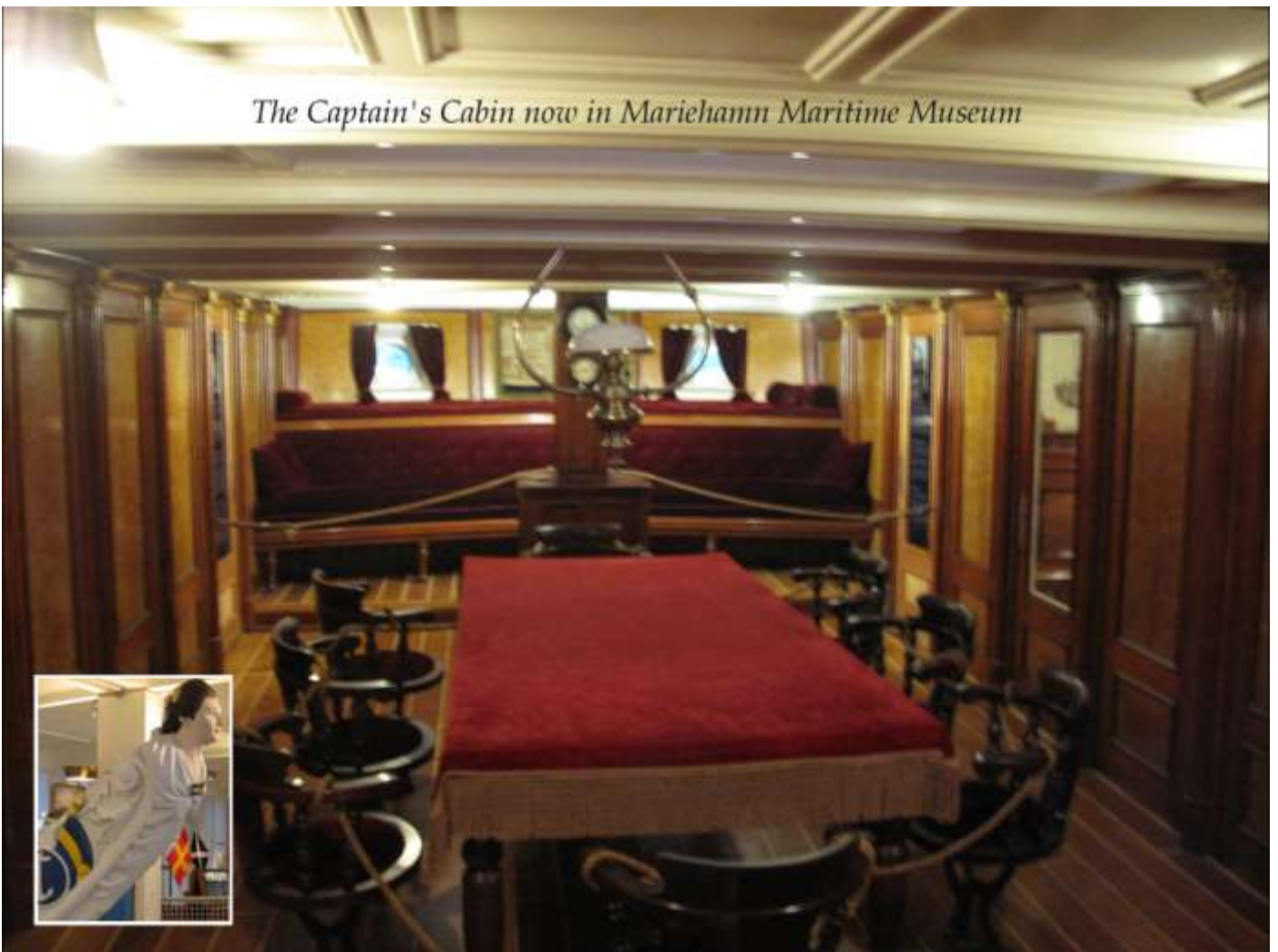




22-29 August 1936

Gustaf Erikson's motorship *Vera* arrives and strips all useful moveable gear for return to Mariehamn. The figurehead and Captain's quarters will go to the Aland Maritime Museum.

*The Captain's Cabin now in Mariehamn Maritime Museum*





24 September 1936

An offer of £225 for the vessel was accepted from the Kingsbridge scrap-merchants, William Edward and Edwin Noyce

consideration of the Sum of Twohundred and Twentyfive Pounds British Sterling paid to me by William Edward Noyce of Marwill, Warren Road, Kingsbridge in the County of Devon England the Receipt wherof is hereby acknowledged, transfer The wreck of the above named "HERZOGIN CECILIE" as she now lies at Starhole Bay, Devon. Excluding deck house and after deck, to the said William Edward Noyce.







Monday, 12 July 1937

- . Six men start the task of breaking the ship up where she lies.
- . The teak from the main deck is to be removed and sold to a timber merchant and the steel work is to be cut down to water level with oxy-acetylene torches.
- . The metal will be sent to Wales to be smelted down.









*Nearing the end in Starehole Bay, 1937*

















Wednesday, 18 Jan 1939

- . The *Herzogin Cecilie* finally capsizes and disappears.
- . Wreckage is found floating in the harbour and in the Channel



## Picture Credits

Kingsbridge Cookworthy Museum; Ålands Sjöfarts Museum; Ann Noyce; Sarah Dorey and RNLI Salcombe Lifeboat Museum.

© Salcombe Maritime Museum