

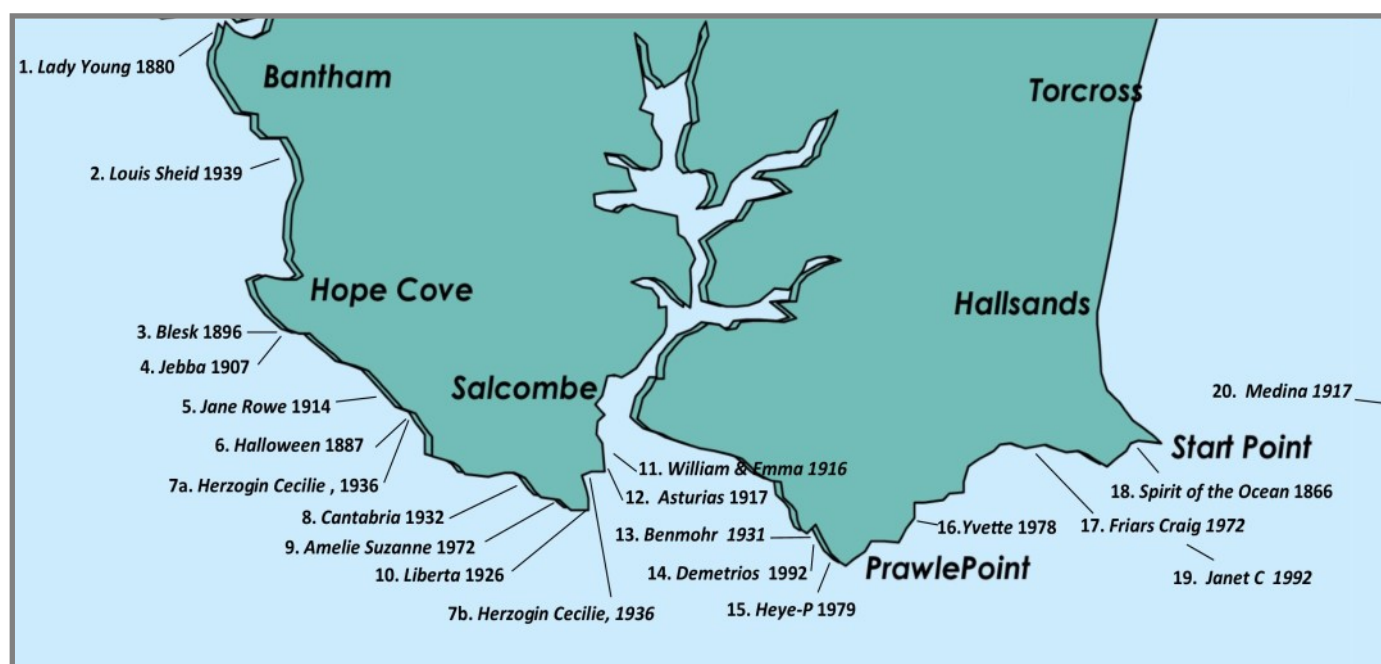


SHIPWRECK!



Notable wrecks between
Bantham Bay & Start Bay,
South Devon

WRECK AND RESCUE ON THE SOUTH HAMS COAST

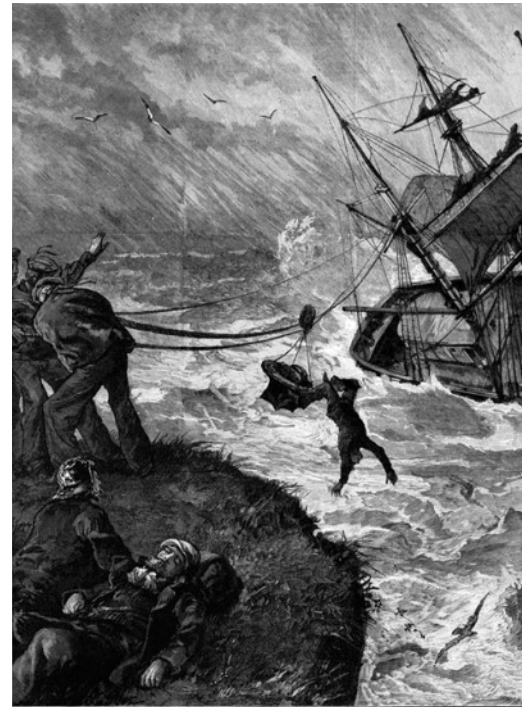


Salcombe – Devon's southernmost town – looks out upon the busy shipping lanes of the English Channel. To the east, the jagged headlands of Start and Prawle Points and, to the west, the rockbound coast between Bolt Head and Bolt Tail, have long been known as a graveyard of ships. It was not only rocks that posed a threat to passing mariners. Wrecking, the practice of looting ships that had foundered close inshore, is known to have been carried out in the 18th century by people living in the poor communities along this stretch of coast. While there is no evidence that ships were deliberately lured by guiding lights onto the rocks by wreckers, the looting of wrecks was common practice. Fortunately, more enlightened attitudes prevailed in the 19th century and, with the foundation of the RNLI in 1824 the story becomes one of selfless courage and humanity, rather than callous indifference, towards those in peril on the sea.

The dramatic wrecks and rescues described in this album date from between 1866 and 1992. They are displayed in the order shown on the chart above - from Bantham Bay in the west to Start Bay in the east.

Design and text by Roger Barrett

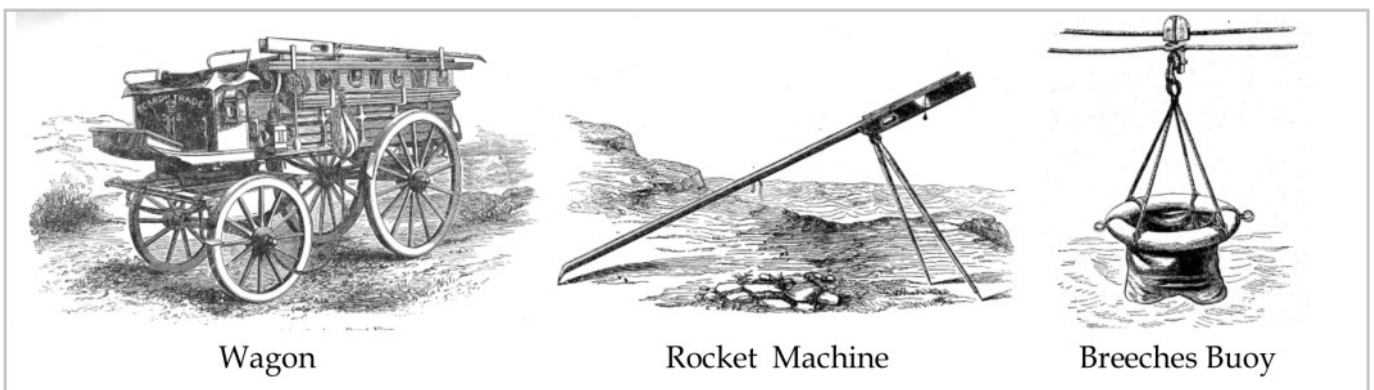
© Salcombe Maritime Museum 2022

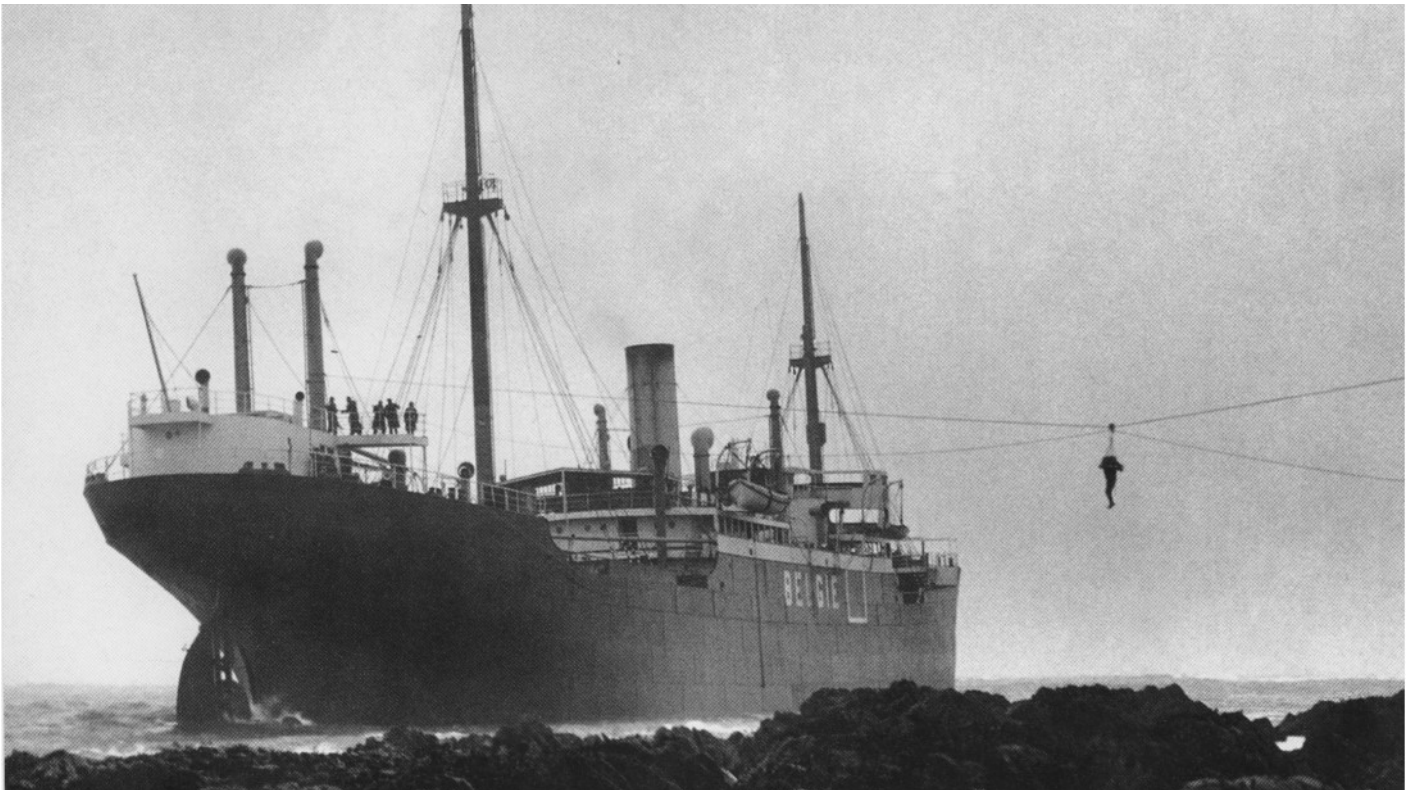


1. *Lady Young*, Bantham, 27th October 1880

The 598 ton barque *Lady Young* of Liverpool was driven ashore in a gale at West Down Point, near Bantham, Bigbury Bay on 27th October 1880. Challaborough coastguards took off 13 of the crew by breeches buoy but the Captain's steward, John Nabsley, stayed onboard so that he could collect some of his belongings and those of the captain. He then stuffed his bulging bag into the breeches and sat on top of the buoy. Becoming unstable, Nabsley fell to his death. The engraving on the right is from the report of the incident in the *Illustrated London News*.

Below: The breeches buoy rescue apparatus used by the Coastguard lifesaving companies. A line was fired by rocket over the stricken ship. Once it was attached to the mast by the ship's crew, it was used to haul out heavier lines and running along one of them was the breeches buoy. This was a pair of breeches (trousers) suspended from a lifebuoy. The survivors would then climb into the breeches buoy to be hauled ashore one at a time.





2. *Louis Sheid*, Leas Foot, Thurlestone 8th December 1939

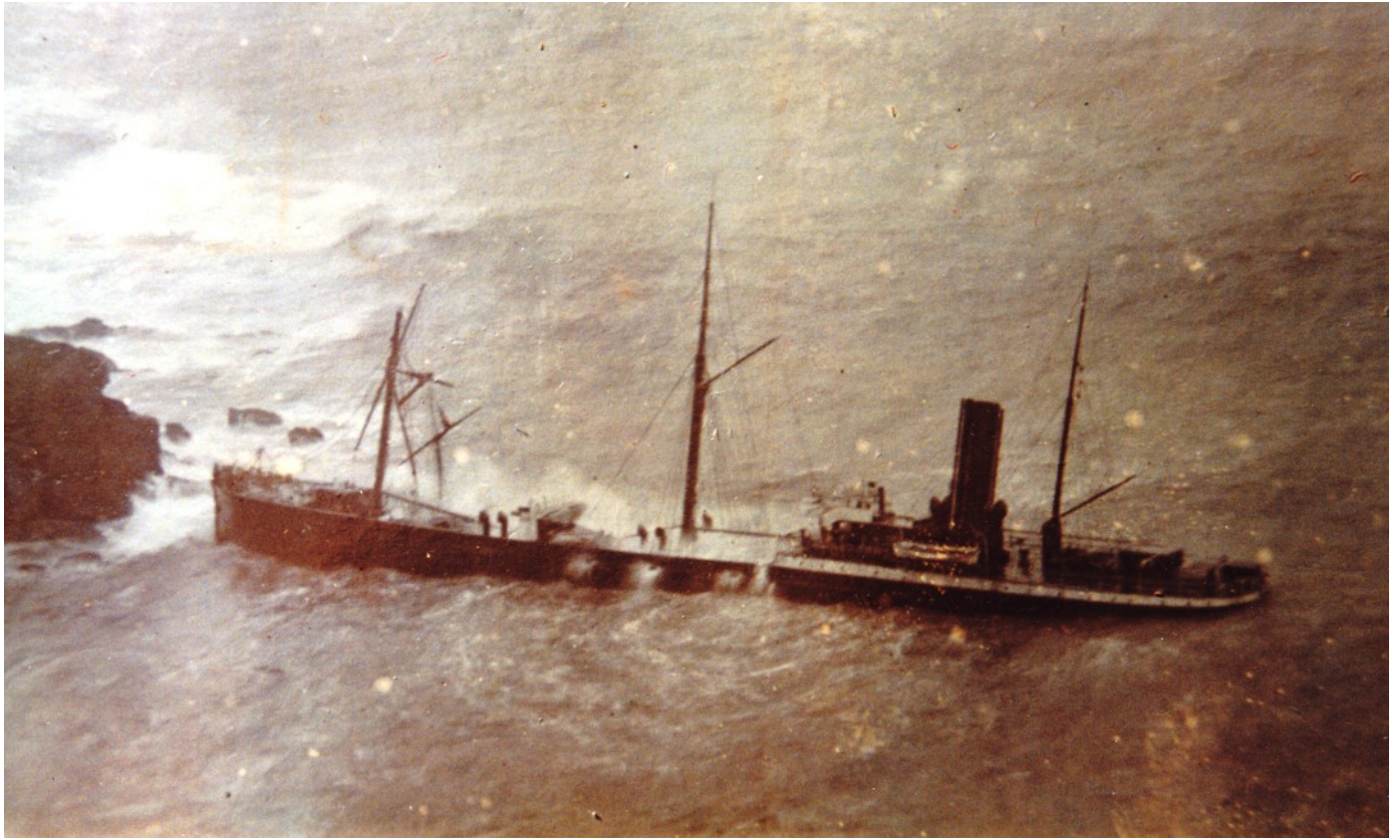
Three months into the Second World War, on 7th December 1939, the Dutch cargo-liner *Tajandoen* was torpedoed in the English Channel by a German U-boat. Fortunately for the survivors, the Belgian ship *Louis Sheid* was nearby and managed to rescue 62 men, women and children. Fearing that his ship could soon meet with the same fate as the *Tajandoen*, the *Louis Sheid*'s captain made for the safety of shallow coastal water, only to run aground on 8th December 1939 at Leas Foot just below Thurlestone Golf Club.

In the huge seas it took two hours for Salcombe Lifeboat to reach the scene. With superb seamanship cox'n Eddie Distin got alongside the *Louis Sheid* and, with the waves rising and falling 20 to 30 feet, took off 40 of

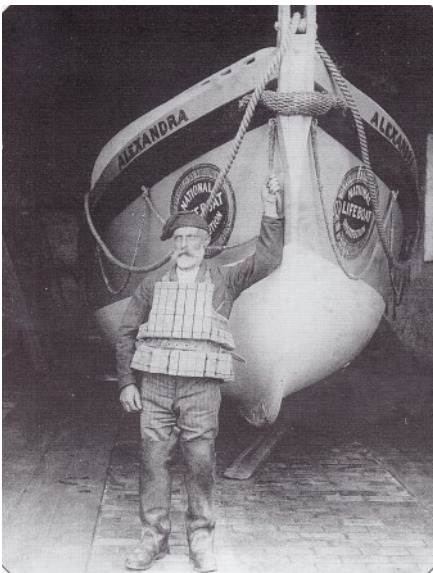


Coxswain Eddie
Distin

the crew of the *Tajandoen*. They were transferred, eight at a time, into a small open boat manned by three Hope Cove men and ferried ashore. The lifeboat then returned and took off another 22 men. The crew of the *Louis Sheid* were brought off by breeches buoy whilst the lifeboat stood by. By the time she returned to Salcombe she had been out for over 15 hours. The RNLI silver medal was awarded to Eddie Distin and a bronze medal to each of his crew of seven.



3. *Blesk*, Greystone, Bolt Tail 1st December 1896



On 1st December 1896, the Russian steamer *Blesk*, from Odessa for Hamburg, got ashore to the east of Graystone Ledge, near Bolt Tail in very thick weather. She was laden with about 3,000 tons of petroleum. Hope Cove lifeboat, with coxswain William Ash at the helm, put off to her assistance and took off her crew of 43 in two trips. The oil spillage from the wreck caused a great deal of damage to local wildlife and was the first oil pollution incident to be recorded on the South Devon coast.

Cox'n William Ash



4. *Jebba*, Graystone Ledge, Bolt Tail 18th March 1907

In the early hours of 18th March 1907, the Elder Dempster liner *Jebba*, with 155 people on board, ran ashore at Bolt Tail. The Hope Cove lifeboat, *Alexandra*, reached the scene at about 2.15 am. The crew found the *Jebba* lying broadside to the cliffs with heavy seas breaking over her. The *Alexandra* was forced to stand off while the Hope Cove Life Saving Apparatus Team attempted to get a line across her from the cliffs above.



*Rescuers Isaac Jarvis
& Jack Argeat*

Isaac Jarvis, and fellow fisherman Jack Argeat climbed down the 200ft (60metres) sheer cliff face in the dark and managed to rig a bosun's chair and haul ashore 117 people from the *Jebba* whilst the Hope Cove Life Saving Apparatus Team above saved a further 38.



5. *Jane Rowe*, Bolberry Down 28th February 1914



In February 1914 the Swedish steamship *Jane Rowe* carrying iron ore from Oran, Morocco to Rotterdam was wrecked under Bolberry Down to the west of Lantern Rock. The heavy breaking seas forced the Hope Cove lifeboat to stand off whilst the crew were brought ashore by the Hope Cove LSA* (Lifesaving Apparatus) Company's rocket apparatus. In the picture above the Hope Cove Lifeboat can be seen to seaward of the steamer.



Hope Cove LSA Company



6. *Halloween*, Soar Mill Cove 17th January 1887

The first effective service of the first Hope Cove Lifeboat *Alexandra* was in January 1887 when coxswain James Thornton and his crew rescued nineteen men from the 920 ton tea clipper *Halloween*, which had ran aground in thick fog in Sewer (now Soar) Mill Cove the night before. The crew fired flares and burned bedding and clothing to attract the attention of the coastguards but to no avail and, with huge waves breaking over the ship, they had to spend the night in the rigging suffering terribly from the cold. Three men swam ashore with a line but one drowned and the line slipped from the grasp of the other two men. The first person to spot the wreck at dawn was John Ford, farmer at Southdown Farm. He sent a messenger to Hope Cove coastguards. The lifeboat was launched and took off her remaining crew.



Coxswain James Thornton



7a. *Herzogin Cecilie*, Ham Stone, Soar Mill Cove 25th April 1936



The famous Finnish windjammer the *Herzogin Cecilie*, sailing from Falmouth to Ipswich with a cargo of Australian grain, struck the Ham Stone off Sewer (now Soar) Mill Cove at 3.50am on 25th April 1936. With a hole in her bow, her foredecks were soon awash. The Salcombe lifeboat *Alfred and Clara Heath* stood by for three hours until the captain of the *Herzogin Cecilie*, Sven Eriksson, asked

the coxswain, Eddie Distin, to take off a lady passenger and 21 of the crew. Then, having landed them, the lifeboat returned and stood by until the Hope Cove lifesaving apparatus team got a line aboard and rigged a breeches buoy. In the picture at the top Salcombe Lifeboat can be seen standing off between the ship and the Ham Stone.



*7b. Herzogin Cecilie's last resting place,
Starehole Bay, 1936-9*



The 'Duchess', as the *Herzogin Cecilie* was fondly known, was towed, in June 1936, to Starehole Bay near the entrance to Salcombe Harbour, where some of her cargo was unloaded. Although great efforts were made to salvage the ship, her back was broken in heavy storms and she became a total wreck. The sad fate of the 'Duchess', was headline news around the world and thousands of people came to South Devon to see her before she finally disappeared below the waves in 1939.



8. *Cantabria*, Steeple Cove, Bolt Head 13th December 1932

In the early hours of 13th December 1932 the S.S. *Cantabria*, on a voyage from Bilboa to Newcastle with a cargo of iron ore, came ashore in thick fog in Steeple Cove to the west of Bolt Head. The crew managed to get ashore in the ship's boat but were unable to scale the steep cliffs. When the



Salcombe Lifeboat, *Alfred and Clara Heath*, arrived on the scene, the coxswain Eddie Distin was unable to get her close into the cliffs because of the heavy ground swell and so he used the *Cantabria's* boat to ferry all 24 men, two at a time, to the safety of the lifeboat.

Alfred and Clara Heath and her crew.
Eddie Distin on the right



9. *Amelie Suzanne*, Off Cove Point, near Bolt Head, 1st April 1972

In dense fog in the early hours of 1st April 1972, the 95 ton Belgian trawler *Amelie Suzanne* ran ashore in Off Cove, near Bolt Head. Salcombe Lifeboat put to sea and found the trawler hard aground at the foot of 200 feet (60metre) high cliffs and, in the swell, she was lifting and bumping heavily on the rocks and in danger of breaking-up. Because of the shallow water close to the trawler and the heavy backwash coming off the cliffs, Coxswain 'Bubbles' Distin (the son of former coxswain Eddie Distin) decided to rescue the men by using the breeches-buoy. He dropped anchor and veered down to within 75 yards of the trawler and a rocket line was fired across. This was made fast and the breeches-buoy rigged. The five Belgian fishermen were then hauled, one at a time, into the water. For his skill and fine seamanship during this rescue, Coxswain Distin received the "Thanks on Vellum" from the RNLI and certificates were presented to the crew.

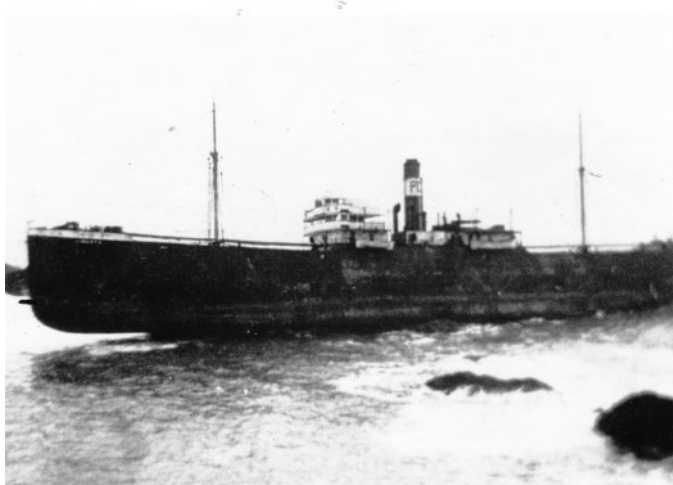


*Coxswain 'Bubbles'
Distin*



10. *Liberta*, Little Mewstone, Bolt Head 15th February 1926

On 15th February 1926 the Italian steamship *Liberta*, from Genoa, was wrecked on the Little Mewstone at the entrance to Salcombe harbour. She had got ashore in heavy weather in the early hours of the morning. With Salcombe lifeboat station closed, the Hope Cove and Torbay lifeboats were launched. The Hope Cove boat, *Alexandra*, reached the casualty first but,



unable to get in close, stood by until daylight when the line-throwing gun was used by the Torbay motor lifeboat *Alfred and Clara Heath*. She succeeded in rescuing three men through the surf. The remaining 30 men and a dog were rescued by the Hope Cove rocket crew using the breeches-buoy



Painting by Paul Deacon

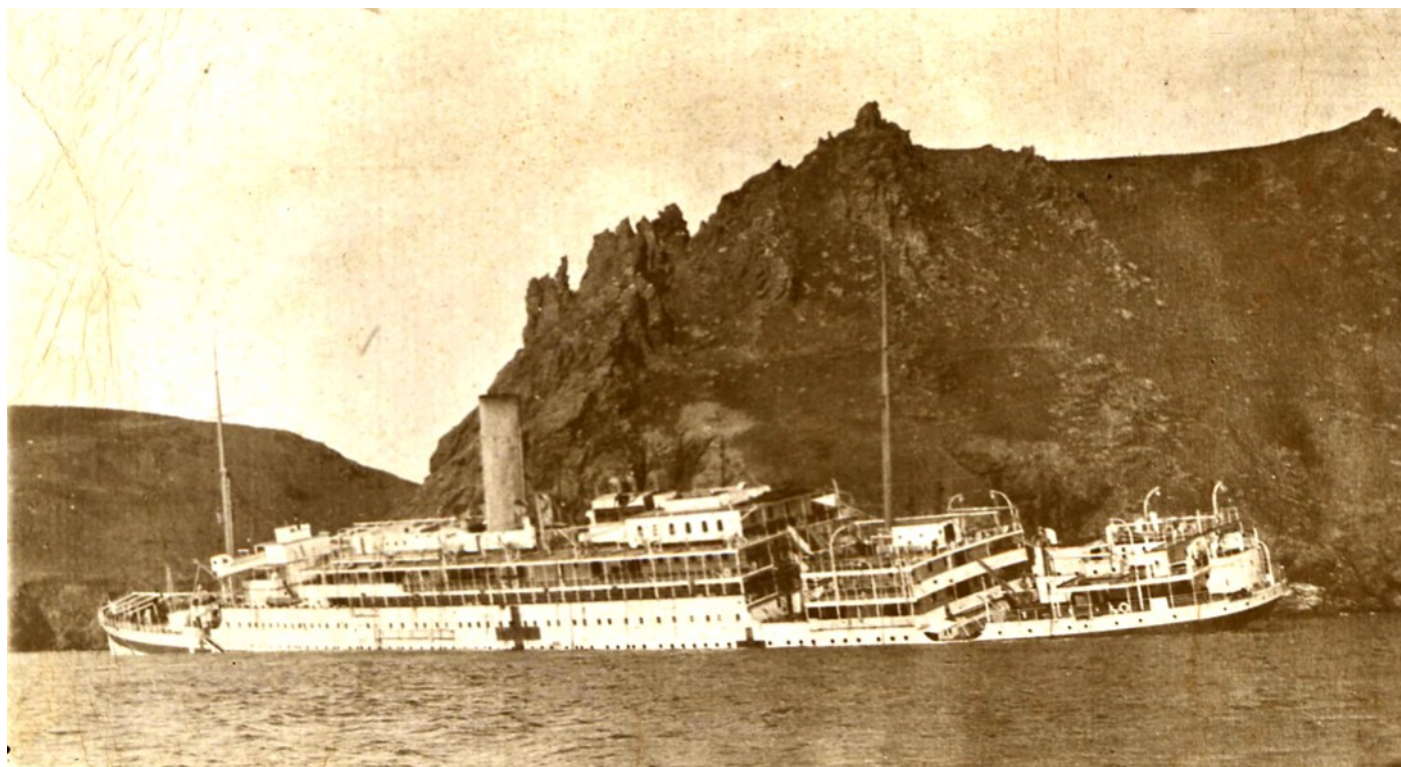
11. *William & Emma*, The Salcombe Lifeboat Disaster, 27th October 1916

On Friday, 27th October 1916 Salcombe suffered a terrible loss when the lifeboat *William and Emma* capsized at the harbour entrance on her return from a fruitless mission near Prawle Point. Thirteen of her fifteen-man

crew were drowned. It was one of the worst disasters in the history of the RNLI. For Salcombe's close-knit community the loss was devastating. Many of the townsfolk had seen the lifeboat capsize as it attempted to re-cross the Bar and return to the safety of the harbour. For them, the sight of those brave men – husbands, brothers and sons, friends and neighbours – battling for their lives within sight of their homes, had been almost too much to bear.



Of the fifteen-man crew only Bill Johnson and Eddie Distin survived



12. HM Hospital Ship *Asturias*, Eelstone 20th March 1917

The hospital ship HMHS *Asturias*, showing her lights and an illuminated red cross, was torpedoed without warning, on 20th March 1917, by U-boat *U20* five miles south of Start Point. In total darkness the ship was abandoned, but many of the crew had been killed by the initial explosion while others drowned when two lifeboats smashed together while being launched. The torpedo had lodged in a 3 ton stack of sulphur and deadly fumes enveloped the ship. In an appalling state, the vessel made it to Starehole Bay, near the entrance to Salcombe Harbour, the decks littered with bodies and other crew members dangerously ill from the poisonous gas. The survivors were taken to the Salcombe Hotel, but eight more died there. Total casualties were 31 dead, 12 missing and 39 injured. The attack on the hospital ship caused international outrage. Despite the extensive damage, *Asturias* was rebuilt after the war and renamed *Arcadian*.



HMHS Asturias on the Eelstone



13. *Benmohr*, Prawle Point 25th February 1931

On 25th February 1931 the 5,920 ton steamship *Benmohr* ran ashore in rough seas at Prawle Point. The captain, hoping to re-float her, asked Salcombe lifeboat and the Prawle lifesaving team to stand by while he waited for tugs to arrive. When the weather worsened during the following afternoon, the captain relented and the rocket apparatus was used to bring off 43 of the crew of 49. *Benmohr* remained on the rocks for a fortnight before she was re-floated by the salvage vessel *Restorer* and a German tug *Eros*. Eleven years later, in March 1942, she was sunk by a German U-Boat off the West African coast.





14. *Demetrios*, Prawle Point 18th December 1992

On 18th December 1992, the 9,700 ton cargo ship *Demetrios*, came ashore in a force 10 gale on the east side of Prawle Point. Fortunately there was no-one on board, for the *Demetrios*, formerly the Chinese owned *Longlin* was being towed by a Russian tug, from Dunkirk and bound for a breaker's yard in Turkey, when the tow parted at the height of the gale. The

unmanned ship drifted for over 30 miles before striking the Island, off Prawle Point, at 9.52 am. Later that day she came ashore and broke her back. Thousands of people visited the wreck causing considerable congestion on local roads. Much of the ship was salvaged but parts of the hull can still be seen on the rocks and at low tide.





15. *Heye-P*, The Island, Prawle Point 16th December 1979

Around midnight on 16th December 1979, the 296 ton German coaster *Heye-P*, was overwhelmed by gale force 9, SW winds as she was making her way up-channel. Huge waves pushed her onto the rocks below Prawle Point. It was not long before the Salcombe lifeboat arrived on the scene but the size of the waves prevented her from rescuing the three-man crew. When the East Prawle Rocket Team arrived, lines were fired across the *Heye-P*, but her crew made it clear by hand signals that they would only come off by helicopter. When a Sea King from RNAS Culdrose arrived, a massive sea broke over the ship. Enveloped in huge sheets of spray, the pilot was clearly unhappy but, guided by the searchlights of the lifeboat and rocket team, he was able to hover while the men were winched off – so quickly that the last man off was said to have left his boots behind!



Cox'n 'Griff' Griffiths



16. Yvette, near Langerstone Point, Prawle 12th March 1978

After receiving a Mayday call at 5am on 12th March 1978, from the 40 ton Brixham trawler *Yvette*, which had struck the rocks east of Langerstone Point, Prawle Coastguards called out the Salcombe lifeboat and the East Prawle Lifesaving Team. Because of the heavy swell the lifeboat had difficulty in getting in close and so the crew, other than the owner skipper, Mike Thomas, were all brought off by breeches buoy. They were to be the last men to be saved by means of the Prawle rocket apparatus. Helicopters were already beginning to replace shore-based rocket teams as the primary means of getting the crew off a stranded ship, and the *Yvette* marked this transition by having its skipper taken off by a helicopter from the frigate *HMS Charybdis*.



17. Friars Craig, Lannacombe Cove 31st October 1972

On the morning of 31st October 1972 the 590 ton coaster *Friars Craig* came ashore in thick fog east of Lannacombe Cove. Salcombe lifeboat, several fishing vessels and the minesweeper *HMS Kedleston* all converged on the area but contact was made difficult by the heavy swell. However, the Prawle lifesaving apparatus team managed to get a line across her and four of the crew were safely brought ashore. Two fishing boats towed the *Friars Craig* off and she later entered Dartmouth under her own power.





18. *Spirit of the Ocean*, Foxhole Cove Start Point, 23rd March 1866



Samuel Popplestone

On 23rd March 1866 the 578 ton sailing barque *Spirit of the Ocean* was sailing down-channel under storm sails, on a voyage from London to Halifax, Nova Scotia, with a general cargo, when a southerly gale flung her towards Start Point. Her captain, realising that his ship was at the mercy of the winds, deliberately drove her ashore towards Foxhole Cove, just west of the Point. Local farmer Sam Popplestone saw the vessel in distress and clambered down the cliffs and onto the big rock shown in the picture.

With huge waves crashing over him he managed to throw a line to four survivors and haul them ashore. Queen Victoria later awarded him the Albert Medal (now the George Cross) for his outstanding bravery. Twenty-eight passengers and crew were drowned



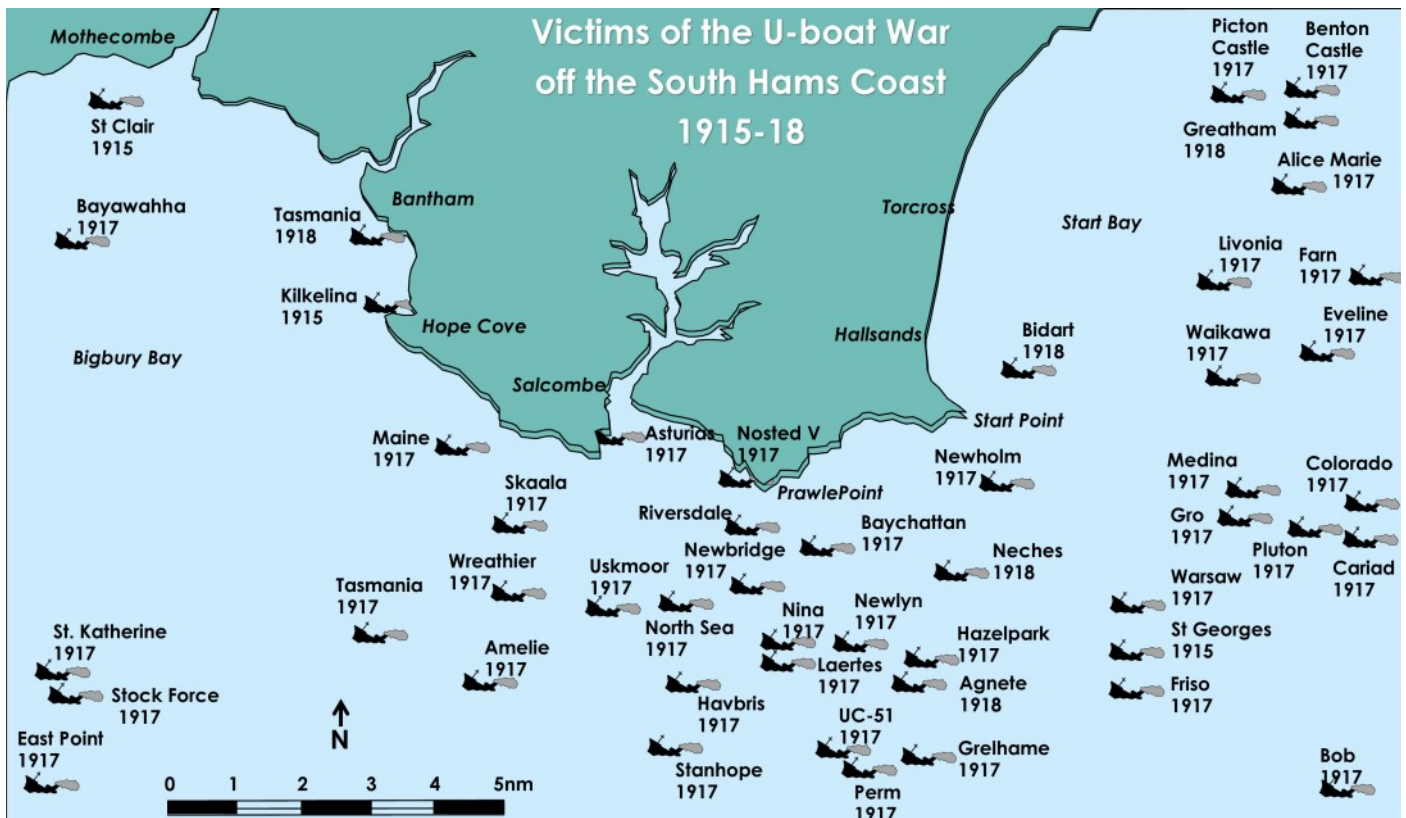
Painting by Christopher Southcombe. Photo courtesy of Baltic Exchange, London

19. Janet C, Start Point, 8th January 1992

On the night of 8th January 1992 *Janet C*, a 1200 ton coaster, lost power 2½ miles off Start Point and started drifting within a ¼mile of the rocks. Salcombe lifeboat, *The Baltic Exchange II* launched at 1.48am and at 2.30 got alongside her. The wind was gusting a steady force 9 and the seas were so rough that the lifeboat was rising and falling up to 16 feet between waves with the coaster rolling at an angle of 45 degrees. After several attempts the lifeboat crew managed to get a line on-board her and then struggled for 3 hours to tow her a mile from the shore. It was a David and Goliath battle with the 24 ton lifeboat battling to drag the 1200 ton vessel to safety until the tug *Anglia Lady* arrived at 5.20am and took the *Janet C* in tow to Torbay. Frank Smith the coxswain/mechanic was later awarded the RNLI Bronze Medal in recognition of his courage, seamanship and determination during the rescue.



Cox'n Frank Smith



First World War U-Boat Victims



Painting by Willy Stott

The Channel waters off Salcombe were a notorious 'killing ground' for German U-boats in the First World War with at least 45 British or allied 'merchantmen' sunk, between 1917 and 1918, off Salcombe and Start Point. Many of the victims were steam colliers carrying coal from South Wales. One U-boat commander, Ober-leutnant Bieber of *UB31* was particularly active in these waters during in 1917, accounting for eleven merchant steamers.



20. SS *Medina*, Start Bay, 28th April 1917

U-boat commander Ober-Leutnant Bieber's largest victim was the 12,350 ton, P&O liner *Medina*. Built in 1910, she had been chartered as a royal yacht to take King George V and Queen Mary to the 1911 coronation durbar in Delhi. With the outbreak of war, the *Medina* was armed and in



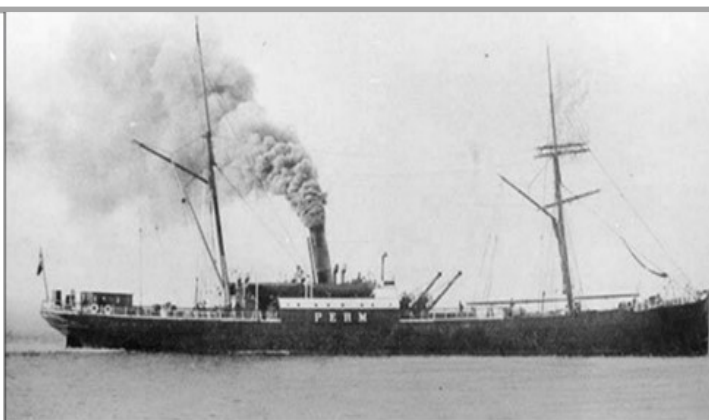
Lord Carmichael

April 1917 was returning from India with Lord Carmichael, the retiring Governor of Madras and 410 other passengers and crew. At 6.30 pm on 28th April she was torpedoed by Bieber in *UB-31*, when she was three miles ENE of Start Point. All but six of the passengers and crew were safely loaded into boats. The *Medina* sunk at 7.15pm, taking with her Lord Carmichael's priceless collection of antiques. In 1987 a salvage vessel recovered some of the items, which were later auctioned at Sothebys. Items from the wreck can be seen in the Wreck Room (including a pair of Lord Carmichael's socks!).

Some of the merchant vessels sunk by U-Boats between 1917-18



Havbris, Norwegian collier, torpedoed July 1917



Perm, Danish collier, torpedoed November 1917



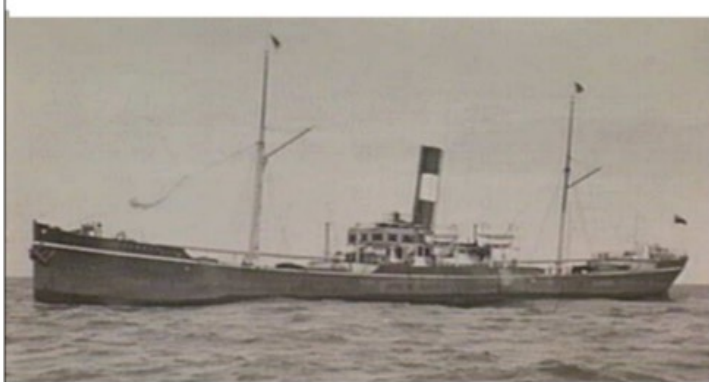
Agnete, British collier, torpedoed April 1918



Wreathier, British collier, torpedoed December 1917



Laertes, British cargo ship, torpedoed Aug 1917



Uskmoor, British collier, torpedoed May 1918

Note: The museum has detailed records of over 200 wrecks around the South Hams Coast. Individual wreck reports are available on request from info@salcombemuseum.org.uk. A small charge is made.

www.salcombemuseum.org.uk