

Eastbourne Shipwreck Project: One Approach to Tackling Research* ('I Did It My Way')

Paul Howard, November 2023

*Just as there's more than one way to skin a cat, there is no prescribed way of going about the process of researching a shipwreck; however, what follows works for me.

Starting Line

A basic summary of the incident, usually abstracted from Lloyd's List (unless the wreck predates 1740), including the name of the ship, her master, her home port, details of her voyage, the type of ship, her flag etc, some of which details may be missing.

Step 1 Lloyd's List

As the date on the summary is the date of publication of the List, which wasn't a daily, it's worth checking Lloyd's List (for vessels from 1740 onwards). This can help pinpoint the actual date of the incident.

Step 2 Lloyd's Register

From 1764 onwards (with a few gaps in the 18th century) Lloyd's Register provides a wealth of information. If you have the name of the ship and her master, the register will unlock the year and place of build, the owner, the ship's tonnage, what type of vessel she was, whether repairs had been undertaken, armaments (if any), the voyage for which she was registered, a judgment of the ship's quality.

NB: Not all ships were registered with Lloyd's, so are no guarantees!

Tip: If the vessel isn't listed in the main body of the register, don't forget to check the supplementary entries, which sometimes appear at the end of the volume, sometimes at the end of the entries for each letter of the alphabet.

From this point onwards, the steps are in no particular order and all can be revisited at any time

Step 3 Lloyd's Register Again?

Not really a step but a warning. Between c.1800-1833, Lloyd's underwriters fell out with shipowners and during that period two versions of the register were published, the green book (underwriters) and the red book (shipowners). Reflecting the dispute between the two groups, there are significant differences between the two versions and it is possible for a vessel to be recorded in one but not the other, so checking both is the order of the day.

Step 4 British Newspaper Archive

Thanks to Wildwood Heritage, participants in the project can access this huge online archive. Whether or not your ship is listed in Lloyd's Register, enter her details in the BNA search bar, checking the box 'Exact Search' to reduce the amount of clutter, of which there may still be loads, and to bring the closest matches to the top of the pile.

Tips (which I learned the hard way!):

- Entering the year of the incident may not help. On the contrary, it tends to draw in huge amounts of reference to the year without adding to the information on the ship.
- If known, the ships' and masters' names are good starting points, e.g. 'Princessa', Lee generated not only more accounts of the incident, but also details of the salvage operation, sale of recovered items and previous voyages and cargoes.

Lloyd's record of registered voyages can also be applied to the BNA search. For example, when researching the 'Hunter', captain Ansell, by adding Barbados, a regular destination, I unlocked a wealth of information about voyages to and from the Caribbean, including cargoes.

Step 4 Other Primary Sources

In addition to Lloyd's List, Lloyd's Register and contemporary newspaper accounts there are many other primary sources, too many to record here. The rule of thumb is that the first tranche of information you gather will influence where you look next.

Example: I knew 'De Anna Amelia' was carrying wine from Bordeaux to Lübeck when she ran aground. This aroused my curiosity as to the trade in wine from France to the Baltic and an internet search threw up some academic papers about the trade and, more importantly, a link to the Soundtoll Registers. These relate to the taxes exacted by Denmark between 1497-1857 on any vessel passing through the Denmark Sound into or out of the Baltic. Vessels' names weren't recorded but the names of their masters were, which often helps fill in another piece of the puzzle.

For locally held sources, The Keep at Falmer, home of the County Records Office, is a must. Online registration is easy and you activate your membership by taking photo ID to Falmer. Further afield, the Royal Museums Greenwich and the National Archives at Kew house vast collections of material.

NB: Although invaluable, primary sources come with a rider that they may contain inaccuracies and inconsistencies.

Step 5 Secondary Sources

Plenty has been published about shipwrecks (and many other maritime topics) in the English Channel and consulting these secondary sources can streamline your research. For instance, in 2004 Dave Renno published 'Beach Head Shipwrecks of the 19th Century', a volume which has enabled me to fill in some of the details of the wrecks I have researched.

NB: As with primary sources, secondary sources may have been superseded by subsequent research.

In addition to books, there are numerous academic articles shedding light on the broader social, economic and historical contexts in which our wrecks are located. JSTOR is a particularly good online resource for this. Registration is free and you can access up to 100 articles each month, which is far too many unless you don't mind drifting many leagues away from your primary, shipwreck focus!

Step 6 'Guardians of Primary Sources'

Nothing to do with Star Wars or Game of Thrones, just a term I use to describe the numerous librarians, curators and archivists who are potential allies in our research. If you know that a ship sailed (once or regularly) from Alicante to Amsterdam, it's worth finding the email address of the Alicante municipal archives and asking the custodians if they can shed light on your ship.

Once again, you have no guarantee of success, but you are almost 100% certain to receive a reply, often with a helpful reference to a publication or the email address of another museum or archive.

Step 7 (Sideways)

As the project is neither prescriptive nor proscriptive, the scope of your research is for you to determine. As pieces of the central puzzle 'fall' into place (more likely they

were pushed!), sideshoots of enquiry emerge. For instance, something as basic as knowing the captain's name may stimulate curiosity about his family and ancestors, prompting potentially lengthy genealogical research (for which I draw mainly on www.ancestry.co.uk, a subscription service). Similarly, identifying the ship's owner may lead to broader enquiries about his business interests.

If you arrive at a point of wondering why you are looking at these things, it probably means you have strayed too far from the shipwreck, but, as a general rule, these lines of enquiry add to the picture we are trying to construct.

Step 8 Embrace Frustration

As with any form of cryptic puzzle, shipwreck research can be 'a tad' frustrating. The ship may not be in the Register, the master's name in the Register doesn't match the Lloyd's List account, there may be several ships with the same name or conflicting accounts in two or more newspapers ... to name but a few.

When confronted with these obstacles it is easy to become frustrated, even disheartened. At these times, I try to remind myself that if all the information was readily available at the flick of a switch or the turn of a page, there would be no need to undertake the research.

Step 9 'Phone A Friend'

Although research often takes place in our own personal bubbles (we can pick it up and put it down when we want without having to negotiate dates and times with others), it pays to remember that we are part of a research team, with its own WhatsApp group. It's not a sign of individual weakness but collective strength if we share problems with the group.

Step 10 Hang on in there until Round Two

When the team has completed the list of shipwrecks for the period under scrutiny, each ship will be re-allocated to another member of the group. Sometimes a fresh pair of eyes sees something the first researcher has not. Regardless of how far we got with our initial trawl, the process gives everyone the opportunity to add to the overall project and to their own skills and knowledge.