

Puzzling it all Out

Paul Howard, October 2023

Involvement in the shipwreck project is providing a cocktail of anticipation, challenge, intrigue and revelation. The starting point of the process, when Wildwood Heritage send the basic details of a wreck, usually gleaned from Lloyd's List, evokes memories of the childhood excitement of unwrapping a present. The main difference is that you know it will be a puzzle!

If your allocated vessel was lost after the late 1760s, the first port of call is Lloyd's Register, a veritable Bible of shipping records. In its pages, you may find the first sense of progress, perhaps a match between the entry and the name of the captain in the wreck report, or details of the ship's origins. Alternatively, you can encounter the first obstacles to that progress: several ships with the same name, the 'wrong' captain or simply no entry.

Although each of the wrecks is what Donald Rumsfeld would have described as a 'known known', the details - of the vessel, its master, crew, purpose, cargo, voyages, engagements – are to a greater or lesser degree hidden from immediate view. Unearthing these details is rarely straightforward, but that is the beauty of the research process, requiring a thorough sift through every available source, the generation of hypotheses and the development of lines of enquiry.

There is a huge range of material on offer to assist the researcher in the compilation of the fullest possible picture of the antecedents, facts and aftermath of each wreck. Thanks to the efforts of archivists around the World, much of this material is now available digitally, which greatly speeds up the process of enquiry as well as empowering the enquirer. Of course, each source or type of source has its own characteristics, familiarity with which is essential to being able to progress the project. For instance, besides basic facts about a vessel, its master, owner, port of origin etc, Lloyd's Register contains abbreviated and coded descriptions for more nuanced parts of the story. Similarly, the potential of the British Newspaper Archive, a repository of millions of documents, only becomes realized when one learns how to search with precision.

When the pieces of the puzzle fall into place, bringing a ship's story into sharp focus, there is an understandable sense of achievement; however, the sensible default position for shipwreck researchers may be to assume that, even when a piece of research is 'finished', there is always more to be found. This is where the collaborative nature of the project is at a premium with participants sharing ideas and occasionally passing the baton on for a fresh pair of eyes to be cast on a subject. Inevitably, there are occasions when answers to lines of enquiry remain unanswered, as data remains confused or apparently terminally elusive. Frustrating though this undoubtedly is, it may still be seen as an invaluable part of the enterprise, if only by enabling the researcher to rehearse techniques and hone lines of enquiry with the prospect of greater success next time.