

Every Ship has a Story to Tell

Donald Selmes, October 2023

Researching Beachy Head shipwrecks has become a great way of using the skills and knowledge that I already had and expanding that by delving into new types of sources and research tools that I have not come across before which results in opening up new information about existing wrecks that have not come to light for many a decade.

Using facilities such as Lloyds List to identify the shipwrecks along with Lloyds Register to help identify the ships, their masters, owners and trade routes to provide information that can then be expanded on through use of the British Newspaper Archives to give more background on the ships and people involved.

Genealogy tools can also be utilised to research the key people involved such as the masters and shipyard owners. Information on many of these wrecks is scarce, particularly the earlier 17th and 18th century ones but in many cases some details can be found and used as clues to further research. It has provided me with new insights to the local area such as disputes over who had the right of way to the sea at Birling Gate (now Gap) and could therefore salvage ships that had come ashore as well as the growing need for the lighthouses to try to prevent so many wrecks.

It has also given me the opportunity to research into interesting areas that I had not even thought about before such as with my latest ship, the Nimrod, which was built in a shipyard in Canada in 1809 that also produced the same year the first Canadian steamship. The Nimrod was then transferred to Greenock in Scotland and for the next few years ran a consistent route from the UK to Jamaica and then Honduras to pick up mahogany for the English furniture makers. For its final voyage it was put in the hands of a teenage captain and about 20 crew who after picking up the mahogany and on the way back to London went ashore off Beachy Head drowning half the crew including the captain and his two Mates.

Every ship has a story to tell and if we are lucky we can find out at least part of what that story is and learn a little bit more about the life and times of the sailors and traders, and there are also military ships that have a different story to tell about the many wars in our recent history. It has been good also that people have been allowed to research in the way that it suits them, and having the freedom to delve into the stories as they want to.