



HMS “Victory” – The Alderney Maritime Trust’s Position

The discovery in 2008 by Odyssey Marine Exploration (OME) of the wreck site of Admiral Balchin’s HMS Victory which sank in 1744 was met with great interest by the Trust. It had long been thought by Alderney islanders that the ship had gone down as a result of it striking the Casquets in a violent storm; at approximately the same time gun fire had been heard and this led to the presumption that Victory was making a distress signal. In fact, the site where the wreck lies is about fifty miles west of Alderney.

Following the discovery of the wreck in April 2008 OME recovered two brass cannon which were deposited with the Receiver of Wreck in Portsmouth and notified the Ministry of Defence (MoD) which declared the wreck to be Sovereign Immune, that is a grave site of a ship of the Royal Navy where a thousand officers and crew died; as such it remains the property of the British Crown. OME contend that the need for excavation of the site is urgent because in their opinion it is at great risk from fishing trawlers and unlicensed salvors. They also maintain that the ship was carrying four tons of gold bullion that had been brought aboard for transportation to England following the lifting of the blockade of the River Tagus by the French Fleet.

The MoD sought the advice of the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) who in turn asked English Heritage, the Government’s advisers, to commission an evaluation, and this was carried out meticulously by Wessex Archaeology. A survey of the ship site was carried out by HMS “Roebuck”, Royal Navy’s Hydrographic vessel, to verify and enhance the survey data provided by OME; a desk top study of the documentary evidence was also undertaken by Wessex Archaeology as part of its study.

Much of what OME had reported was confirmed. The wreck of HMS “Victory” remains on the seabed with a thin covering of sand. Most of the upper structure of the ship has been lost – indeed there are historical records of large parts of the ship having been washed up on the Channel Islands and on the French coast. Scattered around the wreck there are at least 41 cannons, presumably all that remains of the ship’s original complement of 100 guns and also an anchor and rudder. The re-survey did not see any extensive evidence of damage to the site; only one possible trace which might have been left by a beam trawler could be seen actually impinging on the wreck site.

The belief that “Victory” may have been carrying bullion was also refuted by the desk top survey that could find no record of any such bullion in either the Naval or the National Archives. The report comments that it is unlikely that the merchants of



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Lisbon would have entrusted such treasure to a ship that was on active duty and which was not on a direct route back to England.

As a consequence of the Wessex Archaeology's Evaluation DCMS instituted a Public Consultation posing three specific Options: 1) that the wreck site should be preserved in situ and monitored for any sign of ongoing deterioration; 2) that the wreck should be monitored in situ after selective recovery of items deemed to be at risk; and 3) that the site should be fully excavated and the remains of the ship and what survives of its contents fully conserved. Indicative costs for each of these Options were given: Option 1) about £20-50K per annum; option 2) about £1 million, and Option 3) of the order of several million pounds.

The Alderney Maritime Trust has reaffirmed Alderney's interest in HMS "Victory" which may well have been fatally damaged on the Casquets, a savage group of rocks close to Alderney – hence the gunfire as a distress signal – before being driven westwards to its eventual site of sinking. We have expressed our support for Option 2 that retrieval of the remaining 39 brass cannon followed by monitoring in situ should be the preferred Option. Desirable though Option 3 might be, the multi-million pound cost of full excavation and conservation are unlikely to be raised in the foreseeable future, nor will the necessary facilities for conservation of the ship's remaining structure be available at least until the end of the "Mary Rose" programme.

We believe that the 39 brass cannon still on the sea bed at the wreck site should be recovered together with any other artefacts that remain at risk. Whether or not the cannons are in any danger from trawler activity we are concerned that they may be at risk of being plundered by unauthorised salvors attracted to them by the high value of scrap metal at the present time. This would be a sad end to these magnificent weapons.

The DCMS consultation paper also invited respondents to indicate any assistance that might be offered to expedite the protection of the site. The Trust indicated a willingness to support with its slender resources and pointed out that Alderney provided the closest harbour facilities to the wreck site together with the possibility that items recovered from the wreck might be accommodated on the Island and, subject to funding, desalinated in Alderney.

The Trust considers that a clear distinction should be drawn between responsible archaeologists and those who seek out historic wrecks in order to profit from them through the sale of materials recovered.