

SOUTH WEST SOUNDINGS 127

The Newsletter of the SOUTH WEST MARITIME HISTORY SOCIETY CIO

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Edited by Maggie Watkinson and Clive Charlton

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OFFICERS and TRUSTEES

WEBSITE <https://www.swmaritime.org.uk/>

FACEBOOK <https://www.facebook.com/SWMaritimeHistorySociety>



FUTURE MEETINGS AND OTHER EVENTS

Italics indicate an event of possible interest but not organised by the society

Friday 31st March 2023 to December 2024. National Maritime Museum, Falmouth.

Exhibition: 'Pirates. Explore Beneath the Surface'. In this latest major exhibition, explore how popular culture has shaped how we think of pirates today and dive beneath the surface to unearth the harsh and terrifying truth. For more information, see here: <https://nmmc.co.uk/2023/01/pirates/>

A Calendar of Events regarding the celebrations of the 'Birthday of the RNLI' can be found at: [RNLI 200th Anniversary Programmes](#)

Saturday 2nd March 2024 to Sunday 1 December 2024. Women of the RNLI, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. This exhibition marks the bicentenary of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI). The exhibition will celebrate the vital role that women have played in saving lives at sea, highlighting the work and success of women in a variety of roles throughout the RNLI's 200-year history. At the heart of exhibition is the photography of Jack Lowe, an artist who for almost a decade has been documenting the crews and views of every RNLI lifeboat station. His evocative images, captured using Victorian glass-plate technology, allow us to see the modern work of the RNLI through an historic lens. Together with the voices and experiences of RNLI volunteers, *Women of the RNLI* provides a personal perspective on a lifesaving institution. Janet Legrand KC, RNLI Chair, said, 'Women of the RNLI at the National Maritime Museum is a wonderful opportunity to commemorate and celebrate the pivotal role that our women volunteers, staff and supporters have played throughout the 200-year history of the RNLI and continue to do so to this day.' For further information, click here: <https://www.rmg.co.uk/press-release/women-rnli-exhibition-national-maritime-museum>

Wednesday 6th March 2024. 1500-1700, "I fear these repeated appeals may be deemed troublesome": the social agency for lone women's petitions'. Centre for Maritime Studies, Exeter University, Room tbc. Also online - the link will be sent to those on the mailing list. For further information see here: <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/centres/maritime/newsandevents/seminars/>

Wednesday 20th March 2024. 1500-1700, The 'Admiralissimo' Plan: Allied Naval Strategy and Coalition Warfare in 1918. Centre for Maritime Studies, Exeter University, Amory B218. Also online - the link will be sent to those on the mailing list. For further information see here: <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/centres/maritime/newsandevents/seminars/>

Friday 22nd to Saturday 23rd March 2024. New Researchers in Maritime History Conference. University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. This is the 29th conference of The British Commission for Maritime History (BCMh) to help emerging scholars who wish to share their work in a supportive environment and build relations with other maritime historians. The conference will also feature a keynote address by Professor Alison Cathcart, Professor of Early Modern Scottish and Archipelagic History at the University of Stirling, who will speak on "The 'scattered isles in the polar ocean': Scotland and the sea in the (long) sixteenth century." Contact: newresearchers@maritimehistory.org.uk for further information.

Saturday 23rd March 2024. Teign Heritage Centre, Teignmouth. 10.30 am - 3.30 pm, SWMHS event in conjunction with the Teign Heritage Centre: 'Maritime Teignmouth: Mariners and Ship-building, Smuggling and Piracy'. The programme includes 'The First 100 Years of the

Job Brothers of Teignmouth, 'The Life, Times and Mysterious End of John Jellard', Thomas Luny, Teignmouth and the Maritime Tradition and 'Smugglers, Privateers and Pirates'. For further details and to apply see here: <https://www.swmaritime.org.uk/history-day-in-teignmouth-march-23rd-2024/>

Saturday 20th April 2024. 10 am to 4 pm. 'Change, Progress and Decline: Devon's Maritime History in the 1920s', Rolle Building, Drake Circus, University of Plymouth. A joint day symposium in partnership with the Devon History Society (DHS). The session aligns with the wider centenary celebration of that decade. With the aim of highlighting the conditions and changes at the time, topics will include yachting, fishing from Brixham and Plymouth, Tamar barges, maritime activity on the Torridge, the workforce of Devonport Dockyard, Dartmouth's 'coal lumpers' and the work of the Marine Biological Association. For further details and to apply see here: <https://www.swmaritime.org.uk/product/devon-in-the-1920s-change-progress-and-decline-april-20th-2024/>

Tuesday 23rd April 2024. 'Wrecking and Smuggling round Devon and Cornwall'. Evening meeting. Theatre 2, Roland Levinsky Building, University of Plymouth, Drake Circus, Plymouth. Dr Cathryn Pearce, Portsmouth University. See here: <https://www.history.org.uk/events/calendar/8551/wrecking-and-smuggling-round-devon-and-cornwall>

Friday 10th May 2024. 7 pm to 9 pm. Matthews Hall, Topsham, Devon. David Clement Memorial Lecture: 'The First 4-Masted Windjammers', by Bill Cumming. There will also be an appreciation of David's contribution to maritime history from Mike Duffy and a prior birthday party to celebrate 40 years of the SWMHS at 5 pm. In partnership with Topsham Museum. Cost £7.00. For further details and to apply see here: <https://www.swmaritime.org.uk/product/david-clement-memorial-lecture-craigs-counties/>

14th May 2024. 'D-Day 6 June 1944 80 Years on: Twisting the History of the Longest Day'. Evening meeting. Theatre 2, Roland Levinsky Building, University of Plymouth, Drake Circus, Plymouth. Dr Harry Bennett, Plymouth University. See here: <https://www.history.org.uk/events/calendar/8552/d-day-6-june-1944-80-years-on-twisting-the-hist>

Saturday 18th May 2024. 'Watchet's Maritime History', Watchet Methodist Schoolroom, 10 am to 4 pm. The programme is in development, but includes a talk on the shanties of John Short aka Yankee Jack, and Tony James discussing all things Watchet, including the building of a flatner called *Yankee Jack*; more details will be posted on the SWMHS website in due course.

Saturday 18th May, 2024. Naval Dockyards Society 28th Annual Conference, 10.00 - 16.05, The D-Day Story: From Yards to Hards: Preparing Allied naval forces for the 1944 Normandy Landings, D-Day Museum, Clarence Esplanade, Southsea, Portsmouth PO5 3NT. See here for further information: <https://navaldockyards.org/conferences/> <https://navaldockyards.org/> <https://thedaystory.com/>

Saturday 25th May to Sunday 26th May 2024. Brixham Heritage Regatta.

Any boat of classic design or over 30 years old is eligible to enter. The regatta will include tall ships and special celebrations for *Provident's* 100th birthday, which involves a convergence of her sister ships *Lady Daphne*, *Golden Vanity*, *Leader* and Brixham's own *Pilgrim*. Further details from <http://www.brixhamheritageregatta.uk/>

Saturday 25th to Monday 27th May 2024. Gloucester Tall Ships Festival, Gloucester Docks. The *Matthew*, a replica of Cabot's famous ship and TS *Royalist*, the Sea Cadets' flagship, will be there, as well as Classic Sailing's *Grayhound* (arriving on 23rd May). There will also be a host of family friendly activities over the weekend. Further information available here: <https://www.gloucestertallships.co.uk/>



The *Suevic* Incident

The rescue of the largest number of people in one event by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) occurred on 17th March 1907 and it happened in the south west of England, just off the Lizard peninsula in Cornwall.

The vessel concerned was the SS *Suevic*, a White Star ocean liner built by Harland and Wolff (12,531 GRT) for the Liverpool to Sydney route via Cape Town, and launched in 1900¹.

On the date in question *Suevic* was heading for a scheduled stop at Plymouth, with a final destination of London. Due to poor weather conditions (a strong south westerly wind and drizzling rain which reduced visibility) at night and a navigational error the ship was not where it was thought she was, being several miles ahead of her estimated position. The lighthouse on the Lizard was spotted, but due to fog overhead reflecting the beam of light lower down the captain thought it was further away than in reality¹. However, another newspaper report stated that neither the Ushant nor Lizard lights had been seen by the navigators before the accident².

The ship steamed at full speed onto the Stag Rocks on Maenheere Reef off Lizard Point at 10.30



Suevic on the rocks.

Wikimedia Commons. Public domain: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Suevic_postcard-3_\(cropped\).jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Suevic_postcard-3_(cropped).jpeg)

pm; the impact caused the bow to rise and it ended up being stranded atop the rocks, with the stern still afloat. There *Suevic* remained despite the captain ordering full astern several times to attempt to get her off². A newspaper reported that had she not been going full speed she would probably have sunk, due to having her bottom torn out by the sharp rocks. The vessel's siren sounded and distress rockets were sent up; answering signals from the shore were heard shortly thereafter².

Despite great difficulty *Suevic*'s crew loaded two of its own boats with passengers, all women and children, which set off for Polpeor Cove, the site of the Lizard lifeboat station at the time. The first lifeboat to reach the wreck was that from the Lizard, which took the first ship's boat in tow. The second ship's boat was taken in tow by the Cadgwith lifeboat, and also landed the passengers at Polpeor. Without this intervention it is likely the two ship's boats would have come to grief as the crew did not have the local knowledge to navigate their way through the perilous rocks to the shore. The second ship's boat was returning to *Suevic* for more passengers when it was hit by a big wave causing it to collide with a large rock; the side of the boat was caved in and the crew thrown into the sea. They were, however, all rescued by the Cadgwith lifeboat. As a result of this event subsequent landings occurred at Cadgwith Cove which was more sheltered from the stiff south westerly wind and large swell, being on the eastern side of the Lizard. By this time the lifeboats from Coverack and Porthleven, east of Lizard Point, and reportedly Mullion from the west, were on the scene, having been alerted by the coastguards². However, it appears the Mullion lifeboat was in a state of readiness should it be needed but never actually deployed.

Getting the passengers onto the ship's boats and lifeboats from the *Suevic* was arduous; each passenger, initially a woman or a child, was clasped to the side of a seaman with one arm and carried down a ladder on the side of the ship with the crewman holding on to a rope with his other arm to steady himself, all under atrocious weather conditions. Getting the passengers ashore was precarious, too. For instance, the lifeboats had to be winched ashore in Cadgwith. The women of Cadgwith helped with winding the said winch, and some strode into the sea to carry children and babies from boat to land.² The inhabitants of Cadgwith also provided shelter in their homes, and warmth and food to the passengers.

In addition to the lifeboats four tugs, *Triton*, *Victor*, *Briton* and *Marion*, arrived from Falmouth and were instructed to tow the lifeboats to speed up the rescue efforts. Some passengers were later transferred to the tugs and taken to Falmouth³. The rescue took sixteen hours to complete⁴.

There were varying values given for the numbers of passengers and crew on board the stricken vessel. One newspaper wrote there were about 380 passengers and over 100 crew, as well as 75 babies on board², and another initial report declared there were between 560 and 1000 lives at stake³. However, the RNLI states the four lifeboats together saved 456 of the 524 passengers and crew⁴. One report declares there were also 2 stowaways⁵. The *Minnie Moon* of Cadgwith landed 227, the Lizard boat (*Admiral Sir George Back*⁶) 167, the Coverack vessel 44 and the Porthleven lifeboat 18⁴. Some of the discrepancies in reported numbers probably, at least partially, result from many of the babies not being listed on the ship's manifest. There must also have been considerable confusion given the sheer number of people rescued and the diverse landing points. What is known, however, is that all the people on the *Suevic* were saved, an admirable feat.

The RNLI awarded six silver medals for gallantry for heroic efforts relating to the *Suevic* rescue: Reverend Henry Vyvyan and Edward Rutter, coxswain, both of the Cadgwith boat; William Edward Mitchell, coxswain, Edwin Mitchell, second coxswain, both of the Lizard boat, and George Anderson and William Williams, seamen of the *Suevic*, for their sterling work in carrying women and children down the side of the stricken vessel to the boats⁷. All the lifeboatmen involved in the rescue received pecuniary awards.

Because the *Suevic* was stable on her rocky bed over the next few days, when the weather improved, all the passengers' luggage was rescued, although it was not delivered to them for about three weeks, and eventually all the cargo, worth £210,000⁸ retrieved.

The newspaper reports of the rescue are dramatic, but also found were several instances of the event rapidly being turned into a tourist attraction. For example, on 21st March it was reported there was great excitement in Penzance and people were using any means possible to travel to the Lizard to view the stranded *Suevic*³. In addition Great Western Railway Motors Cars were advertising round trips to the Lizard from Penzance to view the wreck⁹, trips on the Royal Mail steamer *Alexandra* on 30th March and 1st April¹⁰ were promoted, photographs of the wreck, available from J Lukey, a 'Photo Artist' of Camborne, were publicised¹¹ and excursions were available on the steam yacht *Ariel* and the steam launch *Pixie* from Falmouth¹⁰.

The *Suevic* herself underwent an extraordinary 'rebirth'; the ship was cut in two by carefully placed explosive charges and the stern half, which had been afloat throughout the rescue, salvaged. The engines were in the rear half of the ship and the watertight bulkheads functioned well, so the stern end of *Suevic* made her way to Southampton, stern first. The new bow, built in Belfast, was sailed to Southampton, the two parts were joined and *Suevic* continued with the White Star Line until 1928. Her final end came, as the Norwegian *Skytteren*, in 1942, when she

was scuttled to avoid capture by the German navy¹.

References:

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Suevic
2. **Cornish Echo and Falmouth and Penryn Times**, 22nd March 1907
3. **The Cornish Telegraph**, 21st March 1907
4. **RNLI**: <https://rnli.org/about-us/our-history/timeline/1907-the-suevic-rescue>
5. <https://www.churchcove.co.uk/the-largest-rnli-rescue-happened-at-lizard-point-in-1907/>
6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lizard_Lifeboat_Station.
7. **West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser**, 18th April 1907
8. **Western Echo**, 7th December 1907
9. **The Cornishman**, 28th March 1907
10. **Lake's Falmouth Packet and Cornwall Advertiser**, 29th March 1907
11. **Cornubian and Redruth Times**, 28th March 1907

Further details and images are available here: <https://www.cadgwith.com/suevic.htm>



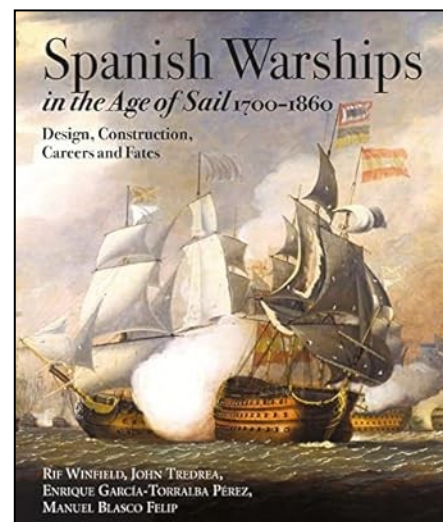
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Maggie Watkinson

Spanish Warships in the Age of Sail 1700-1860. Design, Construction, Careers and Fates, Rif Winfield, John Tredrea, Enrique Garcia-Torralba Perez, and Manuel Blasco Felip, Seaforth Publishing, ISBN 978-1-5267-9078-1, 2023, 392 pp, introduction, 24 chapters, addendum and 7 appendices, abundant illustrations, £50.

This is a welcome addition to the Seaforth series on warships in the age of sail which has seen the publication so far of four volumes on British ships from 1603 to 1863, two on French ships 1626-1861, one on the Dutch 1600-1714 and one on the Russian 1696-1860.

That this volume should only appear after the last two is something of a surprise since Spain was the strongest competitor to Britain and France among the great naval powers in the eighteenth century. Too often Spanish sea power is remembered in the South West and elsewhere only for the Spanish Armada of 1588 and not for its part in the great invasion scare of 1779, when Spain contributed thirty-six to the sixty-six ships of the line in the combined Franco-Spanish fleet that appeared off Plymouth and led the dockyard commissioner to contemplate burning the yard to prevent its ships and material falling into enemy hands. In 1781 it contributed 30 of the 49 ships of the combined fleet that appeared again at the mouth of the Channel and sent the outnumbered Channel fleet scurrying for safety into Torbay where it formed a defensive line against attack. It did so again in 1799, at which time Spain had briefly overtaken France as the second largest navy in the world.



This book follows the same formula as its predecessors, albeit with a more substantial and informative 90-page introduction that includes a historical overview stretching back before the 1588 Armada, a survey of the rulers and administrators of the navy post 1700 and their strategy, construction programmes, building yards, naval architects, ordnance developments, naval organisation and personnel. The only thing to be regretted is that so little is said or illustrated on the well organised and equipped Spanish naval bases which sustained a fleet of ships known for their longevity.

These ships are then listed according to number of guns and sailing rigs with an extensive record of their individual service histories. Such comprehensive lists are an invaluable reminder that states built warships for many purposes besides or even avoiding great sea battles. Spain had the largest, most far-flung and richest overseas empire of all the European powers, constantly harassed by commercial interlopers, smugglers, pirates, and, in wartime, privateers and enemy warships. The navy it built to police and protect its imperial trade faced differing hydrographic and climatological challenges across the oceans and coastlines of the world. This book catalogues the vast variety of ship types from *navios* (ships of the line), frigates, corvettes and brigs to polacres, galleys, xebecs, pinks, feluccas and schooners - many local ship types designed to deal with local conditions from the Philippines to the Caribbean and Mediterranean - which the Spanish navy built to meet these challenges.

For much of the eighteenth century even the *navios* were primarily built with defence of trade in mind rather than fleet battle. Until 1780 only one three-decker was maintained and the

predominant 68-70 gun ships were larger and more solidly constructed than their rivals for more comfort and better protection from attack by the elements and by rivals while escorting convoys on long-distance oceanic voyages and carrying back silver bullion cargoes by return. In a significant difference from their rivals, the Spanish established a shipbuilding yard in Havana as well as those in Spain itself. From the late 1730s to 1798, 56 *navios* were built at Havana, constructed from Cuban and Mexican hardwoods, mahogany and teak, exceptionally strong and durable.

Their ability to resist attack by greater numbers and more heavily armed but smaller British ships impressed the Royal Navy in the 'War of Jenkins Ear' 1739-48 and led it to increase the size of its own ships. Ironically the war led the Spanish to turn to British building methods, sending spy missions to British dockyards and luring over British shipwrights to construct its ships in the British style!

From then to the end of the century there was a warship building race between Britain, France and Spain. Defeat in the Seven Years War drew Spain firmly into alliance with France and led it to conform to French shipbuilding designs though still retaining its emphasis on strong construction with the most durable materials. Realizing that it would have to fight more aggressively to win back its losses, it belatedly began to increase the fire-power of its ships, and between 1779 and 1794 it built ten 112-gun first rate three-deckers, mostly at Havana - more than any other navy. While it was the dream of every British naval officer to capture a Spanish treasure ship and make his fortune, these first rates were the object of their professional desire. In January 1801 Nelson came to Plymouth to hoist his flag in the *San Jose* which he had captured at Cape St Vincent in 1797 and which had just completed repair and refit in the giant New North Dock. He hailed his new flagship as 'the finest ship in the world'. When Collingwood captured another, the *Santa Ana*, after a two-hour close-quarter fight at Trafalgar, he called her 'a Spanish perfection'.

In spite of building such high-quality ships, Spain was the first to fall out of the battle for naval supremacy first. It launched no more battleships from 1798 until 1852. Why? Her lasting weakness was that her merchant marine was too small to man all the warships she was building. Silver bullion required less ships to transport than sugar, coffee or tea, and as Nelson opined, 'the Dons make fine ships, they cannot however make men'. Spain produced some able officers, fine navigators and seamen, but never enough. Her finances were never enough to sustain both an army and a navy through successive wars. She failed to meet the costs involved in preparing and repairing ships for training at evolutions at sea, so that while individually ships fought well in battle, her fleets manoeuvred miserably. From its peak in the 1790s, numbers fell away as a result of British captures and extortion of ships by her bullying French ally to replace its own losses to the British. The rest remained in port slowly rotting away from neglect of maintenance during the ensuing prolonged Peninsular War. The collapse of the Spanish navy facilitated the loss of the empire it defended and with the loss of its function there was no prospect of its renewal, as shown by the limited number of ships recorded as built after 1815 in this compendious and revelatory book.

Michael Duffy



Another Heritage Harbour

Bideford and River Torridge has recently been recognised as a heritage harbour, which makes it the second in Devon and the third in the south west (Exeter and Bristol being the other two).

Given there are only nine of these harbours in the country it means a third of them are in our neck of the woods (does anyone have a more suitable metaphor for the waters in our region?).

The new Heritage Harbour encompasses Bideford and the Torridge, from Torrington at the limit of the tide to Appledore at the mouth of the estuary. The River Torridge Heritage Group (RTHG), which consists of ten local heritage charities, led by The Way of the Wharves, have achieved this success. The nine other charities are: Steamship Freshspring Trust; The Burton at Bideford; North Devon Maritime Museum, Appledore; Bideford Railway Heritage Centre; Appledore Maritime Heritage Trust; Bideford and District Community Archive; Rolle Canal and Northern Devon Waterways Society; Tarka Valley Railway and East the Water in Bloom. The group's website is here: <https://barthh.org/bideford-and-river-torridge-heritage-harbour/> and further information is available here: <https://maritimeheritage.org.uk/uk-heritage-harbours/bideford-river-torridge>



Congratulations to all concerned.

Editor

Paul Wright

The shocking and sad news of the death of Paul Wright has left the society much poorer; he was a gentle and charming man who gave of his knowledge and time unstintingly. He was also the provider, along with Jonathan Seagrave, of much of the news in this section of the magazine. As I live in the upper end of our region, like Jonathan, I don't get to hear much of the maritime news for Devon and Cornwall. I am therefore asking if any of our Cornwall and Devon members feel they could take on the roles of 'news correspondents' for their counties; if so, please do let me know.

Editor

The Devonport Naval Heritage Site and Visitor Centre (DNHC)

The DNHC will reopen on 20th March this year, and be open on the second Saturday of each month and every Wednesday from 1000 and 1500 hours, between March and October. There is currently no other information but watch this space for further news or see the website: <https://devonportnhc.wordpress.com/>

Editor

The mysterious Canadian shipwreck

You may have seen the news item (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-68185423>) about the wreck of a 24 metre long wooden vessel which washed up on Newfoundland's shore close to the small town of Cape Ray in late January. The ship is thought to be from the nineteenth century and underwent archaeological investigation. The wreck has now been

reported as being adrift at sea since mid February but there are still hopes it can be salvaged: <https://www.saltwire.com/cape-breton/news/canada/updated-holding-out-hope-crew-still-hopes-to-salvage-unmoored-cape-ray-shipwreck-100940237/>. Naturally there is speculation about the ship's origins and it is possible it was a member of a cod fishing expedition and/or a vessel from the south west of Britain.

Jonathan Seagrave

New Members

We welcome a number of new members from the Centre for Maritime Historical Studies at Exeter University. <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/centres/maritime/>. The society has always had strong links with Exeter University and it is very good to rekindle the connection (see page 4).

Jonathan Turner

The old Bristol Seaman's Mission

You may recall a news item about the Seaman's Mission building in Bristol (SWS 123). It now appears it may be used to host risk assessed live sporting events, as well as being a 'hybrid space', with room for the provision of food and live music events. For more information see here: <https://www.bristol247.com/news-and-features/news/former-church-could-host-live-sporting-events/>

Jonathan Seagrave

Over the Bar

The society regrets to announce the death of

Paul G Wright



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