

Halsewell - her importance then and now¹

By Heather Anderson

The wrecking of the East Indiaman, Halsewell on January 6th 1786 off the Isle of Purbeck, Dorset, created a lasting impact. News of her loss spread quickly, and the Nation became consumed with sympathy and curiosity for the tragedy. The wreck of the Halsewell became one of the most iconic wrecks of the time, cementing itself in the public psyche for years to come. Her legacy extends beyond her celebrity created by her demise: not only was she a prime example of maritime technology of the day, the social, economic, legal and archaeological implications of her wrecking were felt perhaps more than any wreck before her.

Background to the Halsewell

The Halsewell was a three-masted trading vessel, owned by Peter Esdaile and built at Greenland Dock in 1778 by John and William Wells. She was a three-decked vessel with a burthen of 776 tons, and measured 139.5 feet (42.5) in length and 36 feet (11m) in breadth (Brown, 2015: 150, Wilson, 2014:6). We can see through paintings like Dodd's Society at Sea (appendix 1) that she was adorned with carvings, and would have been impressive in her size and design.

Between 1778 and 1786 she had twice travelled under Richard Pierce as captain, each time stopping at the 'Coast and Bay', Madras and Calcutta (see appendix 2). At forty-seven, Captain Pierce was the oldest commander in the Service, and this was set to be his final voyage before retirement.

In An Interesting Account ... (1786: 8) she was described as:

'one of the finest in the service, and supposed to be in the most perfect condition for the voyage; her commander was of distinguished ability and exemplary character; his officers of approved fidelity and unquestionable knowledge on their profession, and the crew not only as numerous as the East India establishment admits, but the best seamen that could be collected. To these were added a considerable body of soldiers, destined to recruit the forces of the East India company in Asia.'

The Halsewell left the Downs on the 1st of January 1786, with 242 people aboard, comprising crew, soldiers being recruited to India, and passengers - including seven ladies. Of the female passengers two were the daughters of the captain, Miss Elizabeth and Miss Mary Anne Pierce, and another two, his nieces, Miss Mary and Miss Amy Paul.

¹ This article is drawn from Heather Anderson's Bournemouth University Masters dissertation

The Final Voyage of the Halsewell

Log of the voyage

This description of the final voyage is a compilation of several sources which chronicles the voyage and wrecking of the Halsewell (A circumstantial narrative of the loss of the Halsewell..., 1786; An interesting account of the loss of the Halsewell..., 1786; A True and particular account of the loss of the Halsewell..., 1786; Shipwrecks and Disasters at Sea, 1812).

16th November, 1775:

The Halsewell sailed from Gravesend to take on supplies for what would be her third voyage to the east for the East India Company, and her third voyage under Captain Richard Pierce.

Sunday 1st January, 1776:

Having taken the ladies and other passengers on board at the Hope at the end of December, she sailed through the Downs on the first of January, and while abreast of Dunnose the weather fell calm.

Monday 2nd:

At 3pm a breeze was spring from the south, and they ran in shore to land the pilot.

By 9pm they were obliged to anchor in 18 fathoms of water, as the weather was coming on thick and the wind was becoming stronger. They furled their top sails, but were unable to furl their courses as the snow was falling thickly and freezing the courses as it fell.

Tuesday 3rd:

At 4am a violent gale came on from E.N.E. causing the ship to drive, and obliging them to cut their cables and run out to sea.

At 12pm they spoke with a bring bound to Dublin, and having put the pilot on board of her, bore down the channel immediately.

At 8pm the wind freshened and came to the southward, and they reefed such sails as were judged necessary.

At 10pm it blew a violent gale at the south, and they were obliged to carry a press of sail to keep the ship off the shore.

During this time the hawse-plugs, which due to a recent improvement, were now put inside, were washed in, and the hawse-bags washed away, causing a great quantity of water to be washed onto the gun-deck.

Upon sounding the well, it was found that the vessel had sprung a leak and now had five feet of water in her hold; they clewed up the main top-sail (raised the corners of the square sail by means of clew lines), hauled up the main-sail, and immediately attempted to furl both, but failed in this attempt to depower and protect the sails. All the pumps were set to work, on the discovery of the leak.

Wednesday 4th:

At 2am they endeavoured to wear the ship, but were unsuccessful. The mizzen-mast was instantly cut away (it is possible it was damaged during their first attempt to wear), before a second unsuccessful attempt was made to wear (turn the ship from one course to another by causing the stern to point temporarily into the wind).

The ship now held seven feet of water in her hold, and the leak was gaining fast on the pumps. The ship seemed in immediate danger of foundering, and the decision was made to cut away the main-mast. However, in its fall the coxswain, Jonathan Moreton, along with four other men were carried overboard by the wreck and drowned.

By 8am the wreck was cleared and the ship was able to get before the wind. She managed to keep this position for about two hours, in which time the pumps reduced the water in the hold to about two feet.

At 10am the wind abated considerably and the ship laboured extremely, rolled the fore top-mast over on the larboard side, which in the fall, tore the fore-sail to pieces.

At 11am, the wind came to the west-ward, and the weather began to clear, the Berry-Head was distinguishable, at the distance of four or five leagues (28-35 miles). A jury main-mast was erected, and set a top-gallant-sail for a main-sail, they bore up for Portsmouth, and employed the remainder of the day in getting up a jury mizzen-mast.

Thursday 5th:

At 2am, the wind came to the southward, blowing fresh, and the weather was very thick.

At 12pm Portland was seen, bearing north-east, distant two or three leagues (14-21 miles).

At 8pm, it blew a strong gale at south, at which time Portland lights were seen, bearing north-west, distant four or five leagues (28-35 miles). The ship was then wearing, and her head going around to the west; but finding she lost ground on that tack, the captain wore her again, and kept stretching on to the eastward, in hopes to have weathered Peveril Point, in which case he intended to have anchored in Studland Bay.

At 11pm St Alban's Head was seen a mile and a half leeward, on which they took the sail in immediately, and let got the small bower anchor which brought up the ship at a whole cable. She rode for about an hour, but then drove; the sheet anchor was now let go, and a whole cable wore away, and the ship rode for about two hours longer, when she drove again. The sheet anchor was the largest anchor on the vessel, and only used when absolutely required. While in this situation the captain sent for Henry Meriton, the second mate, and asked his opinion as to the probability of saving the lives of those on board; to which he replied, 'with equal calmness and candour, that he apprehended there was very little hope of it, as the ship was driving fast on shore, and might every moment be expected to strike'.

The lifeboats were then mentioned, but it was agreed that at that time they could be of very little use, but in the case of an opportunity of making them serviceable should present itself, it

was proposed that the officers should be confidentially requested to reserve the long-boat for the ladies and themselves; and this precaution was immediately taken.

Friday 6th:

At 2am the ship was still driving and approaching the shore very quickly. Meriton went again into the cuddy, a small space used to store or take refreshment, where the captain was. Captain Pierce expressed extreme anxiety for the preservation of his beloved daughters, and earnestly asked the officer if he could devise any method of saving them. Meriton expressed his fears that this would not be possible, but that their best possible chance would be to wait until morning.

At this moment, the ship struck, with such violence the heads of those standing in the cuddy were hit against the deck above them, and this shock was accompanied by a 'shriek of horror that burst at one instant from every quarter of the ship'.

This brought many of the crew onto the deck. The narrative by Meriton and Rogers (A circumstantial narrative...), which was largely reproduced, states that up until this point, many of the crew had been

'remarkably inattentive and remiss in their duty during great part of the storm, [and they] now poured upon deck, where no exertions of the officers could keep them, while their assistance might have been useful. They had actually skulked in their hammocks, leaving the working of the pumps and other necessary labours to the officers of the ship, and the soldiers, who had made uncommon exertions.'

The ship continued to beat on the rocks, and soon bilging as water had breached the hull and was now flowing freely, fell with her broadside towards the shore. When she struck, a number of the men climbed up the ensign-staff, fearing that she might immediately go to pieces.

To aid in the escape of the soldiers and crew now attempting to flee, since it now appeared no more could be done to save the ship, Mr Meriton recommended that they all should come to the side of the ship lying lowest on the rocks, and singly to take the opportunities which might then arise, of escaping to the shore.

Having now done what he could for the safety of the desponding crew Meriton returned to the roundhouse, where the remainder of the officers and the passengers were now assembled. The officers were occupied by consoling the ladies 'and with unparalleled magnanimity, suffering their compassion for the fair and amiable companions of their misfortunes, to prevail over the sense of their own danger' (Dalyell, 1812: 123). Mr Meriton now joined in this 'charitable work of comfort', and assured the company that it was his opinion that the ship would hold together until the morning, when they would all be safe. Captain Pierce also offered consolation to one of the young gentlemen, who was loudly exclaiming his fear that the ship

was coming to pieces, 'cheerfully bid him be quiet, [and] remarking, that through the ship should go to pieces, he would not, but would be safe enough' (Dalyell, 1812: 123-124).

Description of the wrecking:

The Halsewell had struck near Seacombe, between Peveril Point and Aldhelm's Head, in the Isle of Purbeck, very close to the place that Captain Pierce had intended to find shelter from the storm. At this particular spot the cliff had been excavated at the base due to the quarry work on the cliffs, and presented a cavern of ten to twelve yards deep and equal in breadth to the length of a large ship. The sides of the cavern were nearly upright, causing them to be extremely difficult to access; and the bottom was strewn with sharp and uneven rocks, which seemed to have been detached from the roof.

The ship lay with her broadside opposite to the mouth of this cavern, with her whole length stretched almost from side to side of it. But when she struck, it was too dark for any of those onboard to discover the real magnitude of their danger and the 'extreme horror' of such a situation.

Meriton was still hopeful that the Halsewell might keep together until daylight, by which time the storm might have abated, or at the very least they would be able to see more clearly what could be done to get the remaining passengers and officers to safety. He stated this to the captain when asked what his opinion of their condition was, and in an attempt to console the others, in particular the ladies.

The number of those gathered in the round house had now increased to nearly fifty. Three women and two soldier's wives and one of the latter's husband had been allowed to enter, but the seamen who were demanding entrance to get a light were being kept out by Mr Rogers and Mr Brimer, the third and fifth mates. Captain Pierce was seated in here 'with a daughter at each side, whom he alternately pressed to his affectionate breast'.

Mr Meriton lit all the candles and lanterns he could find, and sat, intending to wait until daylight when he could then devise a plan of escape for those remaining, but noticing that the ladies appeared parched and exhausted, brought a basket of oranges from some part of the round house and prevailed on them to refresh themselves with the fruit. At this time the ladies were all tolerably composed, with the exception of Miss Mansel, who was in hysterical fits on the floor of the deck of the round house.

On Meriton's return he perceived a considerable change in the appearance of the ship. The sides were now visibly giving way, the deck seemed to be lifting, and he discovered other strong indications that she would not hold together much longer. He made an attempt to go forward to look out, but immediately saw that the ship had separated in the middle, and that that the forepart had changed its position and lay further out to sea. He then made the decision to seize this moment to follow the example of the crew and soldiers who were leaving the ship

in numbers and attempting to make their way to shore fearing that another opportunity may not present itself.

The sea now broke in at the forepart of the ship, and reached as far as the main mast.

Mr Rogers had remained with the captain and the rest of the passengers in the round house, but noticing the absence of Mr Meriton decided to see if they could ascertain how much damage the ship had suffered. Captain Pierce and Mr Rogers went together to the stern gallery with a lamp, where after viewing the rocks the captain repeated his question about saving his daughters to Rogers, who, like Meriton, replied that he could see no way of saving them. They then returned to the round house and Captain Pierce to his daughters' sides 'struggling to suppress a parental tear which burst into his eye'. Captain Pierce now seeing that there was no hope for the survival of his daughters suggested to Rogers that he make an attempt to save himself if he could. Pierce would stay with his daughters and the ladies.

Meriton and Rogers' escape

Mr Meriton had managed to escape with the help of a fellow seaman who aided him in securing his safety in the cavern after he slipped into the waves when trying to climb across a spar that appeared to reach from the ship to the relative safety of the rocks.

The sea continued to break in very fast, and Mr Rogers, Mr Schultz and Mr MacManus, a midshipman, made their way through the stern gallery and upper quarter gallery onto the poop deck to try and find a way of escape. They had scarcely reached it when a heavy sea broke over the wreck causing the round house to give way.

Mr Brimar had followed Mr Rogers to the poop deck and they grabbed a chicken coop just in time for a wave to sweep them over and onto the rock where twenty-seven others sought safety.

The ship had stuck just after high water and they were able to access the rock as it fell, but as it came in they were now at risk of being drowned. They then attempted, along with the other men stranded on the rock, to get to the cavern in order to escape the tide that was beginning to flow in. Mr Rogers and Mr Brimar and only a few other men managed to make it to the cavern. Here Mr Rogers and Mr Meriton, who had already made it to the cavern, were reunited. Within a few minutes of Mr Rogers making it to the cavern an 'universal shriek, which long vibrated in their ears, in which the voice of female distress was lamentably distinguished, announced the dreadful catastrophe' of the Halsewell finally sinking.

The rescue and the guns

Throughout the night, many of those who had made it this far but were too exhausted and cold to cling to the safety of the rocks fell into the waves and drowned.

After about three hours day began to break, and brought to light the survivors' precarious situation. They now realised that it was unlikely the country had been alarmed by the guns of distress that had been fired hours before the ship struck due to the violence of the storm - this was the first mention of the guns in any of the accounts. As well as this, the position of the survivors at the base of the cliff meant that they would not be easily seen from people above, and in any case, they were completely overhung by the rocks above, so no ropes let down would be able reach them. None of the Halsewell remained to indicate that anyone might be sheltered there, and no boat would be able to survive to search for them here. The only chance they had of saving themselves would be to creep along the side of the cavern to its outward extremity, to turn the corner on a ledge that was scarcely a hand-width, and to climb up the 200 feet of almost perpendicular precipices.

Many did not survive the attempt, but the cook, and James Thompson, a quarter-master were the first to succeed, and they hastened to the nearest house to raise the alarm and get help. The house they reached was Easington, home of Mr Carland, steward to the proprietors of the Purbeck quarries. He immediately gathered the workmen under his direction, and ropes to assist any other survivors of the wreck in scaling the cliffs. The distance from the top of the rock at the top of the cliffs to the cavern over which it projected was at least a hundred feet. On the edge of this rock two quarrymen stood with ropes tied around themselves, and fastened above to a strong iron bar fixed into the ground. Another rope with a noose at the end was then passed down for the survivors to fasten around themselves to be hauled to safety, but the wind together with the mental and physical fatigue the survivors had already suffered meant that even more lives were lost before the rescue was complete.

It was late in the day by the time that all of the survivors were carried to safety, with the exception of one soldier, William Trenton, who remained caught on the rocky ledge until the morning of the 7th.

When the surviving officers, seamen and soldiers were assembled at the house of Mr Carland they were counted to be 74 (out of the 242 who originally set out on the journey).

It is supposed that 50 or more sank with the captain and ladies in the round house, and that over 70 reached the rocks, but were swept off or perished falling from the cliffs. With the exception of one or two, all those who reached the top of the cliff survived.

The master at the Crown Inn, at Blandford, distinguished himself by his benevolence and generosity. When the distressed men arrived at the town on their return home, he sent for them all to his house, where he gave them the refreshment of a comfortable dinner, and then presented them each with a half-a-crown to help him on his journey (Wilson, 2014: 21).

Seafaring knowledge and protocol of the time

The location of the Halsewell when she came into distress meant that repositioning her along the beach was not possible (this was protocol in instances where the ship was unlikely to be saved, but her crew, passengers and some cargo might be). There had been previous attempts at earlier points in her voyage to steer her into a more sheltered path, but these were without success. On Thursday the 5th it was noted that Pierce intended to find shelter near Peveril Point and anchor in Studland Bay, but it was this route coupled with the strength of the storm which led him too close to the cliffs and ultimately to the wreck.

Logical and conventional procedures, such as gathering everyone to the aft of the ship if she were striking bow-on (since it was likely the masts would snap and pitch forward upon the impact), and lightening the load of the ship by throwing the guns overboard so that she would be easier and faster to manage during a violent storm (Harland, 1984: 310) were not apparently attempted. By examining the narratives of the journey that precede the wrecking it is apparent that her masts had already been cut away by the time she came to wreck, but there is a lack in description of what other attempts might have been made to secure her safety and stability. It is likely that in cutting her masts to prevent the winds from overcoming the ship they sacrificed much of their control over redirecting the ship later.

It would often be best to remain aboard the ship until the weather moderated, rather than immediately abandoning it - in some cases rafts could be constructed and used as life vessels, and muskets and stores were able to be landed before the ship was abandoned, but this greatly depended on the circumstances and whereabouts of the wreck. If the vessel began to break up, the crew would have to struggle ashore as best they could, with lives being the priority over cargo and the vessel (ibid: 310). Captain Pierce and his first officer, Henry Meriton, had agreed that remaining on the ship until the day or storm broke was their best possible chance of saving the female passengers as they were unable to use the boats, but the majority of the crew and soldiers seem to have attempted to make it to the shore. Pierce and Meriton had discussed directing the officers to gather the women onto the boats should any chance for their use present itself, but their position against the cliffs and the stormy weather meant the use of their lifeboats was unsafe at the time.

During a wrecking, maintaining discipline was of the utmost importance, with a firm hierarchy being upheld, and direct orders being carried out so that as much could be preserved as possible. Harland (1984, p.310), who quotes Mossel as '[recommending] that the keys of the spirit-room be in the commander's pocket, and if necessary let the rum casks be store in, rather than add the complication of drunken crew members'. This hierarchy does not seem to have been maintained in the final voyage of the Halsewell, with the accounts by Meriton and Rogers accusing the crew of insubordination and laziness. The loss of five members of the crew, including the coxswain, Jonathan Moreton, on Wednesday the 4th, only a few days into an already taxing journey would have taken a toll of both the crew and captain, but this

accusation against the crew had repercussions. Aside from the loss of life being a moral blow to the passengers and crew, as a senior non-commissioned officer Moreton would have acted as a conduit between the officers and crew, and without someone to fill this role it may have been more difficult for the interchange of orders.

'Traditionally, the commanding officer was the last person to leave the stricken vessel, taking with him the ship's logs, which might perhaps be helpful in defending him against a subsequent charge of having unnecessarily hazarding his vessel' (Harland, 1984, p.310). While the official logs of the Halsewell's final voyage did not survive the wrecking, the published account by the second and third mates on board the Halsewell, Henry Meriton and John Rogers detail the entire voyage of the Halsewell, up to and including the wrecking. It is from their narrative that most other accounts appear to have been based, and this, too will have played a role in the shaping of the public perception of the wreck. The delay in the mention of the guns in their account until they realise they have not been heard is interesting, as is the complete absence of any mention of the chief mate, Thomas Burston except to say that he was aboard. As the logs of the Halsewell were not able to be saved the account given by the officers would likely have been used in its place should any enquiry be needed. This raises a question against the exactness of the rest of their narrative, and while it is not enough to significantly question their whole account, it does mean details could have been missed. Since I have found no record of a trial held for the crew, I can assume the charges placed upon them were not enforced, but used more for example.

Comparison of the narratives

The accounts of the days leading up to the wrecking of the Halsewell all follow the same time line and use very similar language. This is likely to be largely down to the majority of the accounts being written by the two shipmates, Meriton and Rogers, or retellings of their narrative published under different titles. Even the anonymously written accounts do not vary in their retelling of the voyage and the key events that they list. Another indication that the majority of the accounts are retellings of the same version is the mention of the guns being fired in an attempt to alert the nearby villages that the ship was in distress. In none of the accounts are the firing of the guns mentioned until it is realised by the survivors that they have not been heard over the storm, while other actions taken to help stabilise the ship, such as the cutting of the masts, are listed and reasoned. This also indicates that the guns were not thrown overboard in order to lessen the load of the ship and make her more manoeuvrable: cargo and guns were sometimes jettisoned to lighten ships so that they could be more easily steered when they were in peril. There was the potential to recover that which was thrown overboard later, and this potential was improved if the ship and those on board her survived.

Although most of the accounts place a certain amount of blame on the crew who allegedly did not help, and were inattentive and remiss in their duties, none of the accounts attempt to indicate how the Halsewell might have been saved.

Pierce was widely described as a very able captain, and just as the narratives are quick to point out the beauty and accomplishments of the female passengers, they are just as flattering about Pierce's experience as a mariner. He had made over half a dozen voyages to the East Indies, and widely thought of as an experienced commander. He should be credited with managing to steer the badly damaged ship to very near where he had intended to find shelter before she was lost, especially since the pilot seems to have been gone since they met with the brig on Tuesday the 3rd. Actions like the use of the sheet anchor and his navigation of the ship to a more sheltered path show that attempts were made, although unsuccessful, to overcome the conditions. What appears to have complicated things was the leak in the hold, which reached five feet before it was noticed. This brings into question why it was not discovered sooner, and if sufficient manpower was enforced, why it could not be pumped out enough to stabilise them so that they could alter their course to safer waters. It is these questions which bring some credibility to the accusations of crew maintaining their responsibilities – the Halsewell left the Downs in good condition with a strong and experienced crew, and challenging weather conditions were part of life at sea, and would have been experienced and overcome by those in her company before (Brown, 2015: 274-275).

Mr Meriton is set in the narratives as a default commander, with no mention of the chief mate, Mr Burston. His and Rogers' narrative clearly does not attempt to account for the actions of others on board. There is an unavoidable inclination for bias, since no comparative narratives were made, and it allows Meriton and Rogers the privileged position of being able to shape the perception of the wreck – which they both escaped, conveniently with permission from their captain.

The surviving print record of the Halsewell, and the overwhelming majority of nautical and shipwreck accounts of the time, were principally recorded by the middle and upper classes and their perception of the shipwreck and its aftermath: 'this was a constituency, one suspects, inevitably predisposed to perceive insubordination and mutiny in lower-rank behaviour during and after wrecks' (Thompson, 2017: 134). This separation between the classes can also be seen when the number of women on board is stated as seven, but omits the lower-class women - the wives of sailors and the black servants, who are later mentioned when they are also permitted shelter in the roundhouse - although also female, their loss did not incite the same sympathy as the higher-class female passengers.

The majority of the content in Meriton and Rogers' Circumstantial Narrative... and the other narratives, such as the Interesting and Authentic Account... which republished the story remains the same, however, subtle exclusions and inclusions of passages and phrases which

shape their social commentary. While Meriton and Rogers describe the treatment of their rescuers by the EIC as displaying their 'usual munificence', this is excluded in the anonymous account, which instead condemn the Company and 'those who enjoy all the luxuries of life, and sleep with ease on beds of down' as 'purchased at too dear a rate, when they consider nature does not require such hazardous enterprises to support or adorn her'.

The result of this bias towards the responsibility of the wreck being that of the crew is discussed below in the legal and social ramifications of the wreck.

Impact

The legacy of the East Indiaman was one that can be seen not just in the many narrative accounts and poems authored about her tragic end, and the numerous visual depictions of her loss, but also in the shaping of maritime disciplinary law. With large ships, like the Halsewell, being amongst some of the foremost technical advancements of the time - a way to learn about, visit and conquer new corners of the globe, and an ideal source for Romantic inspiration - it is unsurprising that they garnered so much attention. The Halsewell went beyond this, though, and her legacy was more than just news, and reverberated through different elements of society for decades to come. Although the wreck of the Halsewell East Indiaman is largely forgotten today, it was once one of the most well-known and celebrated British shipwrecks. The story of the wreck and tragic loss of her passengers quickly entered the national consciousness, and became the subject of many retellings and the inspiration for depictions across a variety of media - including paintings, poems, and decorative items such as tea trays. Just as the Titanic is for us today, for many decades after her loss the Halsewell was the example given whenever accidents at sea were the subject of conversation (Thompson, 2013: 92).

Public reaction

'In a country such as Britain, where every individual is either immediately or remotely connected with the fortune of the sea, the casualties attendant on the mariner must be viewed with peculiar interest' (Boase, 1959: 332).

How the public came to know and react to the news of the Halsewell was largely influenced by how information was shared. Print was now more widely available than ever before, and this encouraged a surge in the production of ephemeral publications that sought to give the readers a taste of sensational news in a narrative context. Printing presses also meant that reproductions of paintings could be made and distributed, to accompany the pamphlets. The burgeoning ease with which information could be shared allowed more and more people to form a connection with, and opinion of, something to which they were not immediately connected. Shipwrecks were the theme of many sentimental reminders, and the Halsewell

was the subject of many paintings and poems, and was even portrayed on household items like tea trays.

Legal and social implications

The way in which the Halsewell was remembered and represented impacted on matters of naval law and discipline and, consequently, the working conditions of generations of sailors: the commonly held view that the crew was the chief cause of the wrecking of the Halsewell had a lasting significance on seamen. The Halsewell was cited as an example in favour of physical discipline by captains and officers, lest another similar disaster occur due to an insubordinate crew. Christopher Biden argues in his book, *Naval Discipline* (1830), that the reason the Halsewell, amongst other merchantmen, was wrecked was due to the 'disaffection or incapacity of their crews' (311). He states the Halsewell was lost 'owing to the drunkenness of, and neglect of most of her crew', citing the officers Meriton and Rogers as excellent seamen, but beyond their own capability when it came to sustaining the Halsewell without the help of the rest of their crew. This, he reasons is because of insufficient pay for the petty officers and crew, and the need for a broader line of distinction between the petty officers and foremast men, as well as a need for discipline to not only reinforce this distinction in rank, but the consequences of neglect of duty, both personally and to the safety of the ship as a whole (311). The London Recorder also heavily placed the blame for the wreck on the seamen who refused to obey orders when there was still the chance for saving the ship, claiming that the crew threatened to 'Loughborough' the officers when they were threatened with chastisement for their refusal to obey orders. This mention of 'Loughborough' refers to a case where Alexander Wedderburn, the First Baron Loughborough and from 1780 Chief Justice in the Court of Common Pleas, who passed a number of judgements limiting the extent of physical forces by which captains and officers could discipline their crews. This allegation by the London Recorder was refuted a few days later in the *Gentlemen's Magazine*, who published in reply to a letter to the editor that queried this that it had been publicly refuted by Meriton and Rogers (Thompson, 2017: 145). Other than Meriton and Roger's mention of the crew being 'remarkably inattentive, and remiss in their duty during a great part of the storm', that they 'skulked in their hammocks' and that they 'tumultuously demanded entrance to get ... lights' to aid their escape from the wrecking ship (*A Circumstantial Narrative...*, 28), there is no mention of any drunkenness or significant defiance of authority, and no mention at all of any of the crew alluding to Lord Loughborough's rulings. However, the responsibility for the loss of the Halsewell continued to be placed on the insufficient actions of the crew in their duties, and this belief is perpetuated throughout contemporary publications, retellings of the wreck and poems. The alleged events on the Halsewell continued to have legal ramifications for over half a century, and was used in the defence of the brutal treatment by a captain in 1798 as an

example of what may happen if the crew were not subjected to sufficient physical discipline; and as late as 1840 in Arthur Browne's *Compendious View of the Civil Law and the Law of the Admiralty*, where it was advised that Loughborough's ruling had resulted in mischief and disorder amongst seamen (Thompson, 2017: 146). The lower ranks made an easy scapegoat as they were unable to defend themselves, and this played well into the perpetuation of middle-class superiority and ideals. 'In some quarters the Halsewell's story was quickly reshaped to conform to prevailing middle-class myths about shipwreck, and this mythologized version of the wreck in turn influenced questions of naval law and discipline, thereby impacting the lives and working conditions of sailors' (Thompson, 2017: 146).

Although there were some allegations against the competence of Pierce as a captain as his culpability for the wreck, these were soon dropped by the mainstream press in favour of the accounts which sought to scapegoat the crew as the principle cause of the Halsewell's loss. In some interpretations, such as an essay by Thomas de Quincey in 1841, it was suggested that Pierce was fatally distracted from his duties by the presence of his daughters; while a similar accusation written in an 1803 broadside, addressed 'to the Female of Great Britain', urges womenfolk to consider the disaster of the Halsewell, and its loss due to female distraction of the captain rendering him incapable of giving the necessary orders, and warns them not to become hysterical at the possible invasion of Napoleonic troops, lest such a tragedy occur again (Thompson, 2013: 103-104). Other commentators focused not on Pierce's conduct as captain before and during the wreck, but rather on the larger motives and his personal agenda behind the voyage. *The Interesting and Authentic Account of the Loss of the Halsewell*, an anonymous rival narrative of Meriton and Roger's *Circumstantial Narrative*, and largely pirated from it, suggests the reason Pierce's daughters were included in the passengers was to find them 'nabob husbands in Asia', and criticises Pierce for his greed in exposing his daughters to danger when he himself had sufficient fortune. This was one of a few anti-commerce and anti-luxury commentaries which regarded trade as a morally ambivalent, and even morally dangerous activity, in which individuals pursued profit for personal gain and at the expense of the larger social good. Unlike the pro-commerce discourse which saw trade as collectively beneficial to the nation, critics who adopted more traditional religious or civic humanist attitudes, saw the Halsewell as symbolic of the moral decay of the nation and especially focussed on the alleged intention for the presence of Pierce's daughters onboard, comparing them to articles to be traded and auctioned off to the highest bidder, and condemned commercialism for the distraction of family and family values, and Pierce for inadvertently sacrificing his daughters in the pursuit of personal gain (Thompson, 2013: 106).

Depiction in art and media

With the advent of the Romantic Era, descriptions of shipwrecks and suffering were woven into much of the fiction, poetry and drama of the late eighteenth-century. Visual culture also took up the theme of shipwrecks, with artists such as James Northcote, Thomas Stothard and J. M. W. Turner contributing to some of the best known naufragic images of the era. Shipwreck imagery even helped to form the basis of new forms of visual entertainment, such as the Eidophusikon - a kind of moving image show developed by Phillipe de Louthenberg, which in 1786 recreated the wrecking of the *Halsewell* for its audience (see appendix 8). The Eidophusikon was a very early precursor to modern animation: a theatrical production of moving scenery and light, which could produce the effects of calm and storm, coupled with sound effects, which helped to simulate the model scenes depicted. Louthenberg had originally written a show that included a shipwreck scene, but after the wreck of the *Halsewell*, rewrote it as a retelling of the disaster, giving the British public a realistic and intimate portrayal of the wrecking.

The British reading public were also engrossed by shipwreck narratives. Supposedly factual accounts of real-life wrecks were widely produced in ephemeral formats, such as the broadside, pamphlet or cheap duodecimo book, drawing readers in with the dramatisation of events which reflected the pressures and transforming forces that were shaping contemporary British society. This prolific production of shipwreck imagery across a variety of media and genres encompassed themes ranging from the sentimental to sensational (Thompson, 2017: 133-134). The source of widespread collective grief that came from a shipwreck became a considerable commercial opportunity to publish and print pamphlets, chapbooks and similar accounts of the dramatised details of the tragedies. Within days of a wreck an account could be printed and distributed, and this ease of access to the stories increased its audience and their interest. While visual representations of shipwreck narratives, like the paintings and Eidophusikon, had a comparatively limited audience, access to cheaply produced pamphlets and a growing literacy rate meant the audience expanded over a greater geographic area and more social spheres.

Many of the writers and artists who composed pieces about the *Halsewell* chose to focus on the plight of Captain Pierce and his daughters. This is the scene depicted in the paintings by Thomas Stothard, James Northcote and Robert Smirke below, and is alluded to in the Richard Dodd's *Society at Sea* (appendix 1) where the *Halsewell*, is shown leaving the Downs, with the same characters who were later the subject of the wreck scene paintings, playing and singing. The epitaph below the title states the loss of those in the scene only days later, and the sympathy for the ladies is reinforced by showing what they lost: this scene 'implicitly reinforces the association between commercial enterprise and sociability as well as promoting more traditional reflections on the fickleness of fortune and transitory nature of human happiness' (Thompson, 2013: 101). In the paintings depicting the wreck scene (such as those

by Northcote and Stothard, see appendices 9, 10) traditional compositional formulae were followed and adapted to the subject, helping to reinforce not just a retelling of an event, but also the layered meanings and political, religious and social influences and opinions of the time. This style of the depiction of a recent tragedy is relatively unparalleled in today's society, but would have been framed and interpreted by the contemporary audience with the influence of the widely published accounts in mind, which tended to praise Captain Pierce for his paternal duty, rather than condemn him for his neglect of his duty as a captain, and the person most responsible for the success and safety of the voyage.

The continued legacy of the Halsewell – why she matters now

Much like the Titanic is known now, and commonly referred to when people mention shipwrecks, the Halsewell captured and held the sympathy and imagination of the nation for decades after she was wrecked. There are many factors that fuelled this obsession and gave rise to the legendary status that her story acquired, such as the number of female passengers on board, and the social and historical context of the time when she sank, however she is now relatively unknown.

The Halsewell site was rediscovered in 1967 when a canon, along with some smaller artefacts were found, but there has been relatively little archaeological work done on the Halsewell site. Much of the cargo was salvaged at the time and auctioned off to compensate those who aided in the rescue of the survivors who made it up the cliffs, and the site has been more recently salvaged by sports divers since its rediscovery in the 1960s. As none of the wreck remains it is harder to locate exactly where the wreck site would have been (see appendices 11-13). The high energy water environment and coastal erosion also limits the opportunity for public outreach using methods that have proven successful in other instances, such as dive trails and photogrammetry. This is where archival research and appropriate curation and conservation of the significant finds from the Halsewell are important in public awareness and involvement in the history of the area, allowing the public to understand and value the heritage of the area.

Some of the objects recovered by divers are on display at Dorchester Museum, while others have been held or sold by the divers who are 'salvors in possession' (appendices 17, 18). This has meant that most of the known artefacts from the wreck are scattered around local museums, pubs and living rooms, and have not received the conservation or curation that befits them, and caused a wreck that so vividly and significantly captured the attention of the entire nation is now relatively lost from local knowledge (appendices 14-16). This is not a unique issue to archaeology, but is one that must be attended to in order to encourage public awareness and interest in both their local and cultural history. There needs to be more emphasis on preservation of ships and wreck artefacts for their cultural and archaeological

value, rather than salvage value, creating a context which the public and future generations can appreciate outside of a solely aesthetic basis. While none of the shipwreck still remains, the site where the Halsewell was wrecked can be easily seen from the cliff paths beside it. The Maritime Archaeology Sea Trust (MAST) in partnership with Bournemouth University and the National Trust dived the site in July 2016 in order to attempt to record the site and its perimeter, and any finds. Though historical research and our own previous dives on the site we were able to narrow down an area to search using magnetometers and diver searches to determine the extent and distribution of the wreck. We were able to record several hits on the magnetometer and used that information to suggest where to focus our dives. A series of lines bisecting the main magnetic anomalies were set and dived on. A small collection of artefacts, including coins, were recorded and photographed (see appendices 19-23).

A plaque will also be mounted along the cliff path to bring public attention to the site: an etched acid A2 sign on the cliff above the site has been proposed, to help inform visitors of the historical and archaeological significance of this particular spot on the coastline. These cliff paths are frequently used by locals and tourists to the area, but are so far devoid of any reference to their significance in the heritage of the area. There is a cannon believed to be from the Halsewell, set in from the cliff, above the site, by Hedbury Quarry, but this is also free from any information about its context and significance. The National Trust Coastal Vision 2015 states 'that there is provision for stimulating interpretation as well as a space for relaxation and adventure' which would benefit from a greater management and exposure of the historical and archaeological significance of the Purbeck coastline. The wreck is adjacent to a part of the South West Coastal Path, a National Trail which passes through two World Heritage Sites, and is known nationally and internationally as one of Britain's best walks, this allows for the potential to benefit from and encourage public interest which already exists from the visitors to the area, but who would otherwise likely remain uninformed about this other rich aspect of the history of the area.

Discussion

We will never know the exact reason that the Halsewell was lost – perhaps it was the unfortunate weather conditions which were encountered throughout their entire voyage and were beyond control; the lack of judgement or command from a captain who may have succumbed to the physical and mental stress of a hard journey with the added responsibility of his daughters; or perhaps, as many thought, it was the insubordination of the crew, who did not perform their duties when needed. To find the truth within the myth that was built around the Halsewell we must look at the historical context in which she was wrecked, and why she was set apart from the many other wrecks that occurred at the time.

The newly popular pamphlets and chapbooks, at a time where printing and publishing were more accessible than ever before, added colourful narratives to the news of recent wrecks, often including prints which depicted the wreck scene. The presence of ladies on board was also clearly significant in her gaining the attention she sustained – unlike the men, and crew, there was no hope given to their preservation after the use of boats was dismissed, and as women were viewed as delicate and refined figures this brutal end for them was set as a shocking contrast.

The Titanic is the closest modern example we have to a ship which stirred the same widespread interest, inspiration and fame. She shared a similar historical context of a changing society and time of human development, and was symbolic of these changes. It was the combination of factors, of the pre-existing interest in maritime pursuits and shipwrecks in the eighteenth century, the presence of women on board, Romantic hyperbole, and the symbolic nature that the Halsewell fulfilled for a range of critics and commentators which gave rise to her mythology, only added to by the survivors who returned to tell their harrowing accounts, giving a very human element to something otherwise distant to everyday lives.

Understanding why and how each of these elements contributed to her myth is how we can see the facts about her significance.

The contemporary significance of the Halsewell came largely from what she symbolised. She represented commercial, maritime prowess and colonial reach, and was a symbol of the EIC, commerce and colonialism in a time where the national identity was increasingly formed around Britain's maritime and commercial strength. She was also a Romantic symbol, and the added tragedy of the loss of Pierce and his daughters, along with several other 'beautiful and accomplished' young ladies helped to spur sentimentalised and dramatised versions of her loss. The image of the wreck, and her captain were used to represent the state of the nation in commentaries, for and against the growing commercialisation of Britain, and as figures representative of the virtues of the state and EIC.

The Halsewell was also an ideal subject for the Romantic artist. Shipwreck imagery was prolific during the late eighteenth century, and wrecks like the Halsewell combined an ideal mixture of intense human emotion in an equally dramatic natural setting, and the use of identifiable wrecks and characters ignited greater insight and sympathy in those who viewed them. The dominant artistic style of the time and proclivity of art to have a certain amount of poetic licence given in their interpretation. From Turner's portrayal of the event we can see how even decades after her loss the story of the Halsewell was still enough to inspire.

Social change and the increasing fluidity of class structure meant that the self interest in protection of middle-class values influenced the portrayal and legacy of the Halsewell: from the narratives which placed the responsibility of the wreck largely in the hands of the crew (who would have been predominantly from the lower classes); to the framing of the Halsewell

and the tragedy of the Pierce family in artistic works and sentimental souvenirs as symbols of middle-class virtue; to the implications on maritime laws the alleged conduct of the crew had. Pierce was also used as a symbol here, and his death, which fitted so well in the Romantic interpretation of self-sacrifice, was used to prop up masculine, imperialist and British ideals of courage, virtue and paternal strength. This use of Pierce as a hero character helped to exonerate him from blame. We can see Pierce's character and experience defended in the majority of narratives, and although he did have critics they were vastly outnumbered.

Lack of sources about any trial is both indicative of potential exaggeration of the misconduct if no trial was ever held, and prevents us from knowing any official charges or defence that might have occurred. The example of the Halsewell was used for decades as a reason to argue against Loughborough's rulings, and support and enforce physical punishment, and the accusation against the crew whether valid or not had a lasting impact.

There is a lack of variety when it comes to the narrative of her loss which is indicative of those who were in the position to author these things – the middle-class – but it is also indicative of what contemporary society deemed important. What we know of what happened and why is largely down to what can be established from Mr Meriton's account. His account is a personal one and suggests there was not a strong communication between the officers. His and Rogers' account followed in the standard format of shipwreck narratives of the time, which all followed a similar sequence of events and dramas (Thompson, 2007: 66). No accounts exist that contradict Meriton and Rogers, or that do not appear to have sourced their description of events from a circumstantial narrative, and without variety there is an unavoidable bias. Since alternative accounts are not available we must look to the reaction of the public and social commentators and critics and the truth that they sought to find and represent from the wreck. By looking at the art the wreck inspired and comparing it with the accounts we have a more faceted view, both of the accounts and how they were interpreted. There was a commercial element to art, and the artists chose a subject that did not only inspire them, but would be viewed with interest. Many of the shipwreck paintings of the time were commissioned both for private collections and commercial use to sell as print versions and help illustrate the written narratives. This was a time of increasing commercialisation, and the interest in the Halsewell was inevitably taken advantage of.

To reignite the significance of the Halsewell for the modern public a greater awareness of her existence and the role she played in shaping art and society must be made.

Finds would benefit from appropriate conservation and curation, and the scattering of finds and information throughout various museums and private collections inhibits how well they can be used to create connections between objects, history and places. This prevents the public from being able to readily appreciate the significance of the site and the history of the area. Much of the cargo which was recovered at the time was auctioned off to reward the

quarrymen who helped in the rescue, and with none of the physical ship remaining it becomes harder to present the memory and significance of the Halsewell to the public today. The lack of physical remains means we cannot examine the ship remains and compare them to the accounts. Initiatives like the one set up by MAST and the National Trust will help to involve the public in the archaeological significance of the site.

Conclusion

The Halsewell was and continues to be of national historic importance. While she reached a fame to which few other ships can be compared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries her story in more recent years has been relatively forgotten.

To understand why such a mythology built around the wreck it is important to consider the context in which she was lost – the late eighteenth century was a time where Britain's national identity was influenced greatly by her maritime and commercial exploits, and the Halsewell played into both of these. The opinions of historical accounts have inevitably shaped our present view of the Halsewell. By forming a better understanding of the world in which the Halsewell existed and operated we can better comprehend her significance as ship and symbol.

While the crew was given the responsibility for her loss, as they apparently did not commit to their duties, ultimately the ship and crew are the captain's responsibility. The consequences of this diversion of blame to the crew were felt both in maritime law and in the vindication of Pierce's character as an symbol of Britain's and the EIC's rectitude. The Romantic portrayal of the wreck and those lost with her reiterated these opinions of Pierce as a tragic hero. It is by establishing a broad view of the context and opinions of the time that can help distinguish between fact and embellishment.

The reliance on historical records, and the complete absence of any of the ship remains to which we might compare records, means that a certain amount of trust must be placed in the accuracy of the records made at the time: by careful consideration of the context in which these sources were made we can view them more critically. Our history, heritage and culture rely on our ability to share a better understanding of our collective past with the public and create lasting connects between public, material remains and place. To bring the story and the truth about the Halsewell and her myth into modern appreciation we must endeavour to create and sustain a greater connection and contextualisation between our heritage and public space.

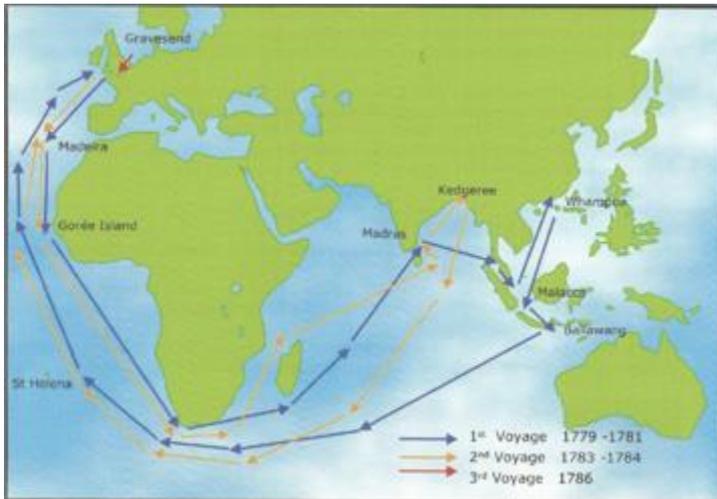
Appendix:

Appendix 1:



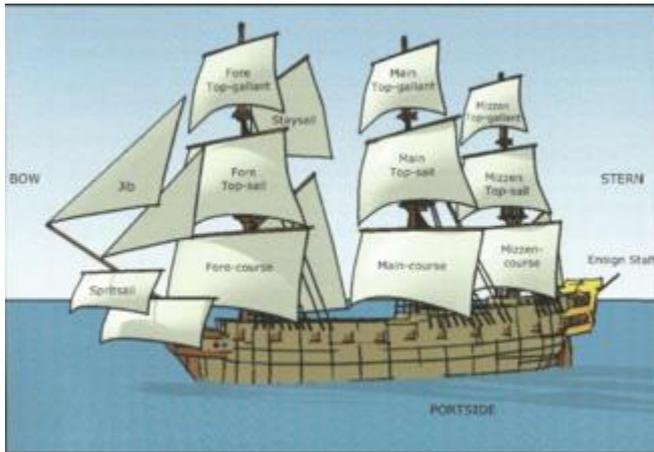
Society at Sea, Richard Dodd 1786, via britishmuseum.org

Appendix 2:



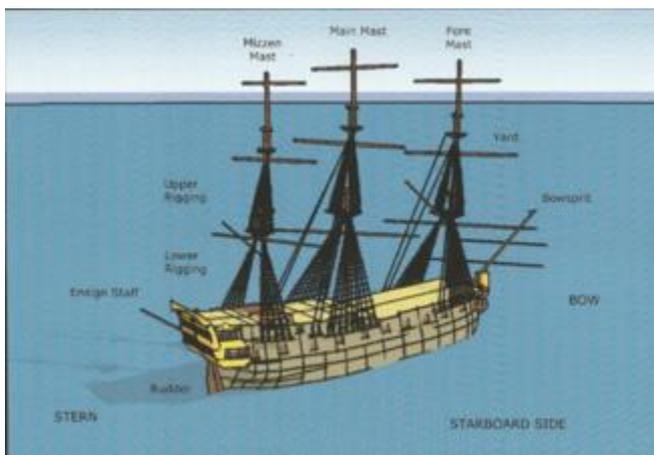
The three voyages of the *Halsewell* (Wilson, 2014: 8)

Appendix 3:



Sail plan for a three-masted ship (Wilson, 2014: 30)

Appendix 4:



Masts, yards and rigging for a three-masted ship (Wilson, 2014: 31)

Appendix 5:



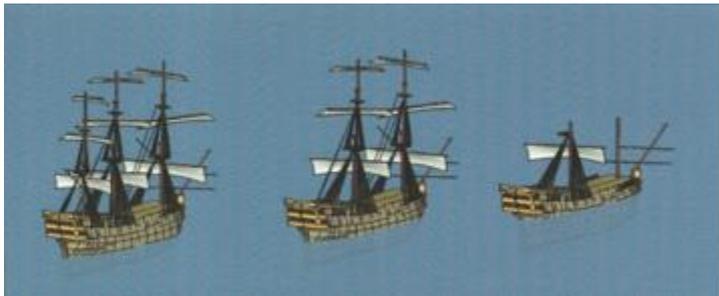
The route of the final voyage of the *Halsewell* (Wilson, 2014: 11)

Appendix 6:



The path of the final days of the *Halsewell* and the wreck site (Wilson, 2014: 12)

Appendix 7:



The loss of the sails, mast and rigging – the mizzen mast was lost first, followed by the foremast before jury rigged masts we set up. (Wilson, 2014: 13)

Appendix 8:



A replica of the Eidophusikon mechanical theatre show (Wilson, 2014: 7)

Appendix 9:



The Loss of the Halsewell, East Indiaman, James Northcote via the British Museum (britishmuseum.org)

Appendix 10:



The Loss of the Halsewell, Indiaman, Thomas Stothard sourced via Royal Museums Greenwich (collections.rmg.co.uk)

Appendix 11:



The wreck site from the east (Wilson, 2014: 22)

Appendix 12:



The wreck site from the west (Wilson, 2014: 22)

Appendix 13:



The site of the wreck 2013 via Ian West (southampton.ac.uk)

Appendix 14:



The gun is located very close to the wreck site at the Headbury Quarry, but is without any context (Wilson, 2014: 23)

Appendix 15:



An iron gun mounted at the Headbury Quarry believed to have been salvaged from the wreck (Wilson, 2014: 23)

Appendix 16:



The mirror from the *Halsewell* that now hangs in Worth Matravers church via Maritime Archaeology Sea Trust, Jessica Berry

Appendix 17:



Coins recovered from the site by the Seadart Divers Association thought to be personal possessions rather than currency (seadart.net)

Appendix 18:



An assortment of finds recovered by the Seadart Divers Association, including coins, a rum glass, clay pipe and brass gun barrel (seadart.net)

Appendix 19:



Copper nails via MAST (thisismast.org)

Appendix 20:



Copper sheathing MAST (via thisismast.org)

Appendix 21:



Wrought iron chain link via MAST (thisismast.org)

Appendix 22:



Container possibly for measured charge via MAST (thisismast.org)

Appendix 23:



Possibly a marine service Brown Bess ramrod holder via MAST (thisismast.org)

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