



HEIC Halsewell



Wreck of the Halsewell by William Turner

Geophysical and Diver Survey Report on the *HEIC Halsewell* for the National Trust, Purbeck Interim report

Introduction

- 1.1.1 This document has been prepared by the Maritime Archaeology Sea Trust (MAST) and Bournemouth University (BU) for the National Trust (NT). It constitutes a report of the geophysical and diver surveys of the English East Indiaman *Halsewell* wreck site off the Purbeck coast.
- 1.1.2 The *Halsewell*, launched in 1778, was a three-decked, 776-ton English East Indiaman. She was built by Wells of Blackwell. She was 42.5 metres in length and 11 metres in beam.
- 1.1.3 She was wrecked on January 6, 1786 at the start of a voyage from London to Madras. She lost her masts in a violent storm in the English Channel, and was driven onto the rocks below a cliff on the Isle of Purbeck. 74 out of 240 passengers and crew survived. Throughout her career she was under the command of Capt. Richard Pierce who died with her.
- 1.1.4 The *Halsewell*, wrecked on the Purbeck coast to the east of St Alban's Head between Winspit and Seacombe, NT-owned land, is an extremely famous shipwreck that inspired not only a Turner painting, a number of odes, a Charles Dickens short story – *The Long Journey* - but also, so lamentable was the event that King George III came to visit the scene shortly after the sinking.

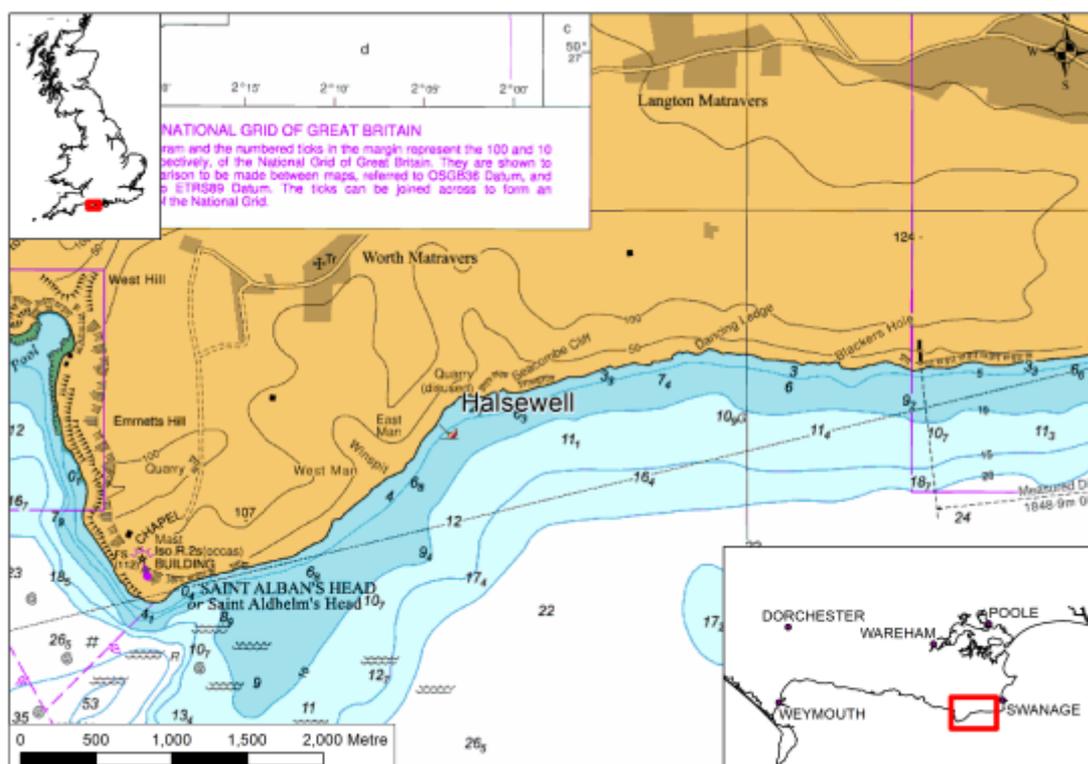


Figure 1. Map showing the location of the site © Crown Copyright/SeaZone Solutions. All Rights Reserved. Licence No. 052006.001 31st July 2011. Not to be Used for Navigation. (Seazone 2015)

- 1.1.5 The *Halsewell* ran aground at the mouth of a cave. There have been cliff falls along this area of the Purbeck coastline in the last two years and it is thought, according to local divers, that these may have buried a part of the site which in itself is located in a high energy environment, artefacts thus at risk of dispersal and erosion.

Previous work

- 1.1.6 In 1967 divers located one of the ship's cannons, as well as coins, cannonballs, lead shot, tackle and glass. Some artefacts are held at Dorchester museum. The Worth Matravers church in Dorset has a mirror from the ship hanging above the main door.
- 1.1.7 There have been cliff falls along this area of the Purbeck coastline in the last two years and it is thought, according to local divers, that these may have buried a part of the site which in itself is located in a high energy environment, artefacts thus at risk of dispersal and erosion.

Geology

- 1.1.8 The seabed in the area of the baselines is characterised by small boulders and then, closer the cliff, the seabed becomes sand with large boulders up by the cliff edge.
- 1.1.9 The nature of the rock is derived from the Portland stone seacliff, which is characterised in the main by limestone: it is a bi-clastic packstone/grainstone or cemented lime-sand or calcarenite. The lower cliffs are Portland Cherty series (West 2010) (see Figure 2).

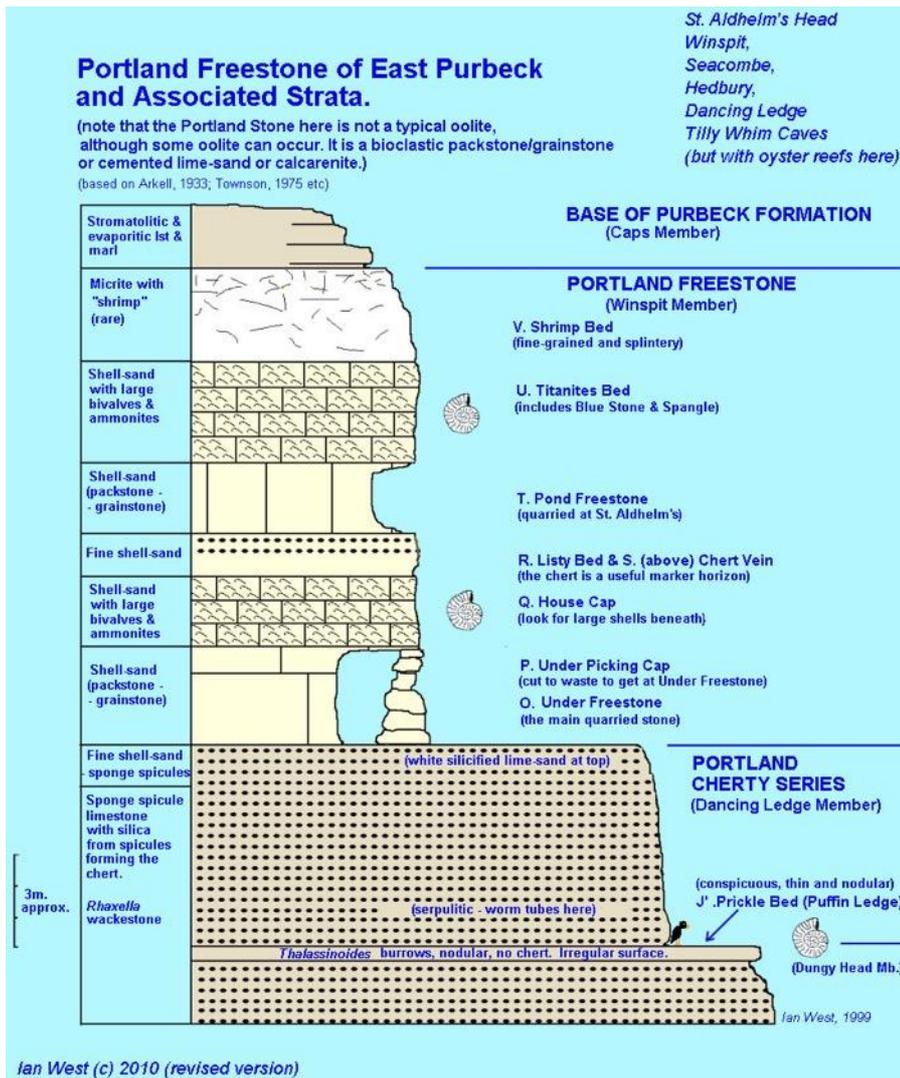


Figure 2. Diagram showing of the Portland Freestone of East Purbeck and Associated Strata (West 2010).

1.1.10 Erosion of the Portland Stone cliff is notable in the area above the site. In Ian West's report on the Winspit to St Aldhelm's Head coastline he notes that the Portland Stone is "largely uncutting by direct storm action on jointed blocks, and to a lesser extent bioerosion"(West, 2010). This in turn is causing collapse of large blocks which have been separated by the open fissures. The debris falls on to the rocks, and much tumbles into the sea directly below (West 2010).

2 Aims and objectives

2.1.1 The aim of the project was to confirm the position of the site using magnetometer and diver searches and record the extent of the wreck to ascertain its complete distribution. The majority of the diving and research has been conducted by BU students, thus providing enhanced training through learning and engagement on a site of national historic importance.

- 2.1.2 A more substantial body of work, in the form of a Masters dissertation by a BU maritime archaeology MSc student is currently underway. The intention is to research and compare the popular understanding of the loss of the vessel with the known archaeological and historic facts.
- 2.1.3 The dissertation will form a larger report for the National Trust on completion.

3 Methodology

Magnetometer

- 3.1.1 Magnetometer data was acquired to identify ferrous material on or potentially within the seabed. The system used was the AX2000 proton magnetometer and processed using the associated Aquascan software. The magnetometer was towed from the vessel and run with a line spacing of 15 metres. The orientation of the lines was essentially east to west, following the contours of the seabed (See Figure 3).
- 3.1.2 The unit was towed from the Diving Support Vessel *Rocket*, a 12 metre Catapult catamaran, at an average speed of 3 knots. Line spacing was c.15m traversing the areas between Winspit quarry to Hedbury Quarry and coming inshore as safely possible.
- 3.1.3 The surface positions were provided by a Raymarine E120 receiver with an estimated precision of between 1-2 metres.

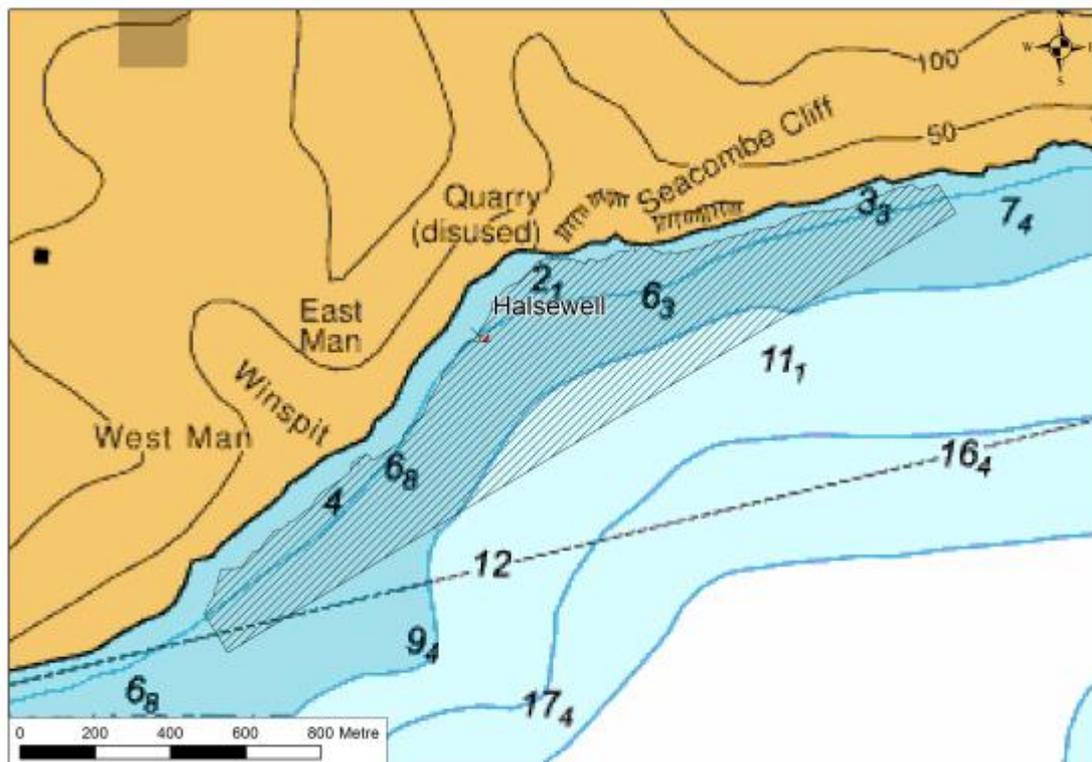


Figure 3. Black lines show the area covered by the magnetometer survey. © Crown Copyright/SeaZone Solutions. All Rights Reserved. Licence No. 052006.001 31st July 2011. Not to be Used for Navigation. (Seazone 2015)

Diver Survey

- 3.1.4 Magnetic anomalies recorded in two main areas. Two 100 metre baselines were laid. Divers were deployed in pairs to search up to 10 metres either side of the baseline. After one baseline search had been completed, the second was laid and searched (see Figure 4).

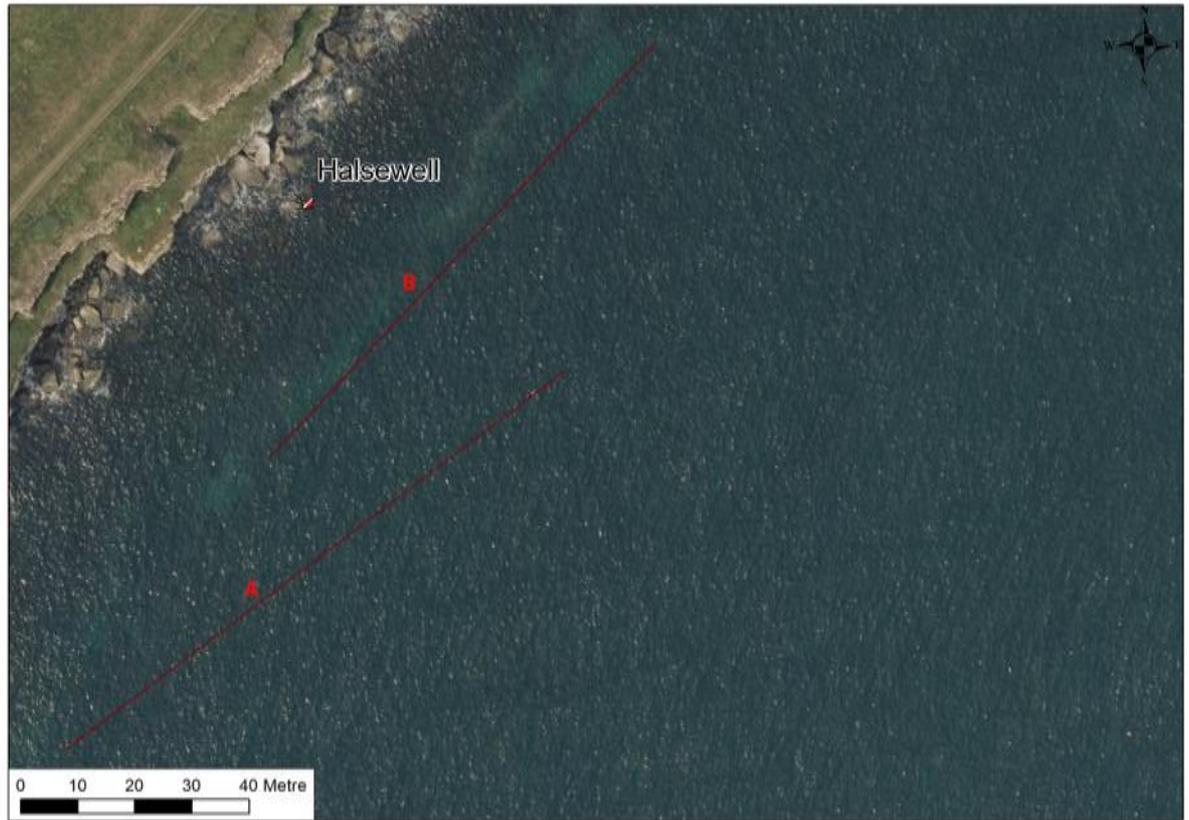


Figure 4. A Channel Coast image with the two baselines A and B overlaid.

- 3.1.5 The boat's navigational GPS system was used to establish the position of the end of each line.

4 Results

- 4.1.1 The larger anomaly picked up on baseline A was a modern anchor and was left in situ. Local divers have reported several anchors around the site left over from previous visits to the site by various dive groups (pers. comm. Andy Wagstaff 2017).
- 4.1.2 Divers found a small collection of finds closer inshore off Baseline B, about 30 metres north west of the line-up against the boulders, particularly in the vicinity of what is locally known as the "Halsewell Rock" (see Figure 6). These finds, in the known wrecking area of the *Halsewell*, were raised because they were at risk of dispersal from storms and tide.



Figure 5. Looking south towards Winspit, Halsewell rock is circled above

4.1.3 The finds are shown below.



Figure 6. Image showing a container of sorts, possibly a powder charge.



Figure 7.. Image shows a small amount of copper sheathing



Figure 8.. Image is possibly of a marine service Brown Bess ramrod holder



Figure 9. Image shows wrought iron chain link



Figure 10. Image shows copper tacks

4.1.4 The finds are consistent with the period in which the *Halsewell* wrecking occurred.

5 Conclusion

5.1.1 This is the first time that a methodological archaeological survey has been conducted on the site of the *Halsewell*.

- 5.1.2 The finds are typical of the period and consistent with previous finds from the site. Their location is also consistent with the wrecking narrative, the ship lodged aground at the mouth of a cave, which has since collapsed. The only activity in this area (quarrying or fishing) does not produce these types of finds.
- 5.1.3 The site is located in a high energy underwater environment and small finds not lodged within boulders are at high risk of dispersal, which likely accounts for the scarcity of artefacts.
- 5.1.4 Given the recent and historic rockfalls which have occurred since the wrecking of the vessel it is likely that the majority of the material lies closer inshore than can be safely got to with a dive support vessel.
- 5.1.5 A further geophysical survey - multibeam and laser scanning equipment - would help to establish with greater precision whether any further artefacts from the site are present in the area of the wrecking.
- 5.1.6 During the survey a 2pdr small gun was noted outside the Square and Compass Pub at Worth Matravers. The weapon is in an extremely poor state and shows clear signs of having been underwater for some period and going unconserved. This gun was said to be “recovered from the sea off the Isle of Purbeck” in the mid-1970s (Le Pard, 2002:112). The precise location of where the gun was found has not been established and the form and type was incorrectly identified as a 6pdr cannon of non-English origin in a note published in the Dorset Natural History Proceedings (Le Pard, 2002).
- 5.1.7 Although the gun is in poor condition, a small scale bearing an engraved crown was recovered and conserved. It was thought by Le Pard (2002) that this was carved into the cannon as a show of patriotism after the restoration of Charles II. The location of the artefact is currently unknown and only a few photographs and drawings survive. This engraved crown appears to be a commercial Woolwich Proofmark in use from 1749, known as a crowned P. These marks are usually indicative of a weapon belonging to the HEIC as few companies could afford to have their guns tested at Woolwich. The size and form of the gun is consistent with guns from late 18th century. This would mean that this gun belonged to a non-governmental organisation, that it is likely to be from an English vessel dating between 1749 and 1800, suggesting that this gun was recovered from the *Halsewell*.



Figure 11. Cannon outside the Square and Compass in Worth Matravers alongside an image of the Woolwich proofmark (courtesy of Ed Cumming)

5.1.8 Another gun of unknown origin is located to the east of the wrecksite in Hedbury Quarry. This larger gun also shows signs of having been underwater for long periods of time with the outer layers of iron having been completely lost along with the trunnions and cascabel making the identification of the gun difficult.

5.1.9 The gun has a bore of c.120mm and a length of c.1960mm, suggesting that it was a relatively short 9 to 12pdr gun probably pre-1800. One suggestion given for this gun is that it belonged to a coastal battery. However no batteries are marked in this location on the 1785 or 1812 charts with the nearest batteries at Chapman's Pool to the west and Peveril Point to the East. Given its un-strategic position it is highly unlikely that a battery would have been installed at this location. More research on the guns carried by the *Halsewell* needs to be carried out in order to confirm if this gun was part of her armaments.

5.1.10 Its presence in the vicinity of the wreck and approximate date do not discount this gun from having come from the *Halsewell*.

6 References

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Personal Communications: Andy Wagstaff, diver and local historian, 2017