

HMS *Prince of Wales*: pillaging out of control



The Maritime Observatory, alerted by a clumsy posting on TikTok, spotted the looting of WW2 vessels HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* by a Chinese purpose-built salvage barge *Chuan Hong 68*, 60 miles east of the Malaysian coast. Further investigation revealed many more wrecks including British and Japanese sites were also targeted in 2022, activities that went undetected until now. We estimate it spent about 92 days in total working over the Royal Navy wrecks, enough time to do enormous damage, and releasing a vast oil slick up to 10km long.



The Observatory tracked the vessel to the breakers yard in Kampung Belungkor, Malaysia where she offloaded most of the salvaged items from *Prince of Wales*. Mechanical excavators and personnel equipped with acetylene torches appear to have cut the wreckage into smaller chunks which was loaded into convoys of waiting lorries for transport to an as yet unidentified smelting works. Our analysis indicates *Chuan Hong 68* spent 8 days on *Repulse* in early December 2022 before moving on to a sustained campaign of salvage on HMS *Prince of Wales* between late December and mid-May this year. The vessel visited the *Prince of Wales* wreck six times, spending up to two weeks on-site using its double cranes to wrench material from the wreck. It spent an estimated 84 days in total working over the wreck, enough time to do enormous damage, and releasing a vast oil slick up to 10km long. The full environmental impact is still unknown.



We detected it unloading its scrap cargo at the yard, where piles of unexploded shells and bullets were later found.

Prince of Wales anchor now lies rusting in the yard

The *Chuan Hong 68* has not just targeted British war vessels. It is also known to have targeted three Japanese wrecks off Malaysia in Jan 2017 (destroyer IJN *Sagari* & troop transports *Hiyoshi Maru* and *Katori Maru*) among others.

- The 695th's Lord Mayor's Lecture Series

MAST and OceanMind were invited by the new Lord Mayor, Alderman Professor Michael Mainelli to address his series of Knowledge Miles lectures. The December event was called "Ending the destruction of our Undersea Cultural Heritage". If you missed it you can see it here on this [YouTube video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu_jH-2kx3I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu_jH-2kx3I)

The image shows a video lecture interface. At the top, there are three video thumbnails of speakers: Nick Wise, Dr. Giles Richardson, and Richard Harvey. Below them is a banner for 'Knowledge Miles: The 695th Lord Mayor's Lectures' with logos for Zen and Galena. The main title of the lecture is 'Ending The Destruction Of Our Undersea Cultural Heritage' in large red text. Below the title, the speakers are listed: Dr. Giles Richardson | Senior Archaeologist, Maritime Archaeology Sea Trust; and Nick Wise | Founder & CEO, OceanMind. It also states 'Presented by: The Maritime Observatory' and 'Online Lecture Thursday, 30 November 2023'. A coat of arms logo is visible in the bottom right corner of the slide.

What is the Maritime Observatory?

MAST and OceanMind, a not-for-profit organisation which specialises in the monitoring of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing for governments and the private sector, have joined forces to harness the growing capabilities of the space sector to better protect important maritime sites from unauthorised salvage. Our intention is to protect naval war graves and underwater cultural heritage with governments around the world. The Observatory is also able to detect oil leaking from shipwrecks, particularly important post 1870 metal wrecks.

The Maritime Observatory completed a number of important projects this year.

The Observatory's work is often triggered when vessels try to hide by turning off their AIS. Time is money for most honest people. When boats stop transmitting, this is when we sit up and check.

- Historic England

This summer they funded the Observatory to undertake a pilot project to monitor historic wreck sites in the Goodwin Sands, the renowned "ship swallow" off the east coast of the UK, and also in Poole Bay on the south coast. Both areas are rich in history and are particularly vulnerable to both damaging fishing and to unauthorised salvage.

On the Goodwin Sands, activity was assessed around 7 shipwrecks, including the *Northumberland* and *Restoration*, both lost during the Great Storm of 1703, and the Dutch East India Company (VOC) ship *Rooswijk*, lost during a storm in January 1740.

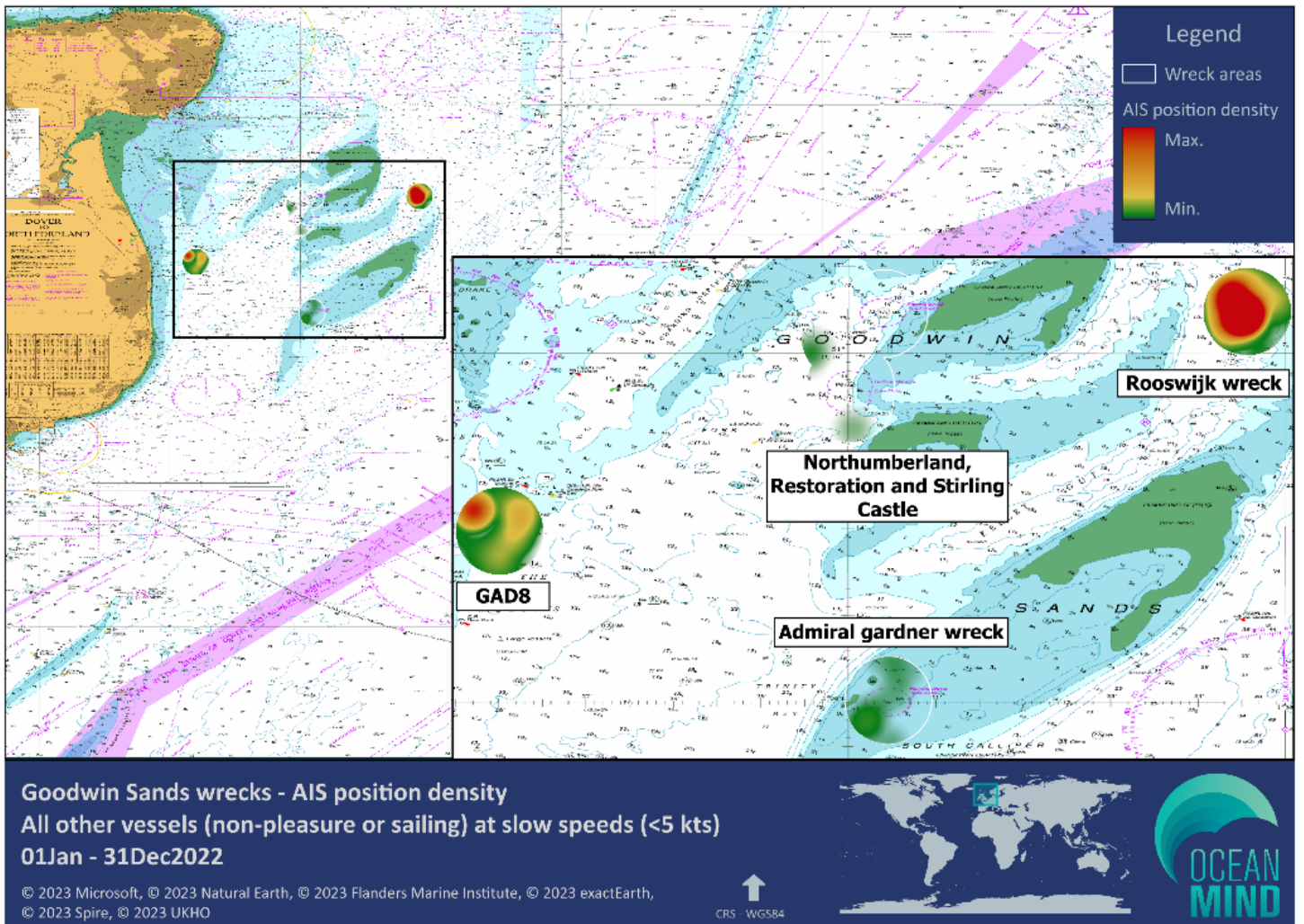


Tank 1's damaged turret

The Poole Bay study area comprised three protected wrecks, the 13th century Mortar Wreck, the 16th century Studland Bay Wreck and the Swash Channel wreck, understood to be the 17th century Dutch Armed merchantman *Fame*. The assemblage of seven Valentine Tanks lost during Exercise Smash in 1944, and now Scheduled Monuments, were also assessed as part of the project, one of them having

been badly damaged. The results of the project undertaken by the Observatory are being used to inform the ongoing Police investigation.

In Poole Bay as a whole, the remote sensing analysis showed that not all vessels transmit on AIS. Vessels on AIS were observed peaking in July and August. But the total number of vessels operating is likely higher due to the 'dark' vessels the Observatory logged in both EO and SAR.

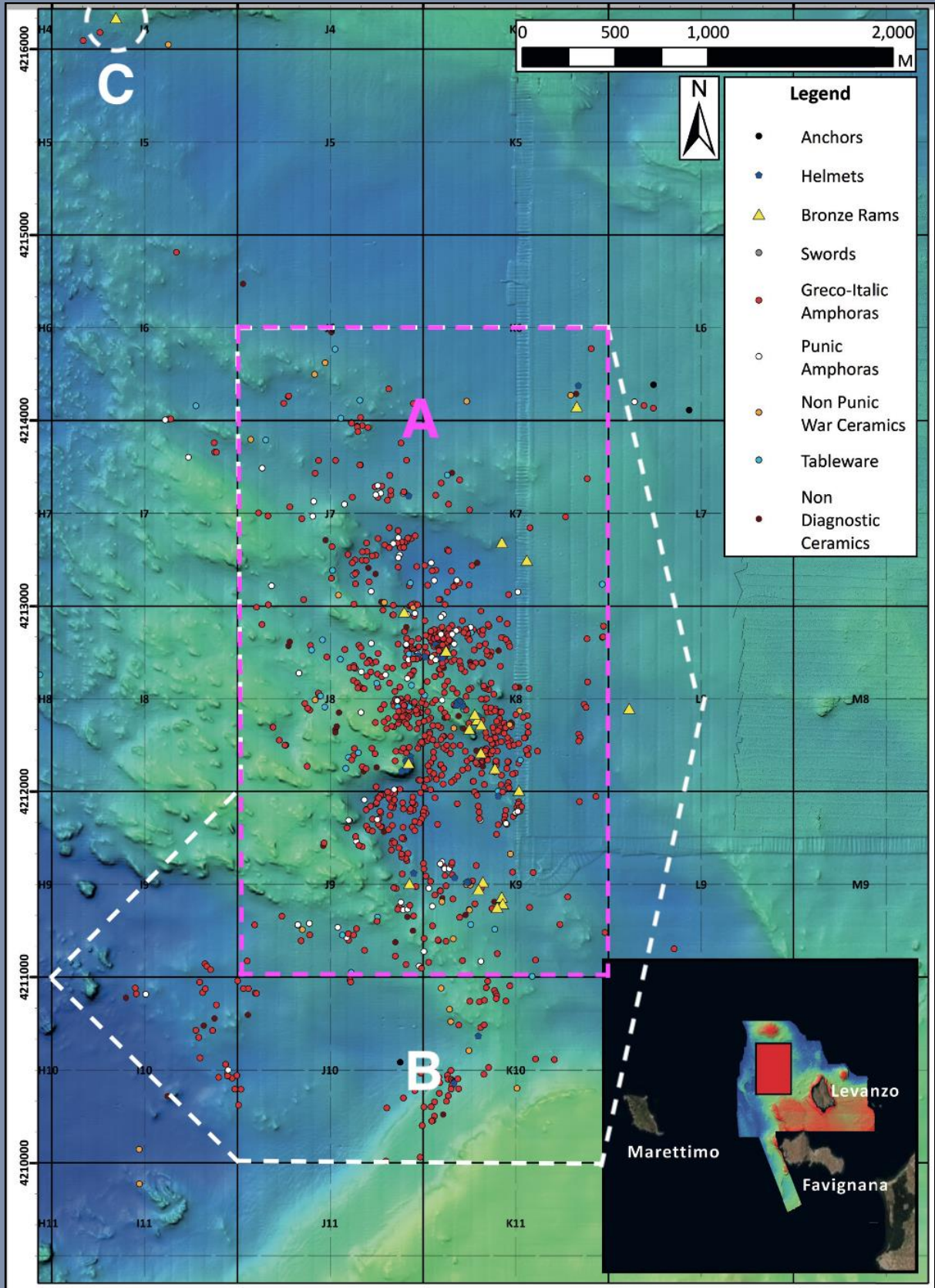


Heatmaps over the two Areas of Interest

In the Goodwin Sands wrecks are thought to be at risk from unauthorised salvage and fishing damage. In total 4 vessels were responsible for 7 incidents that were assessed by the Observatory as high-risk. This represents 0.5% of the 801 vessels detected.

- **The Battle of Egadi**

The Battle of the Egadi Islands (241 BC) is the only discovered ancient naval battlefield. The site was only discovered after a Carabinieri raid identified artefacts from the battle that had been looted from the seabed. It is internationally important but faces significant threats from unauthorised salvage, treasure hunting, and souvenir collecting. A marine protected area encompasses the site, but it remains susceptible to heritage crime due to the difficulties of traditional monitoring, such as watch vessels.



Site Plan of the Battle of the Egadi Islands. The AOI covers Areas A & B with a 1 NM buffer zone surrounding it (Soprintendenza del Mare Regione Siciliana/RPM Nautical Foundation/Global Underwater Explorers/MAST).

The Observatory concluded that by far the greatest threat appeared to be from trawlers, which have been proven to be actively fishing over the AOI. These activities mainly occur between May and October. Again we saw vessels going dark, helping us to direct our attention to them.

- Dutch contract

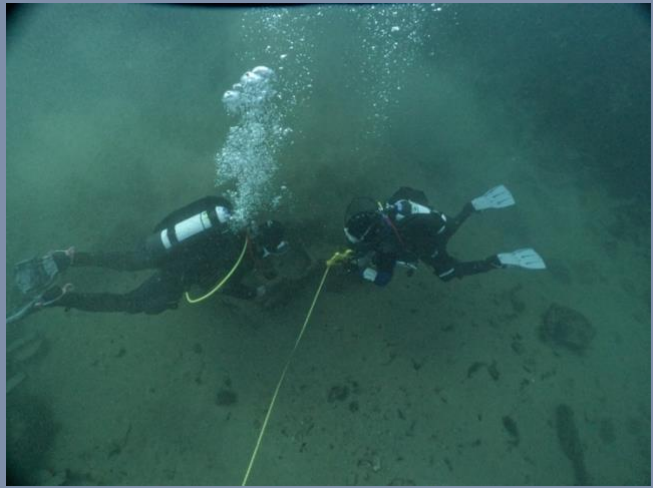
The Observatory recently completed a second project with the Netherlands Information and Heritage Inspectorate and its Cultural Heritage Agency to monitor certain Dutch wreck sites. We are combining our archaeological expertise and specialist knowledge with the advanced technologies operated by OceanMind. During this project we employed SAR and EO satellite imagery to identify vessels operating within 0.5 NM of the wrecks. Detections were correlated with AIS transmissions to identify the ‘dark’ vessels. We reported back on a daily basis.



Image taken by diver in 2014 of the Thien Li Kong 368 over the Japanese 1921 cargo shipwreck Riojun Maru.

Basic Archaeology BAD courses

The BAD course this year saw a resurgence in demand. First came Oxford and Cambridge University students, funded by the Oxford Sports Council. MAST has also begun working with Poole Diving. A number of their staff and students have successfully passed the course and plan to help us teach this far and wide. Poole Bay, of course, is home to a number of wrecks. One of the earliest known is from the 13th century, soon to become a major excavation site with Bournemouth University.



The swimming pool training and then open water

Contact: mast@thisismast.org

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