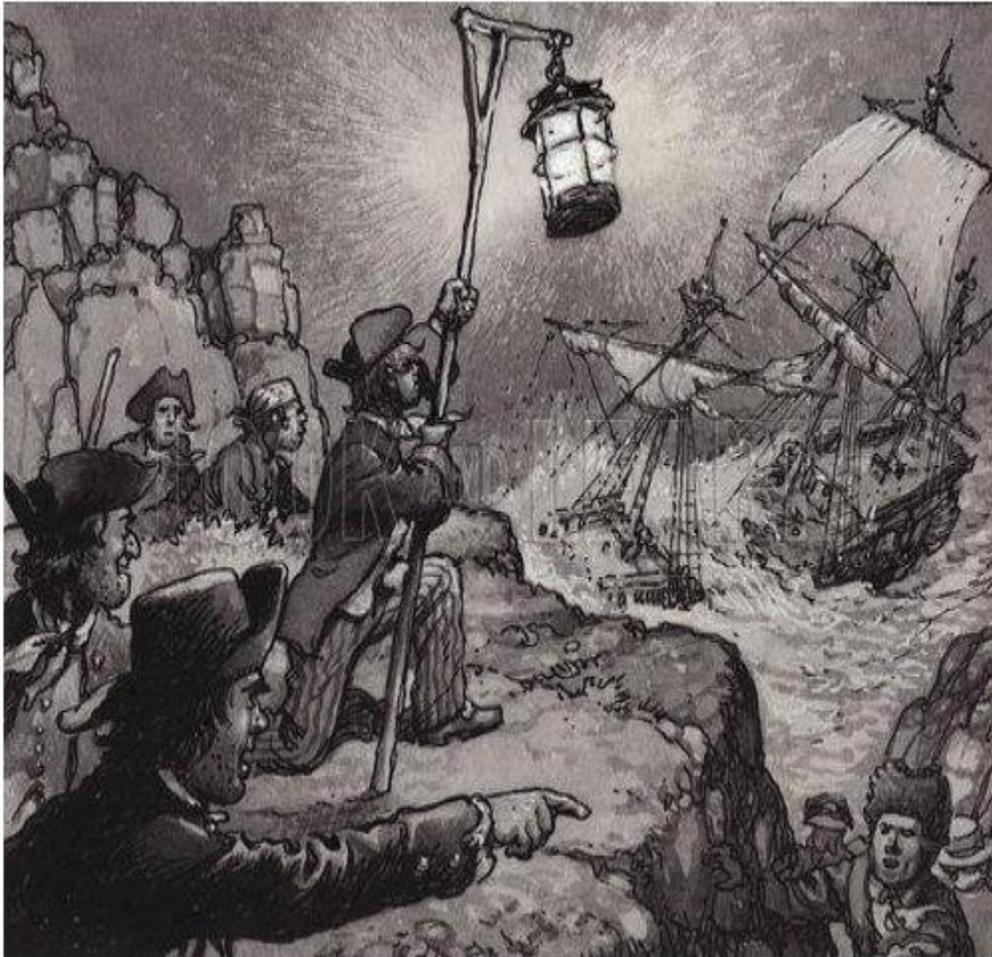


## The Cornish Wreckers

*Sue Cox, February 2015*

### **False Lights:**

The Cornish had always had a rather dubious reputation regarding how they dealt with shipwrecks - probably based on the fact that Cornwall was remote and a bit mysterious to the rest of England.



Their poor reputation was certainly enhanced by the passage of the Wrecking Act of 1753 which dealt with many issues concerning shipwrecks anywhere on the English coast, but had a last-minute clause added:

*“Any Person or Persons who shall put out any false Light or Lights with Intention to bring any ship or Vessel into Danger shall suffer death.”*

The rest of the bill outlines penalties, usually death, for plundering, killing or hurting survivors, etc. However, the Cornish already had a bad name, so the idea of their putting out false lights was firmed up with this one piece of legislation - after all, why would they mention this if it wasn't a threat? In reality, there was never any case brought before the courts of false lights being mounted to cause shipwrecks, and navel people believe it is nearly impossible. However, it is true that when lighthouses were proposed in some parts of the Cornish coast, the locals opposed it because the salvage from shipwrecks was part of their local economies and important for the acquisition of many necessities - and, of course, some luxuries.



Daphne du Maurier brought the reputation into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with her novel *Jamaica Inn*, and Dame Ethyl Smith also introduced the idea with her 1906 opera *Les Naufrageurs*, which, although the libretto was in French, was set in Cornwall and concerned Cornish wreckers and false lights. Pastor Robert Hawker of Morwenstow clearly believed that at one time there were false lights and vicious plunder, but he wrote of one of this parishioners that he was a wrecker watching for "flotsam and jetsam and other unconsidered trifles" but not like the people of the past who would lure vessels ashore with lights.

## **Plunder.**

Daniel Defoe in the eighteenth century wrote about the Cornish - particularly those of the Scilly Isles, as

*"voracious country people - greedy and eager for the prey ... charg'd with bloody and cruel dealings ... especially with poor distressed seamen when they came on shore by force of a tempest ....where they find the rocks themselves not more merciless than the people who range about them for their prey."*

Defoe was referring to the other part of the Cornish notoriety - that they did not offer proper aid to shipwrecked mariners, and even harmed them. Others though this was impossible, given the garrisons charged with attending to wrecks and protecting them. Nonetheless, when one ship when ashore in the Scilly Isles the locals carried off its cargo of brandy and refused to give it up. Customs came over from Penzance, but the brandy had disappeared. Eventually they found it, locked it in a warehouse, from whence it disappeared again.

The most notorious wreckers - plunderers - were the tinnerns, particularly those of Mounts Bay, Breage and Germoe. Mounts Bay was the most dangerous place to be wrecked, it was thought, because the "county people" were the most ruthless.

In a book on the life of Parson Robert Hawker:

*A story is told of a guileless curate, new to Cornwall, who found the body of a man washed on shore. He rushed off to obtain medical help, thinking that life might not be quite extinct. Meeting a native, he asked in excited tones, "What do you do when you find a man apparently drowned?" "Search 'is pockets," was the calm reply."*

Astonishing life-saving and ruthless plunder existed side by side, and by the nineteenth century the Cornish were proud of their efforts at saving lives, even while they fought for the right to "harvest" from the wrecks as a gift of Providence. And Cornwall and its reputation certainly had its defenders

## **Entitlement and custom:**

The story on the brandy on the Scilly Isles illustrates the sense of entitlement that people had. Altogether, 9,000 gallons of brandy came ashore from wrecks over a few years, and of that 3,000 gallons was kept by the islanders because they claimed it was their right as salvage. One cannot escape the truth that people did regard the wrecks as a right - even a God-given right, and part of the local custom

and culture. But whatever the people believed, at no point were the shore dwellers legally entitled to anything that came ashore.

The legal prohibitions differed from time to time, but basically the wrecks were variously regarded as the property of the king - who sold or gave the right to the local gentry - or the property of the proprietors. Of course, customs officials had an interest, too - the stuff was declared and was probably kept hidden, and they would have an interest in any dutiable goods - and since the wreckers often had a reputation as smugglers, they were doubly alert. Some of the most dramatic stories of wreckers came about when the customs agents confronting them at a wreck.

From the 12th century, legally if anyone escaped from a wreck, or if the ownership could be established, then it was not a wreck. This, of course, led to the belief that the Cornish would polish off the survivors just in case. But legally if neither of those two conditions pertained then the wreck was the property of the crown. In that time, the sheriff, or the king's agent or the lord of the manor to whom the right to wrecks had been given by the crown, could hold the goods for a year and a day, and if no one came forward to claim them they could be sold. Nothing there to say that the locals could have them or any portion. However, laws were developed which said if the owners should be found, and should pay a reasonable reward to anyone who salvaged the goods, and some variant held into the eighteenth century.

Notwithstanding all that, for most coastal dwellers the materials that came ashore were important to meet their needs for certain commodities, particularly for poorer people. Not just the cargoes were important, but the timber and rope was vital. And, of course, any luxury goods that came their way were prized. To confuse matters, it's not always clear what is salvage and what is flotsam. Staves from wrecked ships were openly sold in the Helston market.

What is clear, though, is that wrecking was a community activity - everyone got involved, local tradesmen rented out their carts, there was some bartering of various items and definite sharing of the booze which was almost always on board. It was noted by some that when wrecks occurred in other parts of the British Isles people turned out in hundreds; in Cornwall they came in thousands. And while the miners are often regarded as the principle wreckers, others wrote that they included "farmers and respectable tradesmen as well as the poor."

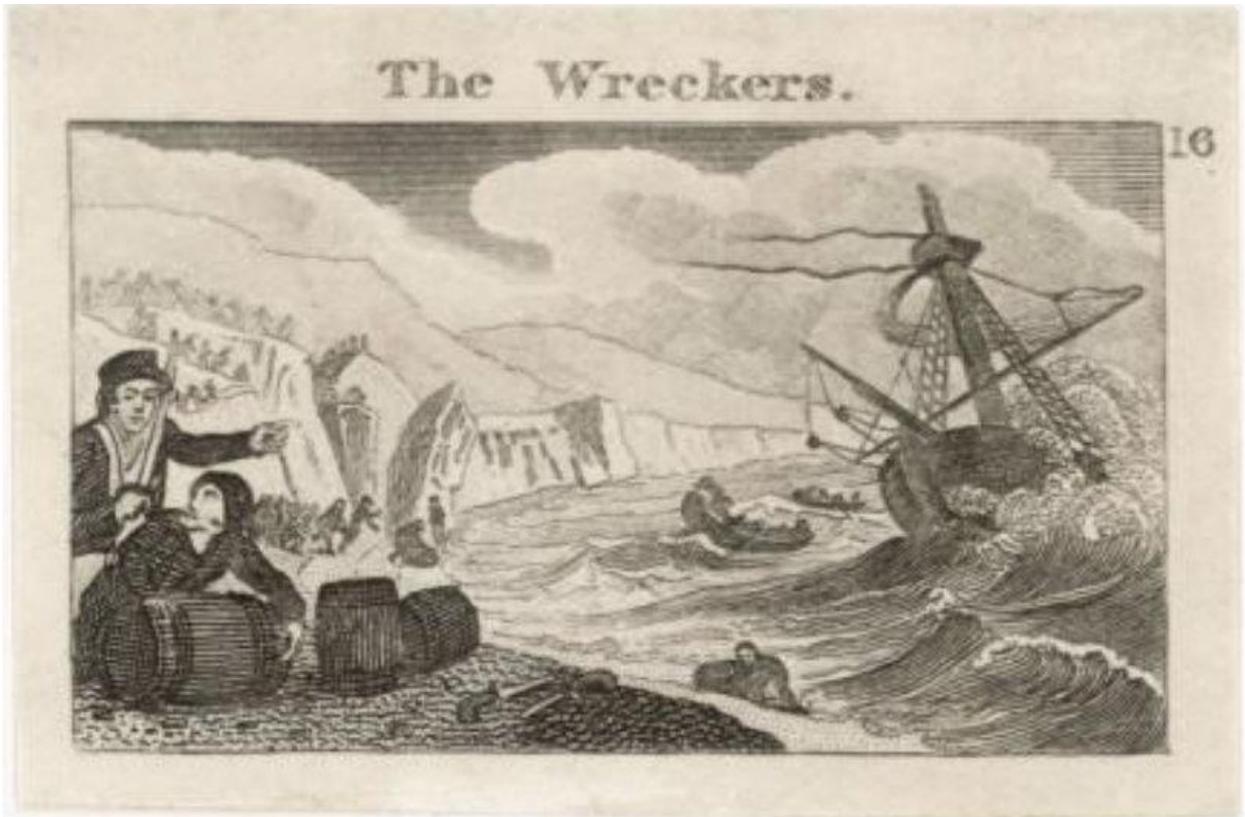
## **The church perspective**

The Rev George C Smith wrote in 1818 that in his parish, when a vessel came ashore and "men, women and children are working on her ... the precipices they descend, the rocks they climbed ... are the most frightening and alarming I ever beheld." But the Rev Mr. Smith was mainly concerned with the children. For the most part, little attention was paid to the issue by the Church of England, and, in fact, the prayer of Scilly's Rev. Troutbeck is often quoted:

*"We pray thee, O Lord, not that wrecks should happen, but that if any wrecks should happen, Thou wilt guide them into the Scilly isles for the benefit of the poor inhabitants."*

Robert Hawker reported that the local children said a prayer at bedtime "*God bless father and mother and zend a ship ta shore vore morning*". The famous answer to that prayer was the wreck of the Eliza that afforded the locals wonderful bales of cotton and other luxury goods "*To feed the hungry and clothe the poor.*"

The Methodists felt differently. Initially their main concern was with the alcohol which all ships carried, and which was, in the event of a wreck, carried off by the wreckers. John Wesley referred to Cornwall where many "neither feared God nor regarded man. However, as the Cornish converted to Methodism, Wesley believed that they would no longer be involved in wrecking - particularly the tinnerns, who were both the converts and the wreckers.



But the tanners were easily able to reconcile their Methodist beliefs with their wrecking activity, and indeed some like the tanners of Breage were both the most notorious wreckers and enthusiastic disciples. However it is probably the preaching of clergy of both the Methodist and Anglican persuasion that the violent plunder of vessels did eventually come to an end - along with a growing pride in Cornish ability to rescue survivors and the growing number of garrisons around the coast. But what continues to this day is the harvest of items washed ashore.