

**Welsh Wreck Web Research Project
(North Cardigan Bay)**

On-line research into the wreck of the:

John



Cardigan Bay

Report compiled by:

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Date:

July 2020

Report Ref:

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1.0 Abstract

The Welsh Wreck Web Research Project is a group volunteer effort to use online archives, databases, and books to research shipwrecks in Cardigan Bay of North Wales. This report aims to uncover information about the *John*, a documented sixteenth century wreck off the coast of Pwllheli. Through extensive online research, little information was uncovered about the *John* due to its early date and the loss of archived documents during the Second World War. The *John* originated in Saint Malo and wrecked in Cardigan Bay off the coast of Pwllheli in the mid to late sixteenth century. The vessel transported a cargo of wine.

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2.3 Contributors

Ian Cundy of the Malvern Archaeological Diving Unit managed logistics for the Welsh Wreck Web Project and provided research guidance and resources. The French Society for Maritime History (Société Française d'Histoire Maritime, SFHM) and Michel Daeffler provided guidance for maritime research in online French archives.

3.0 Introduction

The *John* is a wrecked vessel located off the coast of near the town of Pwllheli, Wales. Originating from Saint Malo, France, the vessel was abandoned sometime in the mid to late sixteenth century.

The goal of this research endeavour was to find all available information related to the *John*, such as vessel specifications, cargo and crew records, how the vessel wrecked, and any other historical information associated with the wreck. This research was conducted as part of the Nautical Archaeology Society's and Malvern Archaeological Diving Unit's Welsh Wreck Web Research Project. The project was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 so that researchers under quarantine could investigate Welsh shipwrecks using online resources.

This report details the findings of an intensive online research effort. No fieldwork has been conducted on the *John* as part of this project.

4.0 Background

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw an expansion of world trade networks by sea. Nations such as Portugal, Spain, England, and France all sought to participate in the growing world economy to secure valuables from Asia, such as porcelain and spices, as well as New World riches like gold, silver, sugar, and tobacco. Trade was spurred by navigational and shipbuilding advancements of the period, many of which were developed in Portugal.

Local, domestic, and coastal trade during the sixteenth century among England, Wales, and France included the shipment of foodstuffs, fish, salt, wine, grain, dairy products, leather, cloth, iron, lead, woad, and coal (Jones, 1984; Taylor, 2009). Wine imported into Wales, at least in South Wales, typically originated from Bordeaux, France, with Northern French ports such as Saint Malo and Iberia as secondary sources (Taylor, 2009, p. 20). During the reign of Elizabeth I, three Welsh ports were designated: Chester, Milford and Cardiff (Jones, 1984, p. 25). While most items were traded under bond, items of low value or carried short distances were more frequently traded under letpass or transire, customs documents that listed cargo and gave clearance for trade (Taylor, 2009, pp. 229-230). Toward the end of the century, local shipments of wine began to be traded under a letpass rather than under a customs bond, which were not recorded in coastal ledgers (Taylor, 2009, p. 229). Smuggling, corruption among customs officials, and piracy were also rampant along the Welsh coast (Jones, 1984, pp. 25-26). Ships from France and Spain, carrying highly vulnerable cargoes of salt or wine, were particularly involved with illegal trade (Jones, 1984, p. 26).



Figure 4.1: 1570 Nautical Map (Ortelius, 1570)

The Welsh port town of Pwllheli, near which the *John* wrecked, was known to bring in imported wines and served as a haven for pirates and smugglers throughout the town's history, dating back to the thirteenth century (Pwllheli Cymru; Pwllheli.org.uk).

The French port town of Saint Malo, from which the *John* supposedly originated, developed as an important seaport during the sixteenth century. The city is situated in a strategic location as the last main Channel port before the tip of Brittany; all merchant ships from the North Sea and the English Channel had to pass Saint Malo on a journey south (About-France.com). The city became well-known as a base for corsairs, or pirates, that pillaged foreign ships that came out of the English Channel. These brigands were documented to operate at least as early as the fifteenth century through the eighteenth century (St-Malo.info 2011). Saint Malo's most famous seafarer was Jacques Cartier, who is credited with the European discovery of modern-day Canada. The city was bombarded during the Second World War by Axis and Allied forces alike, reducing much of the old city to rubble (About-France.com).

During the transition between the medieval and post-medieval periods, around the fourteenth through the mid-sixteenth century, Iberian shipbuilding innovations led to the predominant use of caravels, naos, and galleons for overseas trade until the mid to late nineteenth century (Gould, 2011, p. 209). Northern French ships of the sixteenth century were of relatively modest size compared to other European vessels, generally around 18 to 23 meters long. They were constructed to fit their desired uses, and were generally multi-purpose vessels. These ships generally came in one or two deck forms. Single deck vessels, around 50 to 60 tons, had a low hull, a length of about 18 meters, a width of 5 meters, and a depth of 3 meters. This type had a forecastle, a quarter deck, and a poop deck above. Double deck ships, over 100 tons, were about 20 meters long, 6 meters wide, and 3 meters deep. The vessel had a forecastle, a quarter deck, and a poop deck above, with 1.3 meters between decks. This larger ship type was also frequently equipped with a "spare deck," which was arranged over the upper deck between the forecastle and the quarter deck, which was designed to block the entry of enemies onto the vessel when under attack (Daeffler, 2018).

5.0 Research Methodology

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, access to physical archives, libraries, and other institutions was restricted. Research was conducted using online resources and distanced communication.

Research was conducted using an MSI GF63 Thin 8SC laptop running the Windows 10 operating system. The web browser Google Chrome was used to access the internet, and the Google search engine was the primary method of online research.

Ian Cundy of the Nautical Archaeology Society provided the initial references to the *John* wreck, which were found on Robert Cadwalader's online list of Welsh shipwrecks and Henry Parry's 1969 book *Wreck and Rescue on the Coast of Wales*. Neither source provided references for their information on the *John*. An attempt to contact Robert Cadwalader was unsuccessful.

Online research began by checking online archives for any reference to the *John* wreck (Coflein online catalogue of archaeology, buildings, industrial and maritime heritage in Wales; Rhiw.com; Books, Boxes, & Boats Maritime and Historical Research Service; Crew List Index Project; newspapers from the National Library of Wales). These services turned up no results, likely due to the wreck's early date.

Welsh and United Kingdom databases were not fruitful, so French archives were checked for any reference to the French vessel. The French Society for Maritime History (Société Française d'Histoire Maritime, SFHM) was contacted for guidance, and Michel Daeffler provided information on sixteenth century Norman ships and pointed toward online archive resources. The online French National Archives and departmental archives of Ille et Vilaine were searched thoroughly. These sources also turned up no useful information. Notary minutes from 1557 were found in the French National Archives that mention shipped goods that were stopped in Saint Malo, however, no vessel names are mentioned. Ship insurance documents and a list of ships from Saint Malo were found in the Ille et Vilaine online archives that dated back to the early eighteenth century, but no earlier. It was suggested by Daeffler that the destruction of Saint Malo during the Second World War resulted in a loss of many archived historical documents and any information about the *John* that may have existed was likely lost in the event. The online departmental archives of the Gironde produced nothing of interest. Physical archives may be more fruitful.

6.0 Results

The *John* was a French ship that originated in Saint Malo that was bound for Pwllheli, Wales with a cargo of wine. The vessel experienced difficulty off Saint Tudwal's islands and ultimately found shelter in Pwllheli harbour (Parry, 1969, p. 4).

The wreck of a ship named the *John* is referenced in Ivor Wynne Jones' map of North Wales shipwrecks, displayed just off the coast of Pwllheli (see Figure 6.1).

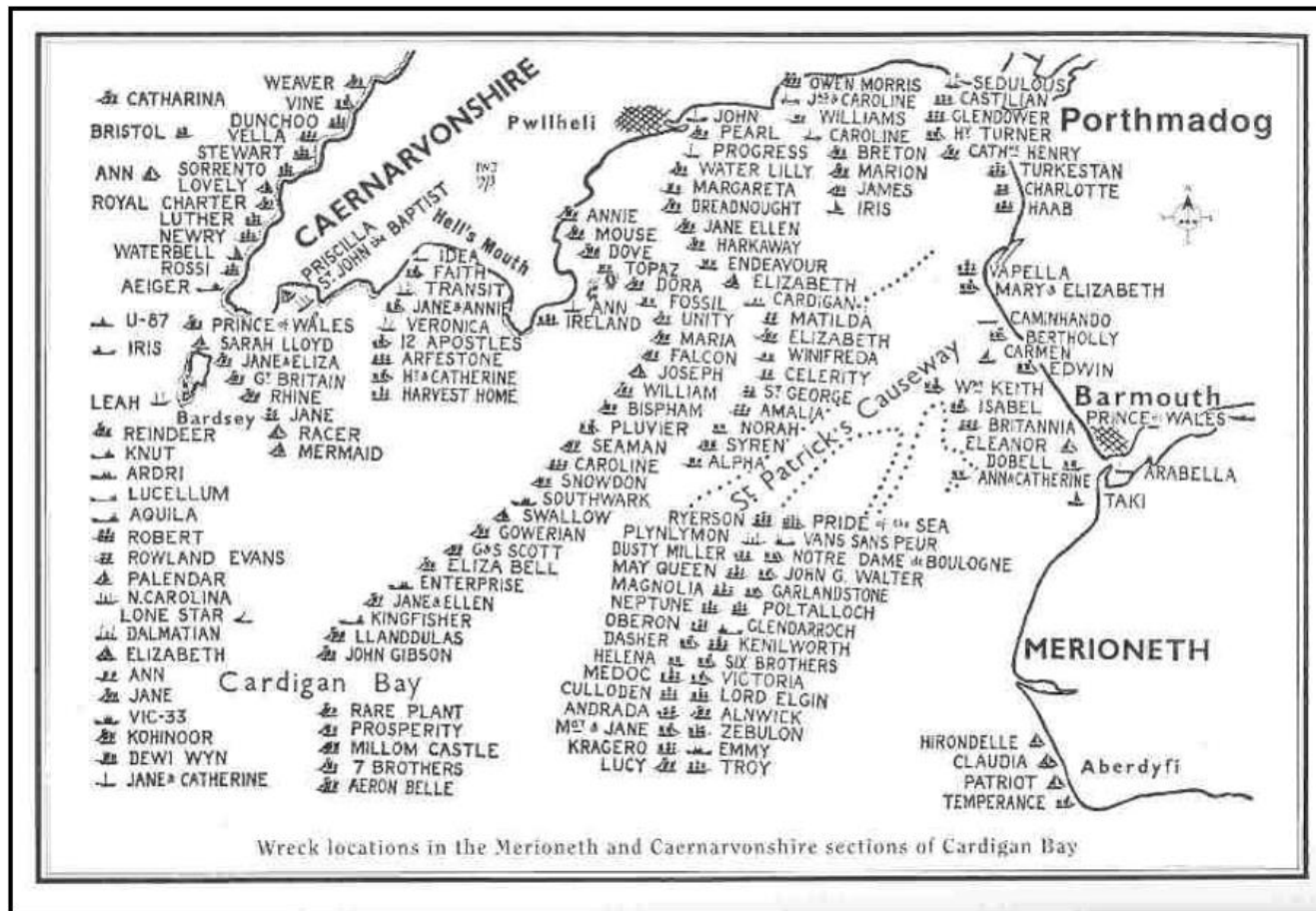


Figure 6.1: Map of shipwrecks in North Wales (Jones, 1973, reproduced on Nauticalarchaeologysociety.org)

Similarly, a *John* is referenced in Robert Cadwalader's compiled a list of Cardigan Bay shipwrecks. This vessel is noted to originate in Saint Malo and was abandoned near Pwllheli in 1590 (Cadwalader, 2001). Given the late sixteenth century date and similar location, it is likely that the *John* that was in distress in 1559 is the same *John* that wrecked in 1590. It is also possible that the exact dates and circumstances have been muddled over time, and these sources reference the same event.

Notary minutes from 1557 mention an instance of shipped goods that were stopped in Saint Malo. The minutes detail the power of attorney over these goods being passed from Antwerp to Bordeaux merchants (Delavigne, 1557). Bordeaux merchants were known for exporting wine, which was supposedly carried by the *John*. However, no vessel names are mentioned in the minutes. It does raise the possibility that the *John* may not have originated in Saint Malo, and merely passed through on its way to Wales from a different port city, like Bordeaux, a major exporter of wine.

Unfortunately, no more information about the *John* could be uncovered. The vessel predates many nineteenth century efforts to consolidate, organize, and preserve maritime shipping records. The *John* is also a French ship that originated from Saint Malo, which was bombarded during the Second World War, destroying many archived documents. It is likely that further documentation on the *John* was lost, and the only potential for more information relies on the archaeological investigation of the wreck itself.

7.0 Analysis

There was not much information about the *John* available in online archives. This is most likely due to the early date of the wreck, which predates many databases on maritime information in the United Kingdom. The majority of these databases are focused on nineteenth century wrecks and later; documents from the sixteenth century are not as readily-available. Searching online French archives were able to reach shipping records from farther back in time, reliably to about the eighteenth century. The few sixteenth century records uncovered were not relevant to the *John*. In personal communication, Michel Daeffler of the French Society for Maritime History suggested that documents from Saint Malo would be difficult to locate due to archival destruction during World War II.

The two primary sources for this report, Robert Cadwalader's list and Henry Parry's book, are conflicted about the events of the *John's* wreck. Parry's book mentions the *John* as a distressed ship in 1559 that eventually finds shelter, while Cadwalader says the *John* was abandoned in 1590 in the same general location (Parry, 1969, p. 4; Cadwalader, 2001). It is unclear whether or not these accounts are conflicting. Taking both accounts literally, and assuming they reflect the same vessel, the *John* sailed from Saint Malo to Cardigan Bay with a cargo of wine in 1559, became distressed at sea, and found shelter in Pwllheli Harbour. The vessel revisited the area in 1590, where it was abandoned. It is also possible these two sources recount the same event differently, providing slightly different dates and outcomes to the ship's distress near Pwllheli.

8.0 Conclusions & Recommendations

Unfortunately, little information about the *John* could be uncovered through online research. All that is known about the *John* is that it sailed from Saint Malo to Cardigan Bay with a cargo of wine, where it eventually wrecked sometime in the mid to late sixteenth century.

Further research should involve contacting Robert Cadwalader and investigating references for Henry Parry's *Wreck and Rescue on the Coast of Wales* to understand the origin of their information on the *John*. Online archival research appears to be unfruitful for this particular wreck. It is possible that physical archives in France may provide some information; Michel Daeffler suggested searching the archives of the "Table de Marbre" (series 5B) and the possible notarial archives of Saint Malo (series 4B). However, the damage to the archives of Saint Malo during World War II means there is likely no documentary information available.

More information about the *John* is dependent on archaeological fieldwork. The vessel provides excellent potential for more information on sixteenth century shipwrecks. The most well-known wreck of the period, the 1545 *Mary Rose*, represents a large, prominent military vessel. Conversely, the *John* could provide information on typical merchant vessels of the age. The general location of the wreck is known, along the coast near Pwllheli, and the wreck could be potentially located with a side-scan sonar survey of the area. Professional underwater archaeologists should dive on the wreck, as it is an old wreck in an uncertain state of preservation with great potential for study. Sixteenth century wrecks have not been as widely studied as later wrecks, and professionals would provide the best opportunity for data recovery.

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