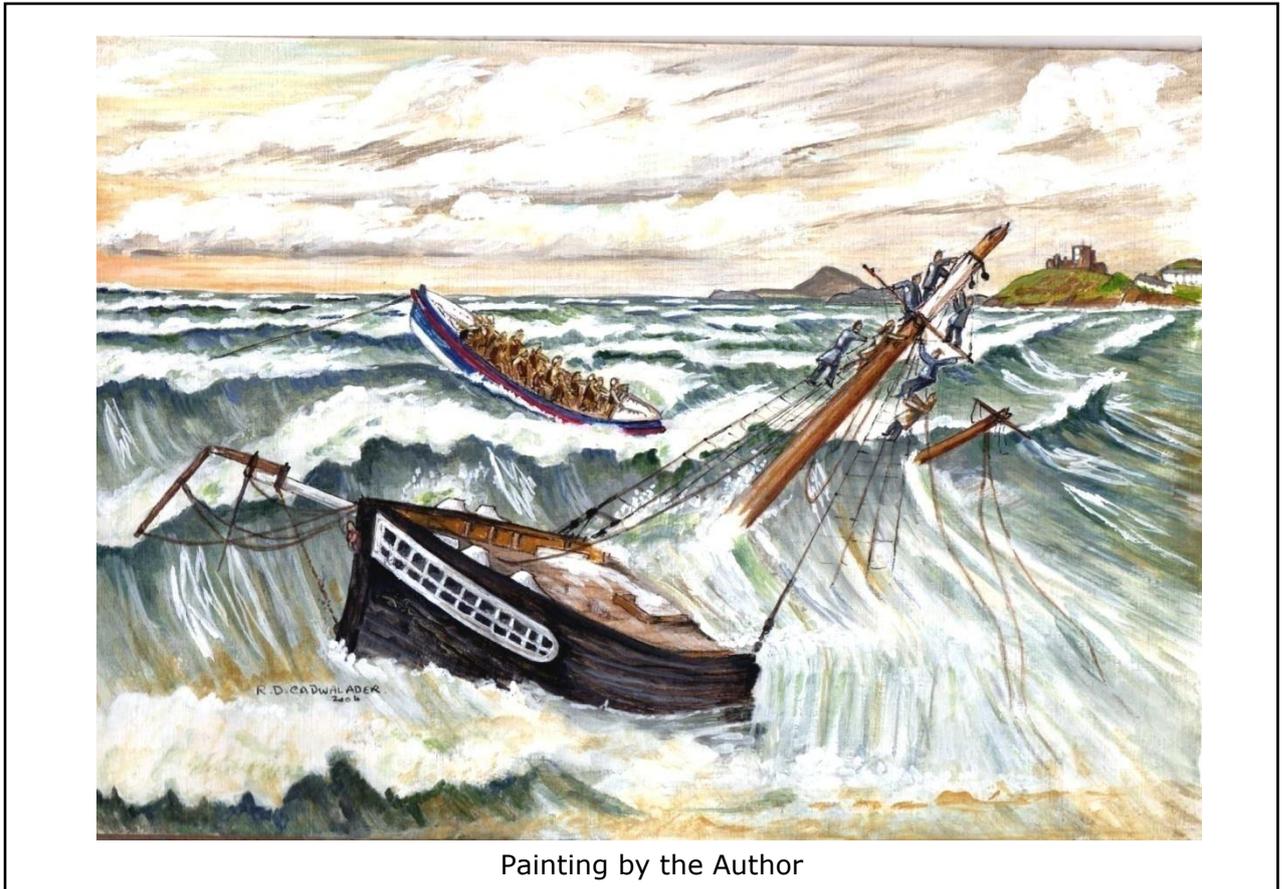


Welsh Wreck Web Research Project
(North Cardigan Bay)
On-line research into the wreck of the:
SPANKER



Stranding of the SPANKER at Morfa Harlech Feb 6th 1885

Report compiled by:

Robert Dafydd Cadwalader

Report Title:

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SPANKER**

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MADU No. 252

1.0 Abstract

The Malvern Archaeological Diving Unit (MADU) currently have a database of 453 shipwrecks in the north end of Cardigan Bay in north west Wales. These wrecks date from 1590 to 1993 and very few have been investigated in any depth! With corona virus currently requiring us all to rethink the way we live, on-line research would appear to be something we could all safely consider taking on.

The author of this report is from a seafaring /fishing/ lifeboat family from Criccieth at the northern end of the Bay and the sea has been in his blood all his life, serving on ships of all types, including, as master, on research vessels, for over 40 years. His particular interest is in Tremadog Bay as the whole expanse of the bay is visible from Criccieth and as Trustee/Secretary of the Porthmadog Maritime Museum has gathered material on local shipwrecks and maritime incidents for many years and aims to correlate this and expand the information from written and the many on-line resources available. Anecdotes are included, but as always, though often useful, this type of information should be treated with caution so will be clearly indicated. The author is a Welsh speaker so possibly has wider access to newspapers in that language.

No diving experience or training in archaeology. This report describes the historical aspect of the incident.



Fig 1. Barque

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2.4 Contributors

Porthmadog Maritime Museum
 MADU
 Chris Holden
 Late Capt. W.E.Williams

2.5 Abbreviations

A list of any abbreviations used in this report, i.e.

GAT	Gwynedd Archaeology Trust
IJNA	International Journal of Nautical Archaeology
MADU	Malvern Archaeological Diving Unit
NAS	Nautical Archaeology Society
NPRN	National Primary Resource Number
OS	Ordnance Survey
RCAHMW	Royal Commission on the Ancient & Historical Monuments of Wales
URL	Uniform Resource Locator
Larne	Larne and Larne Shipwreck Index Vol 5
MW/CM	Maritime Wales/Cymru a'r Môr Journal No 11 1987
AE	Aled Eames

3.0 Introduction

The author became aware of this wreck at a young age as it is recorded on the services boards at Criccieth Lifeboat Station. His father and elder brother were members of the lifeboat crew and he spent a lot of time there. This shipwreck is very typical of other incidents whereby ships bound for Liverpool have blundered in to Cardigan Bay and been wrecked on St Patrick's Causeway, the shores of Tremadog Bay, and Morfa Harlech.

An article describing the incident and analysis of how she was wrecked appeared in Cymru a'r Môr /Maritime Wales Journal in 1987 written by Captain W.E.Williams of Criccieth.

4.0 Background

On 6th February 1885 the wooden barque SPANKER, on passage from Jamaica to Liverpool with a cargo of logwood, stranded on the north end of Morfa Harlech. Criccieth lifeboat rescued 7 of the crew, 4 crew members drowned. This wreck is recorded on the Services Boards at Criccieth Lifeboat station and the author heard about it anecdotally as a boy in the 1950s/60s. There is an account of the incident in "Wreck and Rescue on the Coast of Wales by Henry Parry 1969". This appears to be based on newspaper articles of the period. (A selection of these articles can be found in Section 6).

Three communities are named in connection with the shipwreck viz.

Harlech The ship stranded on the foreshore .

Porthmadog (then Portmadoc) The main, and only, port in the vicinity. Where the tugs were based.

Criccieth The lifeboat which rescued of the crew was stationed here (despite it being officially named the Portmadoc Station).



Fig 2. Cardigan Bay

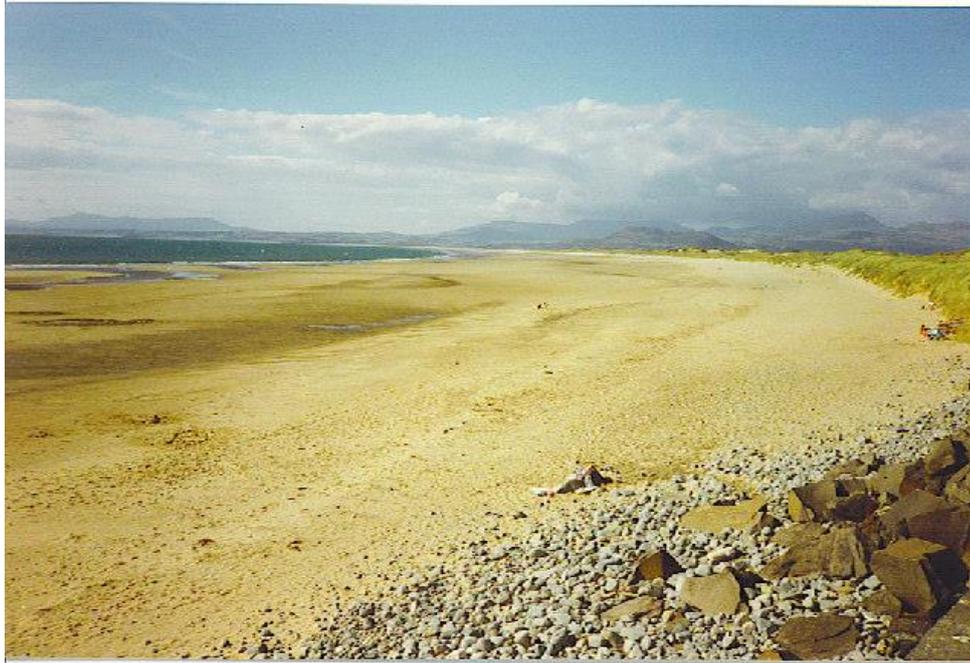


Fig 3. Morfa Harlech (Harlech Beach) Photo © [Colin Smith \(cc-by-sa/2.0\)](#)



Fig 4. Map of UK

5.0 Research Methodology

Equipment used

LENOVA C40-3D Desktop PC with Windows 10
High speed broadband
Microsoft Office
Google search engine
Ancestry.co.uk
Adobe Photoshop Elements

1. I have a good library of reference books on maritime history including the classic books on shipwrecks and rescue on the North Wales coast. As an amateur local historian I have a collection of autobiographies and biographies by local people plus typewritten and hand written notes by residents of Criccieth going back to the 1830s. I start my research from here.
2. I check the Lloyds Register database to see if there is an entry for the vessel to obtain building date and dimensions.
3. Entry from Larne and Larne Shipwreck Index Vol 5 included (if there is one)
4. Online – If no entry in Lloyds and if the ship is British I check with the CLIP Crewlist website <https://www.crewlist.org.uk/> to obtain the official number and vessel details from the Mercantile Navy List.
5. The COFLEIN website has information on some wrecks so this is checked. NPRN 271705 <https://coflein.gov.uk/en/site/271705/details/spanker>
6. A general search with GOOGLE always remembering to precede the vessel's name with.... barque, brig, schooner, sailing ship, SS , MV etc. And the date of the incident. Other search words used are... stranded, foundered, wrecked etc.
7. The national Library of Wales newspaper collection of Welsh newspapers 1800-1919 (English and Welsh) is invaluable <https://newspapers.library.wales/> Try using the name of a nearby community combined with the name of the ship or date of the incident using modern Welsh name or, more likely, the old English version or spelling e.g. Portmadoc/Port-madoc. Criccieth was spelt in several different ways.
8. Wrecksite.eu is an excellent website. A very reasonable fee of 4 eu is charged for further information and HD image (if available).
9. Uboat.net is very useful for ships sunk during WW1 and WW2 <https://uboaat.net/>
10. Anecdotal – sometimes elaborated over the generations but often an element of truth so well worth researching.
11. An article describing the incident and analysis of how she was wrecked appeared in Cymru a'r Môr /Maritime Wales Journal in 1987 written by Captain W.E.Williams of Criccieth.

6.0 Results

TABLE 1

Vessel	Name/s	Spanker		
	Type	Sailing vessel - Barque		
Built	Date	1860		
	Builder	A McMillan		
		Dumbarton		
Construction	Materials	Wood		
	Decks	1		
	Bulkheads			
Propulsion	Type	N/A		
	Details	N/A		
Engine	Details			
	Boilers	N/A		
Drive	Type	N/A		
	Number	N/A		
Dimensions	Length	136.3 ft	41.54m	
	Beam	28.3 ft	8.63m	
	Depth of hold	18.5 ft	5.64m	
Tonnage	Gross	477 tons		
	Net	506 tons		
Owner	First			
	Last	Robert Whitehill, Renfrew		
	Others			
Registry	Port	Glasgow		
	Flag	UK		
	Number	28223		
History	Routes	Varied		
	Cargo	Varied		
Final Voyage	From	Carlisle Bay, Jamaica		
	To	Queenstown(Cobh) for orders -diverted to Crookshaven then Liverpool		
	Captain	Robert Whitehill		
	Crew	11		
	Passengers	0		
	Cargo	Logwood		
Wrecking	Date	6 th February 1885		
	Location	North end Morfa Harlech		
		¼ mile from the shore and ½ mile south of Porthmadog Bar (BOT inquiry)		
		52° 51'.30 N 04° 08'.00 W (Larne)		
		Map Reference SH53SE		
		Grid Reference SH5540233570 (COFLEIN)		
		Cause	Stranding	
		Loss of life	4	
	Outcome	Smashed to pieces		

The SPANKER loaded logwood roots and sailed from Carlisle Bay in Jamaica 11th December 1884. The master set course to either the Windward Passage between Cuba and Haiti or to the north around the west coast of Cuba through the Florida Straits, although longer, makes full advantage of the Gulf Stream. The former route is difficult for a sailing vessel as it is against the prevailing NE Trade Winds. Unfortunately she grounded on the Cuban coast and some of her cargo had to be jettisoned to refloat her. (Timber cargo is bulky and relatively light so often deck cargo is carried in addition to what is loaded in the holds). Her orders at this time were "towards Queenstown (Cobh) for orders".

N.B.

History of Logwood

It was fashionable in Europe to wear black and it was easier to get black from logwood than from indigo and madder. Logwood was first exploited by the Spanish in the Campeche Bay in Mexico. From the 17th century to the 19th century, logwood was a commodity of great economic importance both in the Caribbean and in Europe.

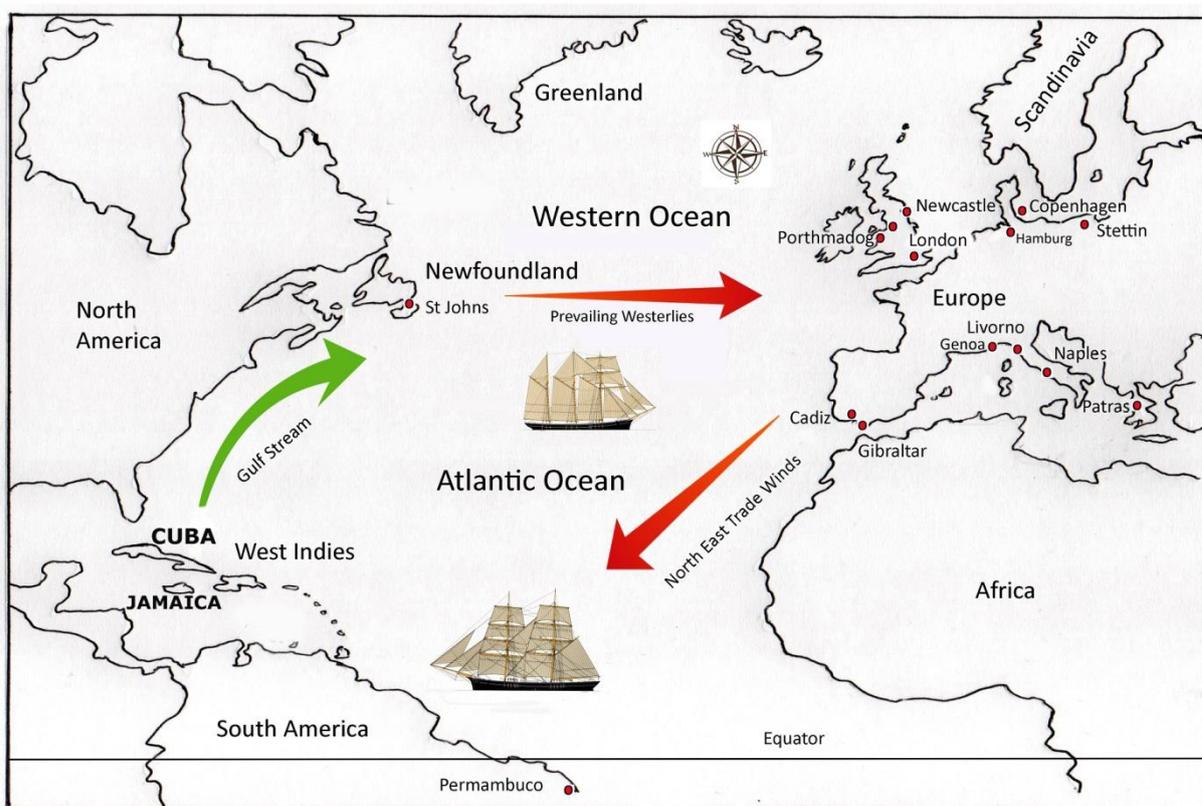


Fig 5. North Atlantic showing prevailing winds and current

On 26th January 1885 she reported to the Lloyd's signal station at Rock Island at the south westernmost point of Ireland. She then called in at nearby Crookhaven where she received orders to proceed to Liverpool. She departed 5th January.

South Wales Echo 26th January 1885

Lloyds' Casualty Telegrams

The barque Spanker, from Jamaica, has arrived at Rock Island, and reports that she got ashore at Cuba and jettisoned part of her cargo. Damage unknown.



Fig 6. Shows intended and actual route of the SPANKER

Cambrian News 13th February 1885

CRICCIETH. SHIP WRECK.—During the gale of Friday night and Saturday morning of last week, the barque Spanker, of Glasgow, bound for Liverpool from Jamaica, with a cargo of logwood was totally wrecked within a short distance of the Turkestan, on the Harlech shore. A light, as from a ship in distress was observed from Criccieth late on Friday night, being then off Mochras point, and the wind blowing a gale from the south-west. Mr O. Hughes coal merchant, who is also a member of the local committee connected with the life-boat institution, was at once consulted. He immediately started for the life-boat house, and the crew was soon got together. Rockets were fired from the shore, and the life-boat under the management of Captain Evan Jones was afloat shortly after 11 o'clock. The light, which was at first observed, now suddenly disappeared. Owing to the darkness of the night the boatsmen were unable to pick up with the shipwrecked crew until day-break. It was then discovered that the ill-fated ship had gone to pieces. The master, steward, boatswain, and a boy were drowned in trying to make for the shore in a boat. The remainder of the crew, seven in number were found clinging to the pieces of the wreck and were with difficulty taken into the lifeboat. They were safely landed at Criccieth about 11. 30 on Saturday morning. Crowds of people were anxiously waiting them on the beach. Most of the shipwrecked men were so exhausted that they had to be carried ashore. They were soon taken to comfortable lodgings, and the attention they received is worthy of the highest praise. It was thought at first that one of the crew (the carpenter) would not recover. Dr Jones (Talarfor) was on the spot, and restoratives were applied, and with great care the patient gradually became sensible, and so far recovered as to be able to leave Criccieth on the following Monday. Mr and Mrs J. E. Greaves, with their characteristic kindness, visited the sick men, and brought them good nourishing food. At Mr Greaves' expense they were also supplied with a new suit of clothes, a pair of boots, and a cap each. Mr Watkin, of Muriau. also visited the men, and offered to provide anything which might be required. Other kind friends offered relief in kind and money, and, indeed too much praise cannot be bestowed upon the many who looked after the interests of the unfortunate crew. The names of Captain Ellis (the Edward), Messrs. Hughes, J. Owen (surgeon dentist), Richard Jones, and Humphrey Humphreys, who all rendered most valuable assistance, particularly deserve to be mentioned. The lifeboat men are reported to have behaved remarkably well. The ship's crew left on Monday for their respective homes, cheering heartily as the train left the station. A large sum of money was collected to provide them with pocket-money previous to their departure. The body of the unfortunate captain was

washed ashore at Morfa Bychan on Monday last, and was taken to Treflys Church. An inquest was held on Tuesday before Dr Hunter Hughes, coroner, when the mate and another of the crew, a Russian, were examined as witnesses. A verdict of Accidentally Drowned was returned. It appears that the captain was unwell during the greater part of the voyage, and had been confined to his bed for some days prior to his death. His body was taken to Paisley by the evening mail from Criccieth on Wednesday.

One account has the Porthmadog tug boat standing by during the night with the Criccieth lifeboat.



Fig 7. Porthmadog paddle tug "Wave of Life" - Porthmadog Maritime Museum

Precis from article by Captain W.E.Williams of Criccieth in Cymru a'r Môr / Maritime Wales Nr 11 1987

(N.B. Captain Williams did not have access to the B.O.Trade Inquiry Wreck Report so was unaware that the SPANKER called at Crookshaven and so assumed that the vessel passed well to the SE of Malin Head)

The Spanker was en route from Jamaica to Liverpool with a cargo of logwood and at 10pm on 6 February 1885 struck the coast off Morfa Harlech. It was a dark and stormy night but, undaunted, the lifeboat crew set out for the wreck as soon as the news was received. The Criccieth lifeboat was a pulling boat, powered by 10 men on the oars and commanded by a first and second coxswain. It was hard, gruelling work, rowing a heavy lifeboat in dangerous seas, a job that required both courage and stamina.

So keen were the lifeboat men to get going that they did not stop to pick up supplies, something that was to cause them more than a few hunger pains during the long night ahead. As they were approaching the Spanker all of the lights on the wrecked ship suddenly went out and the lifeboat crew, in the days before radar, were

left with no idea where the wreck lay. The boat was now faced by total darkness and with a heavy sea running the decision was taken to 'lay to' and await morning. There was nothing else to be done as nobody could see anything in the blackness. It was a miserable night, spray and sea water pouring into the boat and within a few minutes everyone was soaked to the skin.

At first light the lifeboat moved in. The wreck had now broken in two but seven men were seen clinging to the remains of the rigging. These men were rescued but the captain and two of his crew had already drowned when they attempted to get ashore in a small boat. The bosun had been sheltering in the rigging of the mizzen mast but this went by the board and he was also lost. The lifeboat returned to shore and the rescued men were looked after by the people of Criccieth.

Accompanying the article is a pencil drawing by Owen Jones who had talked to one of the crew members in the 1920s. It shows the lifeboat at anchor, which is in the deep, being slackened down stern first, to the wreck which is in the breakers.

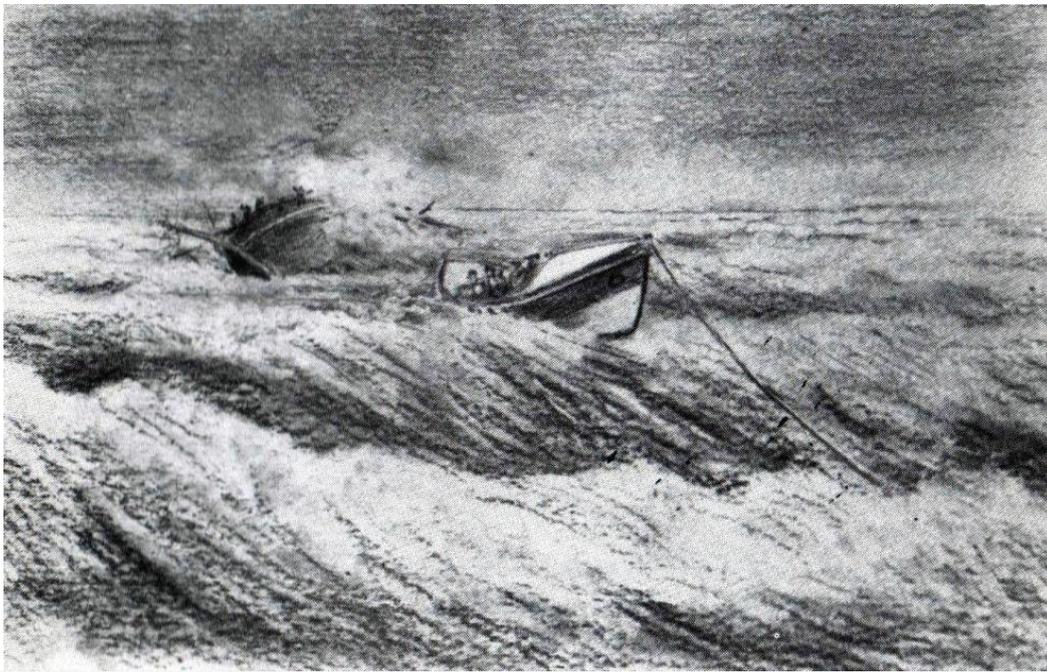


Fig 8. Sketch SPANKER rescue by Owen Jones

Board of Trade Inquiry at Glasgow 5th March 1885

The Board of Trade inquiry found that the *Spanker's* stranding was due to careless and improper navigation, explained by the master and the mate not being aware that the Bardsey Light had been changed from a fixed light to a revolving light and confusing it with Tuskar Rock lighthouse on the Irish coast. The mate, Peter Wood, was exonerated from blame.

The full, very detailed report on the inquiry can be found on the Southampton City Council database(on wrecksite.eu website)

7.0 Analysis

The incident is well documented in the press and in books. The information in books is often derived from the former. The writing in Victorian newspapers is frequently flowery, prone to exaggeration and sensationalism (still is!). Brief accounts appeared in the Welsh language press but with no additional information. There is a certain amount of information on the Internet.

The B.O.T. inquiry is the best source of information.

The master was confined to his cabin due to illness though the Mate held a master's certificate and was an experienced mariner.

No log was hove so the Mate had no knowledge of the vessel's speed.

Insufficient soundings were taken.

The vessel had been away for over a year and the characteristic of Bardsey light had changed in the meantime.

Not sufficient allowance for leeway and the well known set into Cardigan Bay.

No fault was found with Criccieth lifeboat for the delay as the SPANKER's lights had become extinguished during the night.

8.0 Conclusions & Recommendations

1. It is a classic example of a vessel ending up in trouble in north Cardigan Bay
2. The wrecking of the SPANKER is an important incident in a historical context.
3. It is perhaps not so important in archaeological or diving terms as very little (or anything) remains in situ. "**Site Description** (COFLEIN NPRN 271705): Archaeological remains associated with the loss of this vessel are not confirmed as present at this location, but may be in the vicinity".
4. The incident occurred during February and the wooden ship was totally smashed to bits during the winter storms. No mention was found of any salvage of the cargo and it is unknown if the cargo was insured. Some wreckage and cargo was surely salvaged by local residents and might still exist in the district. There is no mention whether any iron fittings such as the anchors were recovered so might be found by metal detectorists one day.
5. This stretch of shoreline has been affected by accretion for centuries with material being carried eastward along the southern shore of the Llŷn Peninsula so the site of the incident has been greatly altered. It is possible that remains could be uncovered by storms combined with spring tides.
6. The newspaper report states that the vessel was wrecked in the vicinity of the wreck of the TURKESTAN, (wrecked in 1876 and not yet completely broken up by 1885).
7. The report was compiled completely at home, during the Covid-10 lockdown 2020, from books and online resources. The amount and range of digital data is continuously being added to. The database will be useful to dive clubs, historians, historical societies, archaeology enthusiasts and local schools. The references and methodology will give these and other interested parties an idea of the huge amount of data available for research projects.

8. References

Sources include:

Lloyd's Register 1875 <https://archive.org/details/@lrfhec>

Wreck and Rescue on the Coast of Wales by Henry Parry 1969

Shipwrecks of North Wales by Ivor Wynne Jones 4th edition 2001

Underwater Guide to North Wales by Chris Holden Vol 1 Barmouth to South Stack

Larne and Larne Shipwreck index Vol 5 (Lloyds Register)

Aled Eames - Porthmadog Ships

Lewis Lloyd - Wherever Freights May Offer

Lewis Lloyd - Pwllheli The Port and Mart of Llŷn 1991

David Thomas - Hen Longau Sir Gaernarfon 1952

Cymru a'r Môr / Maritime Wales Annual journal from Gwynedd Archives 1976 to present

RCAHMW COFLEIN <https://coflein.gov.uk/en/site/271705/details/spanker>

Wrecksite website <https://www.wrecksite.eu/Wrecksite.aspx>

National Library of Wales Welsh newspapers on line <https://newspapers.library.wales/>

CLIP Crewlist project for dimensions/details of vessels <https://www.crewlist.org.uk/>

There is a Historypoint plaque with a QR code which, when scanned with a smart phone, directs you to a website with the story of the shipwreck. This is near the car park by the golf course in Harlech <https://historypoints.org/index.php?page=spanker-shipwreck-site-morfa-harlech#map>

Appendices:

Appendix A – Table of Lloyd’s Registers entries for the *SPANKER 1884*

9.	<i>Spanker</i>	<i>Whitehill</i>	477	1363 283 185	Dumbarton	1860	R. Whitehill	Glasg'w	Hul.	10	—
28223	Bk	Wood	506		dirp.74nd.&srp.77	<i>A.M. Millan</i>	482mo.				C7	3,82
<i>P.V.M.K.</i>	<i>r.&YM.79c.f.</i>		452		ptsklsn.&srp.pl7yrsM	<i>at.69</i>						