

Forgotten Wrecks  
of the  
First World War

# SS *Westville*

## Site Report



LED BY IWM

2018





**FORGOTTEN WRECKS  
OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

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## Table of Contents

i Acknowledgments .....	2
ii Copyright Statement .....	3
iii List of Figures.....	3
1 Project Background .....	3
2 Methodology.....	4
2.1 Desk Based Historic Research .....	4
2.1.1 Online information/sources.....	4
2.1.2 Records at The National Archives .....	4
2.2 Associated Artefacts .....	4
2.3 Site Visit/Fieldwork .....	4
3 Vessel Biography: SS <i>Westville</i> .....	5
3.1 Vessel Type and Build .....	5
3.2 First World War Use & Loss .....	5
3.3 Associated Vessels .....	6
3.4 Post-loss Activity .....	6
4 Seabed Remains.....	6
4.1 Site Location and Environment.....	6
4.2 Archaeological Methodology .....	6
4.3 Description of Surviving Vessel Remains .....	7
5. Site Significance & Potential Further Research.....	10
6. Bibliography .....	11
Websites .....	11
Books.....	11
7. Appendices.....	11
7.1 Site video.....	11

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## ii Copyright Statement

This report has been produced by the MAT with the assistance of funding provided by the Heritage Lottery Fund through their Heritage Grants Programme. Unless otherwise stated all images are copyright of the MAT.

## iii List of Figures

FIGURE 1: SS <i>WESTVILLE</i> (ENTAYLOR COLLECTION (COURTESY OF D WENDES)) .....	5
FIGURE 2: POSITION OF SS <i>WESTVILLE</i> .....	6
FIGURE 3: THE SEABED AROUND THE <i>WESTVILLE</i> IS A MIXTURE OF SAND AND SHINGLE .....	7
FIGURE 4: DECK RAILS SEEN FOR THE OUTSIDE OF THE HULL.....	7
FIGURE 5: BOLLARD FORWARD END OF THE WRECK (IMAGE ROLAND BROOKES).....	8
FIGURE 6: WINCH, ROPE COILED AROUND A DRUM TO THE LEFT OF THE IMAGE .....	8
FIGURE 7: LOOKING UP AT THE ENGINE MACHINERY .....	9
FIGURE 8: THE LEGS OF THE ENGINE CAN JUST BE SEEN TO THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE IMAGE.....	9
FIGURE 9: THE FOUR BLADED PROPELLER RESTING ON THE SEABED .....	10
FIGURE 10: PROPELLER ON SEABED .....	10

## 1 Project Background

Forgotten Wrecks of the First World War is a Heritage Lottery Funded project which is dedicated to raising the profile of a currently under-represented aspect of the First World War. While attention is often focused on the Western Front and major naval battles like Jutland, historic remains from the war lie, largely forgotten, in and around our seas, rivers and estuaries.

With over 1,100 wartime wrecks along England's south coast alone, the conflict has left a rich heritage legacy and many associated stories of bravery and sacrifice. These underwater memorials represent the vestiges of a vital, yet little known, struggle that took place on a daily basis, just off our shores.

The study and promotion of these archaeological sites presents a unique opportunity to better interpret them and improve physical and virtual access.

The project focuses on underwater and coastal sites between Kent and Cornwall, which include merchant and naval ships, passenger, troop and hospital ships, U-boats, ports, wharfs, buildings and foreshore hulks. These sites, under water and on the foreshore, have been degrading and deteriorating due to natural and human processes for approximately 100 years and, as a result, are extremely fragile. In many cases, this project represents a final opportunity to record what remains on the seabed and foreshore before it is lost forever.

The project aims to characterise the nature and extent of the maritime First World War archaeological resource surviving on the south coast's seabed and around the coast. This will enable an understanding of maritime activity just off our shores during the conflict and provide a window onto some of the surviving sites. While it will not be possible to visit and record all c.1,100 vessels dating to the First World War, lost off the south coast of England, a representative sample of sites have been selected for more detailed study, analysis and interpretation. This report collates information collected during the project, relating to one of the south coast's First World War wrecks, namely that of *SS Westville*.

## 2 Methodology

General detail on the methodologies employed during the project are outlined within *Forgotten Wrecks of the First World War: Project Methodology Report*, this report section concentrates on approaches and resources relating specifically to the *Westville*.

### 2.1 Desk Based Historic Research

#### 2.1.1 Online information/sources

A range of online sources were searched for information on SS *Westville*, with the following being identified.

<b>Pastscape:</b>	<a href="http://www.pastscape.org.uk/hob.aspx?hob_id=895347&amp;sort=4&amp;search=any&amp;criteria=Westville%201917&amp;rational=q&amp;recordsperpage=10">http://www.pastscape.org.uk/hob.aspx?hob_id=895347&amp;sort=4&amp;search=any&amp;criteria=Westville%201917&amp;rational=q&amp;recordsperpage=10</a>
<b>Wrecksite EU:</b>	<a href="http://wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?1286">wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?1286</a>
<b>You Tube:</b>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bcwxm6oqCck">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bcwxm6oqCck</a> <a href="https://vimeo.com/99485738">https://vimeo.com/99485738</a>
<b>uboat.net</b>	<a href="http://uboat.net/wwi/boats/index.html?boat=UB+35">http://uboat.net/wwi/boats/index.html?boat=UB+35</a>
<b>Other URL:</b>	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SM_UB-35">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SM_UB-35</a>

#### 2.1.2 Records at The National Archives

Research was further extended through visits to view relevant material held at The National Archives at Kew, the following documents were examined:

##### Documents relating to *Westville*:

What	Ref.	Where	Date accessed
British Merchant Vessels sunk and captured by the enemy September 1917 - February 1918	ADM137/2963	TNA	2017

### 2.2 Associated Artefacts

While the Forgotten Wrecks project had a non-recovery policy, where possible, the project aimed to 'virtually reunite' artefacts historically recovered from the Forgotten Wrecks.

Research identified three artefacts that have been reported to the Receiver of Wreck they are two brass portholes and a steering wheel with pedestal (Pastscape, Droit A/389).

### 2.3 Site Visit/Fieldwork

Forgotten Wrecks site visits and fieldwork aimed to:

- Provide opportunities for volunteers to access and take an active role in the recording and research of a range of different types of maritime First World War site.
- Record extant remains for heritage records.
- Record extant remains for public dissemination, enabling 'virtual' access for those not able to achieve physical access.

Forgotten Wrecks funded diving from the dive boat *Wight Spirit* took place on the wreck of *Westville* on 25 June 2014.

Initial dives aimed to assess the condition of the remains and obtain a sketch drawing, then to build on this information with a measured sketch/survey and photographic recording where possible.

A total of six divers undertook a total of 310 minutes diving on the wreck. The dive team used self-contained breathing apparatus (SCUBA) with a breathing gas of enriched air nitrox (EANx) using accelerated decompression procedures.

Low light conditions prevailed on the underwater site on the day of the dive but visibility was reasonable at around 5m. A video tour of the wreck was obtained with strong torch light but obtaining good photographic images was difficult.

### 3 Vessel Biography: *SS Westville*

*SS Westville* was chosen as one of the Forgotten Wrecks case study sites because it represents an example of a steam ship of the day with a triple expansion engine, and was unenviably the last vessel to be sunk in 1917.



Figure 1: *SS Westville* (ENTaylor collection (courtesy of D Wendes))

#### 3.1 Vessel Type and Build

*SS Westville* was built by John Readhead in South Shields and completed in August 1913. The ship was a steel screw steamer with one deck having a gross tonnage of 3207. The 335ft 3ins (c.102m) long ship had a beam of 47ft 6ins (c.14.5m) and was powered by a three cylinder triple expansion engine with two single ended boilers. It had 310 nominal horse power.

#### 3.2 First World War Use & Loss

The *SS Westville* was a British cargo vessel, owned and operated by Ville Steamships Ltd (Ball & Stansfield, managers) (official number 133317, Signal letters JCSK). At the time of the sinking, the *Westville* was on route from Blyth bound for Blaye and was carrying a cargo of 5,200 tons of coal. The vessel was defensively armed with 1 x 12 pounder, 12cwt stern gun (Wrecksite EU, 2001-2016; Wendes, 2006, p. 136).

On 31 December 1917 *SS Westville* had the dubious distinction of being the last ship to be sunk in 1917. The ship was heading along the English Channel, zig-zagging at nine knots on a very dark night under the command of Captain George Bell with two look-outs, one posted on the fo'c'sle and one on the bridge. At 5.10am, when five miles WNW of St Catherine's Light, a torpedo fired by UB-35 hit the port side of the ship without warning just abaft amidships causing a large hole in the side of the ship

and destroying one of the boats in the davits. The ship capsized within four minutes and had sank in 20 minutes. All of the 30-man crew miraculously escaped and were rescued by a patrol boat and landed in Portsmouth. All confidential papers, codes and logs are reported to have gone down with the ship (Wendes, 2016, p. 136).

### 3.3 Associated Vessels

The German submarine whose torpedo sank the *Westville* was UB-35 a UBII class submarine commanded by Oberleutnant Karl Stoter. The following month UB-35 under the same commander also sank the *Mechanician*, *Molina* and *Serrana* in the Wight area before being lost on 26 January 1918. The submarine was depth charged by HMS *Leven* with the loss of all hands near the Dover Straits, two of the crewmembers were captured the day before by British patrol vessel P34 while preparing to scuttle a Greek vessel (uboat net, 1995-2016).

### 3.4 Post-loss Activity

The wreck is a popular dive site for sports divers and the bridge steering pedestal has been recovered bearing the date 1913. This was the year *Westville* was completed so helped in the positive identity of the wreck (Wendes, 2006, p. 136).

## 4 Seabed Remains

### 4.1 Site Location and Environment

The site of the wreck of the SS *Westville* is five miles WSW of St Catherine's Point, Isle of Wight lying on a sand and shingle seabed in position 50°33.94N 001°31.87W (Wendes, 2006, p. 136) (Figure 2). There is 3m scour which extends SE from the south end of the wreck (Pastscape, 2015).

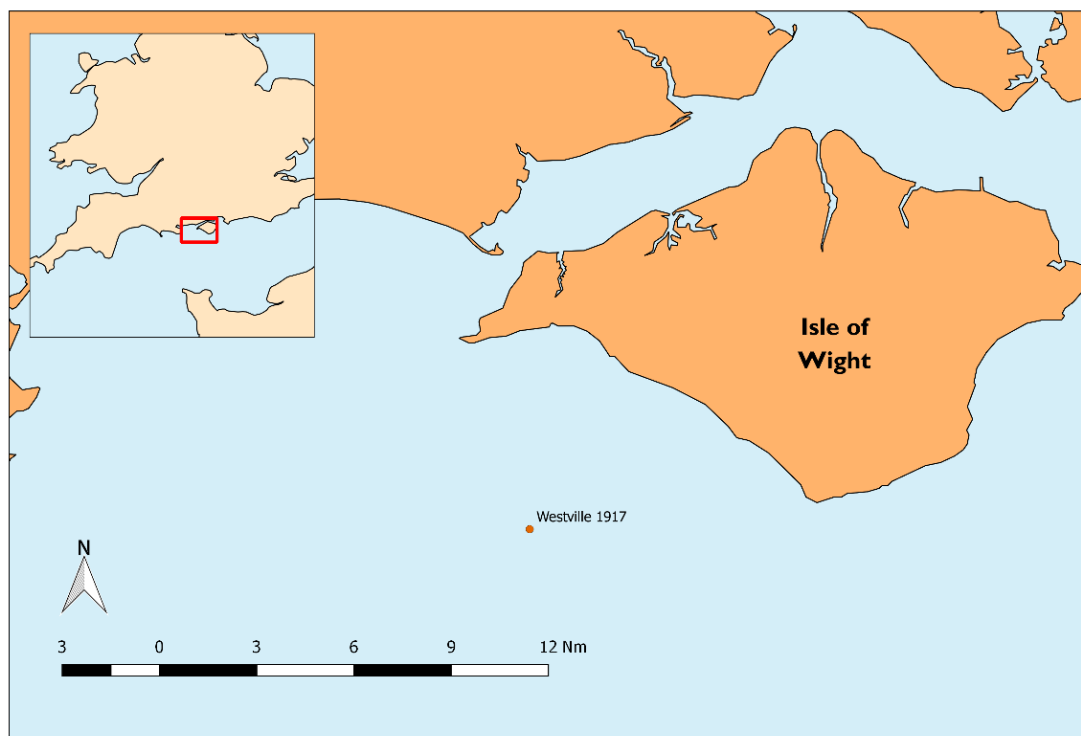


Figure 2: Position of SS *Westville*

### 4.2 Archaeological Methodology

A range of survey methods were planned to survey the *Westville* as follows:

Visual survey

- Identify key features for more detailed recording through photograph and video
- Confirm the nature of the seabed

#### Photographic survey

- Gather general photographs of the wreck and divers on the wreck
- Photograph key features with an archaeological scale

#### Video survey

- Conduct general video of the wreck and divers on the wreck
- Gain footage of key features of the wreck

### 4.3 Description of Surviving Vessel Remains

The remains of SS *Westville* lie in around 40m depth of water on a sand and shingle seabed (Figure 3) and are moderately intact. The wreck is leaning half over onto its port side with the bow, which is quite broken up, towards the south east.



Figure 3: The seabed around the *Westville* is a mixture of sand and shingle

Substantial frames still stand and many parts of the hull plates are still in place. Moving along the hull line there are deck rails still present (Figure 4).

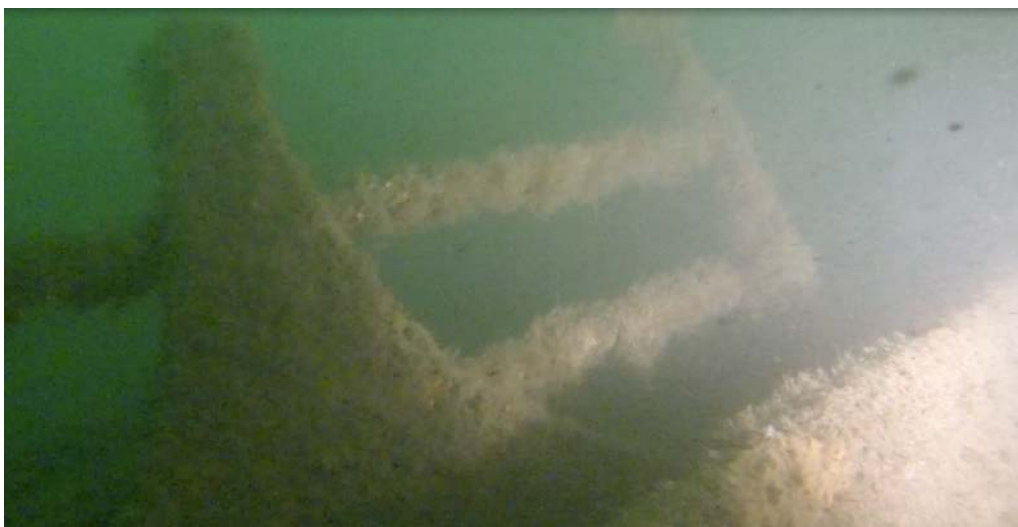


Figure 4: Deck rails seen for the outside of the hull



Two bollards are apparent on both the port and starboard side of the forward end of the wreck (Figure 5) with a winch or windlass present near the bollards on the port side (Figure 6). Part of the winch is covered with rope still coiled around a drum.



Figure 5: Bollard forward end of the wreck (image Roland Brookes)



Figure 6: Winch, rope coiled around a drum to the left of the image

The highest point of the wreck is around amidships section with one of the boilers in this area having rolled out of its original position. The large triple expansion engine just behind has a large section of the hull resting against it as it tilts over still on its substantial legs (Figure 7 and 8).



Figure 7: Looking up at the engine machinery



Figure 8: The legs of the engine can just be seen to the right side of the image

At the stern the four bladed propeller can be seen resting on the seabed (Figure 9 and 10) and the gun is still present at the stern although this was not encountered on this occasion. Coming forward from the stern along the starboard side access to the hold is possible in the aft part of the wreck, and a deck winch is present on the port quarter. Also on the port side, the bridge deck and its rails can be seen where it has slipped off the wreck onto the seabed. A video was taken around the wreck and the video tour can be seen on line at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bcwxm6oqCck>



Figure 9: The four bladed propeller resting on the seabed



Figure 10: Propeller on seabed

The condition of the *Westville* is consistent with what might be expected of a wreck that has survived the natural processes within the area in which it lies for nearly 100 years. Although the remains are partially broken down some aspects of the ship are still moderately preserved.

### 5. Site Significance & Potential Further Research

As the SS *Westville* is an example of a merchant steam ship of the First World War engaged in the collier trade from North East England to France that was lost in 1917 due to unrestricted submarine warfare. The vessel has a lot of structure still remaining, and further dives in improved visibility to gain a site plan and better images would all add to enhance the archaeological record.

Although the *Westville* represents a ship of relatively common type, which was undertaking a relatively common trade as a collier, it does have aspects of special significance which add to its archaeological importance. Factors of special interest which are identified within the publication 'Assessing Boats and Ships 1914-1939' (Wessex Archaeology 2011), are relevant for *Westville*, these include, being lost during the period of unrestricted submarine warfare 1917-18.

"Vessels lost during the period of unrestricted warfare in 1917-18 may have special interest because they represent of a new form of warfare which not only came close to winning the war against Britain but also influenced the conduct of the Second World War" (Wessex Archaeology 2011: 24). The report recognises that the numbers of ships lost during unrestricted submarine warfare were large, so for a site to have a high degree of special interest it is likely to have additional significance factors associated with it.

The site should also be considered within its group value of of First World War cargo vessels lost in an area south west of the Isle of Wight. As such they demonstrate the density of shipping on common sea routes during the war and the impact of submarines on shipping losses.

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## 7. Appendices

### 7.1 Site video

Publishing date:	5 July 2014	Publisher:	MAT
URL:	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bcwmx6ogCck">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bcwmx6ogCck</a>		
Last accessed:	December 2017	License:	Standard YouTube License
Length:	4.59 mins	Description:	Dive footage
Notes: A tour beginning at the bridge deck, port side, along the hull to the triple expansion engine then on to the starboard side of the aft hold. A deck winch on the port quarter then finally at the stern, the 4 bladed propeller.			