

Goodwin Sands Shipwrecks

A talk by Anthony Lane

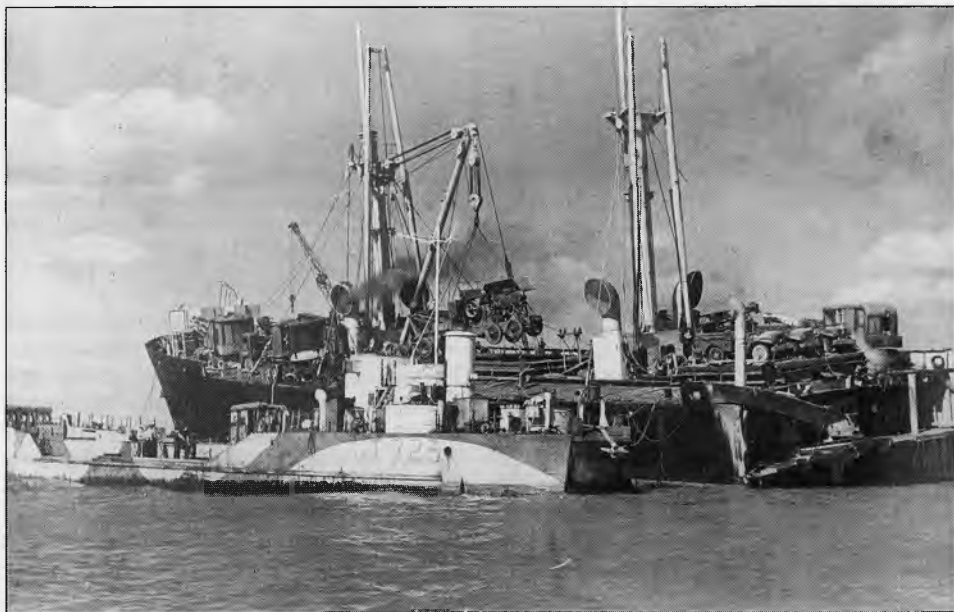
Reported by May Jones and Merril Lilley

LIKE MANY OTHER coastal dwellers the good folk of Deal had a reputation for being more interested in the booty provided by wrecked ships than in the fate of the crews and stories of battles between revenue men and would-be smugglers were commonplace.

In his well illustrated talk, Dr. Lane quoted one of the few actually authenticated cases, which occurred in 1909. A merchant vessel, the *Mahratta*, ran aground and tea, a commodity subject to duty, began to find its way ashore. As the customs officer came

knocking at the door of a suspect house, the owner was busily disposing of the contraband. Strangely, thirty years later, another *Mahratta*, also carrying tea, was wrecked in the same place.

The Goodwins are notorious for wrecks and there are countless stories told of them over the centuries, tales of sunken galleons and treasure waiting to be found. Deal was a thriving town and always busy with sailors coming ashore for food and other pleasures. Sometimes as many as five hundred ships might be anchored in the Downs. Dr. Lane told us many accounts of wrecks on the Sands,



Probably the most infamous recent wreck on the Goodwin Sands was the American freighter *Helena Modjeska*, which went aground off Deal and broke in two in 1946. The ship carried 5,000 tons of food, of which a fair amount was smuggled ashore to supplement the restricted and rationed diet of the period. There were also a large amount of lorries and other vehicles aboard and in this picture a crane is being lowered into a landing craft from the forepart of the ship.



The Greek-registered *Ira* was a Liberty ship almost identical to the *Helena Modjeska*. In March 1947 she ran ashore on the outer side of the Goodwins close to the earlier wreck of the American *Luray Victory*, here seen in the background. Here the *Ira* lies intact, but within a few days she had broken in two and the afterpart had almost vanished.

but, he said, there were not that many really serious single wrecks involving great loss of life.

However, there were several during the great storm of 1703 when there were hurricane force winds for many hours and high winds for another two weeks. The Royal Navy lost four vessels on the Sands, the *Stirling Castle*, the *Northumbrian* the *Mary* and the *Restoration* and about 1100 seamen out of 1260 perished, including Admiral Beaumont.

Those were the days when there were no lightships to warn mariners of the

proximity of the Goodwin Sands and even lighthouses on the North and South Forelands could give only an indication of the coast and where the sheltered waters of the Downs might be found. These, in 1635, were the first two lights to help mariners locate the Goodwins. Later came four lightships, the North Goodwin, the Gull, the South Goodwin and the East Goodwin. The Gull was established in 1809 and the North Goodwin in 1795. These were very valuable in their day and could fire a cannon to indicate there was a wreck on the Sands. The first lighthouse to guide vessels into the port



The most tragic of the wrecks on the Goodwins in later years involved a lightship, intended to warn other mariners away from the Sands. In November 1954 the South Goodwin's vessel broke from her mooring and drove up on the sand bank in near hurricane conditions. All 7 crew were lost, the only survivor being Ronald Murton, a scientist with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.

was built in Ramsgate in 1795.

Life-saving improved in Victorian times, with lifeboats serving the area, but it could take five hours to row a heavy lifeboat out to a wreck if there was no wind, the RNLI men showed great courage often facing extreme weather. The Downs lifeboats in the twentieth century were in service throughout both World Wars when many lives were saved, but salvage operations were more difficult than in peace time.

In 1914, the *Montrose*, the vessel in which Dr. Crippen had escaped to Canada, was destined to be sunk to block

the entrance to Dover Harbour but it broke loose from the Prince of Wales pier, drifted across the harbour and thence along the coast, eventually ending up on the Goodwins.

The area was particularly hazardous in World War II when there were no light vessels. All ships with European destinations were boarded in the Downs and searched for contraband destined for Germany.

With so many vessels in narrow waters collisions were inevitable. In one instance, two ships collided, one, the *James Harold*, an American Liberty ship,

22 with a cargo of petrol which caught fire.

Even after hostilities ceased there were casualties. Of American Liberty and Victory ships, supplying food and equipment to Europe, several were lost in these unfamiliar waters. In 1946 the

Helena Modjeska went aground on Deal beach with a 5000 ton cargo of tinned turkey, fruit cocktail and vehicles. The captain was found dead in a hotel in Ramsgate. The owners gave permission to any men who came to unload the



The *Silvia Onorato* was an Italian steamer that came to grief at the northern end of the Sands in 1948 on a misty day. The crew refused to leave the ship despite bad weather and it was three days before Coxswain Fred Upton and the Walmer lifeboat could get them ashore. The coxswain won the RNLI Silver Medal and the mechanic the Bronze for persistence in a service which lasted 51 hours, 45 of them being at sea.

The last serious threat of oil pollution was posed by the Liberian tanker *Panther* which struck the Sands in March 1970 while carrying 25,000 tons of crude oil. There were fears that the ship would break up, but discharge of 10,000 tons of the cargo into another vessel was eventually successful. Five tugs managed to free the ship six days after her original stranding.



cargo to take what food they needed - a heaven sent opportunity to supplement food on ration and points. One family was heard to complain afterwards that they were tired of turkey! Had they known that there were 35 tons of gelignite aboard the helpful 'locals' might have been less eager to act as stevedores!

The most recent wreck involving loss of life was the tragic stranding of the South Goodwin lightship in November 1954. In near hurricane conditions the vessel broke away from her mooring and was driven on to the sands. The only survivor was a scientist from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, who had been studying the migration of starlings. His rescue by a USAF helicopter from Manston aerodrome was the first rescue of this kind to be carried

out. All the crew of the light vessel was lost.

Since then a number of other ships have grounded on the infamous Sands but all have been refloated although some caused fears of oil pollution, like the tanker, *Panther*, in 1971.

With modern aids to navigation and more powerful engines in ships, the Sands pose much less of a threat nowadays. Instead it is collisions in the Dover Straits that cause concern.

When our speaker had finished we felt that we had learned a great deal but had only scratched the surface of the subject. There are so many shipwrecks and so many untold stories that it would take a book to tell them all. We are grateful to Dr. Lane for his informative and intriguing account of the 'Shipwrecks of the Sands.'