

Severn Wreckers!

The word 'wrecker' evokes thoughts of dark figures on the cliffs at night, luring a ship to its doom with false lights, then plundering the subsequent wreck and killing any survivors.

Whilst deliberate wrecking of ships has never been proven, the act of wrecking in the form of looting of shipwrecks was prevalent throughout history and is still common today (see: web links to MV Cita and MV Napoli off the Isles of Scilly and Devon in recent years).

Though traditionally associated with the coasts of Cornwall, the Severn shore seems to have had its fair share of wrecking, as these two local folksongs reveal. They were written around 1750 and were probably published by the printers Collards of Bristol. They tell of the wreck of a trow and the subsequent robbing of the wreck and possibly the bodies of the crew. The precise date of the incident and the name of the ship involved are not known, but are probably recorded in the Bristol newspapers.

Attitudes to wrecking vary: to many people living on the coast a shipwreck was a source of food and potential income as recovered goods could be sold or used. In Cornwall, there were even prayers about shipwrecks (the second is from the Isles of Scilly):

"Oh please Lord let us pray for all on the sea,
But if there's got to be wrecks, please send them to we".

"Oh lord we pray there are no wrecks,
but if there must be wrecks,
let them be in the Scillies,
for the benefit of the poor Islanders."

For the owners of ships and cargo, they saw wrecking as outright theft. The situation is complicated because of the salvage laws, which entitles anyone to the right to salvage material from a wreck provided that they declare it to the Receiver of Wreck (a Crown post). There was also the Right of Wreck, whereby a landowner or other person could hold the right to take and lay claim to all material that washed up from the sea.