

Severn Shipwrecks

The Severn Estuary has always been a dangerous place for shipping thanks to the shifting sands, vicious currents, rock reefs and huge tides. Many ships have been wrecked along its banks and these are the stories of just a few.....

New Newnham

The worst shipping disaster on the Severn took place on 18 March 1731 and is recorded in the parish register of the village of Awre: This night about ten, the New Newnham of Newnham, trow, John Pierce, owner, struck upon the sands a little above Amity Cribb and he and all the passengers to the number of 17 perished, only 4 rowing the small boat escaped.

Hero

In 1758 the trow Hero of Worcester foundered on a sandbank off Shepperdine whilst her crew were towing her in their boat (a process called 'hobbling'). She was carrying £40,000 worth of goods bound for Bristol - a cargo worth over £1 million in today's money!

Newnham Ferry

6 February 1809, the Newnham on Severn to Arlingham Passage ferry sank in full view of people on both banks of the Severn. Two boatmen on board drowned.

Prince Victor

The Prinz Victor was a Norwegian sailing ship of 1,300 tons that had left New York under the command of Captain Corneliusen bound for Sharpness with a cargo of 10,000 barrels of petrol. On 8 April 1887 she was being towed up river in bad weather by the tugs (Ranger and Refuge) with a third, the Victoria (of Newport), tied to her starboard side.

Off Beachley a squall blew up and the ship struck Whirls End Sands where she rolled over crushing the tug Victoria. The crews of both ships survived but Corneliusen's wife and youngest son, aged 8, were trapped in their cabin and drowned. The ship eventually drifted ashore at Woolaston where the bodies of the Captain's family were recovered and buried.

Hampstall Ferry

On the Bank Holiday Monday of 4 August 1919, pleasure boats were taking people on trips between Gloucester and Stourport. One boat, the May Queen, came downriver passing the Hampstall Ferry, (located between Stourport and Holt Fleet), at speed. The ferryboat lurched and all 17 passengers were tipped into the river. Some witnesses said the ferry was overloaded. A total of 9 people were drowned.

William

On 3 June 1939, the trow William left Cardiff laden with coal being towed by the steamer Elemore in rough weather. The craft were bound for Bristol but had almost reached Avonmouth when the William was struck by a large wave, which broke over her bows, causing some of her cargo to shift. This gave the vessel a strong list and she suddenly capsized, taking 2 of her 3 crew with her. The vessel was subsequently washed upstream and came ashore at Stup Pill.

Severn Pioneer, Severn Traveller, Severn Pioneer & Severn Carrier

On 4 February 1939, these 3 tanker barges were trying to enter Sharpness when they were caught by the tide and swept upriver where they collided with the Severn Railway Bridge. The Pioneer and Carrier capsized and sank, drowning several men, while the Traveller struck the bridge but was only badly damaged.

Stancliffe

On 3 April 1947, the 1,580 ton ship went aground off Sharpness loaded with 3,000 tons of timber. Local shipyard engineer, Ivor Langford, managed to cut the vessel in two and sail both parts down to Cardiff Docks. There the two halves were joined together and the ship sailed again under the new name of Gripfast.

Rameses II

On Good Friday 23 March 1951 the Egyptian steamship Rameses II was bound for Sharpness with 7000 tons of Russian grain when she ran aground on a sandbank off Lydney. The Egyptian crew wanted to abandon ship but the pilot persuaded them to wait and a few hours later they were able to walk ashore. As the tide fell, the ship broke her back and was declared a total wreck. As she was a hazard to shipping it was decided to scrap her where she lay. Salvagers recovered 6000 tons of grain but the wreck was not cleared until 1960, by which time she had sunk so deep into the sand that the salvagers simply cut her sides down to the level of the riverbed. Her remains can sometimes be seen at low water.

Arkendale H & Wastedale H

On 25 October 1960, the above tankers were heading for Sharpness in thick fog when they missed the harbour entrance and collided. The ships became entangled and were swept upriver where they struck the Severn Railway Bridge. On impact the Wastedale exploded, causing a pier and 2 bridge spans to collapse. Burning furiously the ships ran aground on a sandbank and leaking fuel caused a huge fire. 5 of the 6 men onboard the ships died. The wrecks can still be seen at low water in the river today.

Unnamed Rescue Boat

On 19 November 1961, during construction of the Severn Bridge three men fell into the river. The alarm was raised and a rescue boat crewed by two men set sail from Chepstow. Unknown to the crew of the rescue boat the three men had been picked up safely by the last crossing of the day of one of the Aust to Beachley ferry boats, the Severn Princess. As this was taking place a pair of tanker barges were coming down empty from Sharpness, the Wyesdale H and the Wharfedale H. As was the usual practice, these 2 craft were tied together with both being steered from the Wyesdale H. The steersman failed to see the rescue boat, as it had no navigation lights and both barges collided with it. One of the 2 men aboard the rescue boat was saved, but the other crew member was drowned.

BP Explorer

On 17 February 1962, this tanker capsized unseen off Sharpness in mysterious circumstances. The upturned ship drifted upstream on the tide and struck pier 20 of the already damaged Severn Railway Bridge before finally going ashore at Awre. All her crew of 5 were drowned. The ship was later salvaged and renamed BP Driver, but in 1962 she was once again wrecked, this time on Nash Point in South Wales. This time she was declared a total loss and scrapped where she lay.