

The Sad Case of the ss *Maori*

John Gribble

Wessex Archaeology, United Kingdom
(Formerly Maritime Archaeologist,
South African Heritage Resources Agency)

The impact of human agents on underwater cultural heritage is but one of a host of problems that beset the management of this fragile resource. In particular, the degradation of wrecks popular as good dive sites is an area of great concern to the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA), and is perhaps epitomised in South Africa by the case of the ss *Maori*.

The *Maori* was owned by the Shaw, Saville and Albion Company and was a typical cargo vessel of the early 1890's. She was a steel screw steamer with a registered tonnage of 5,317 tons and was built during the latter part of 1893 by the firm C.S. Swan and Hunter at Wallsend-on-Tyne near Newcastle in the United Kingdom. She was a little over 402 feet long, 48 feet wide, and 29 feet deep, with two decks. Her triple expansion engine was built at the Central Marine Engineering Works in West Hartlepool and had a nominal 461 horsepower.

The vessel was originally square-rigged on her foremast – carrying working masts and rigging on a steamship was still found to be useful by some steamship owners in case of a breakdown of the engines — and as a result she had taller masts than were the norm on many other steamers of the period.

The Loss of the *Maori*

At about one o'clock on the morning of Thursday 5 August 1909 the *Maori* went ashore in dense fog and sank near

Duiker Point on the Cape Peninsula, about 20km south of central Cape Town.

She had left Table Bay shortly before midnight after recoaling, and sailed into drizzle and thickening fog as she headed south towards Cape Point. Forty minutes later, with her engines going at full speed, the *Maori* struck a rock, which according to those aboard, seemed to stand well out of the water. Shrouded in dense fog the vessel had come very close inshore and had unknowingly entered the bay north of Duiker Point. The first intimation of danger was the lookout's warning cry, but by then the vessel was only about thirty yards from the rock, and although her master, Captain G Nichole, immediately ordered the wheel hard-a-port, the *Maori* ran up on to the rock (Fig 1).

Badly holed, the vessel started sinking by the bow, and the crew were ordered into the boats. It was assumed that the entire complement had boarded the three lifeboats, but it later became apparent that fifteen crewmen had been left behind. The lifeboat commanded by the Chief Officer and carrying fourteen others was the first to land at eight that morning and raise the alarm.

Ultimately 32 of the crew of 53 were lost, including Captain Nichole and all the navigating officers. The vessel was a complete loss.

The *Maori* Today

Today the *Maori* is one of the most popular recreational dive sites on the Cape Peninsula. Its location on the western, Atlantic seaboard of the Cape Peninsula means that during the South African summer months diving conditions on the site are often optimal, with very cold, but very clean water. The sheltered nature of the bay in which the wreck lies means



Figure 1 : A historical photo of the wreck of the *Maori* taken before the crew left aboard had been rescued. Note the figure on the foremast (Courtesy John Marsh Maritime Collection, IZIKO Maritime Museum)

that it retains a remarkable degree of structural integrity, with large portions of the vessel surviving relatively intact. When Jaques Cousteau dived on the wreck of the *Maori* in the 1960s he declared that it was the best preserved wreck of its type that he had seen. An added attraction and one of the reasons for its currently degraded state is the fact that much of the *Maori*'s cargo remained substantially intact, packed in her holds until relatively recently.

On a violent coast, where most wrecks break up rapidly, the *Maori* is thus something of a rarity, both as an archaeological and diving site, and it is hardly surprising that with the growth in sport-diving during the last 40 years, the *Maori* has become a site favoured by divers.

Sadly, this popularity has not been without price. Although never salvaged on a commercial basis after her loss, the *Maori* has been the victim of years of souvenir hunting by thousands of divers, and is now a shadow of her former self. At one stage during the 1970s divers used dynamite on the wreck to blast their way into the hull in search of non-ferrous metal. Today her holds are virtually empty and her structure has been further damaged by scores of irresponsibly placed anchors.

This problem is not limited to the *Maori* and manifests itself on many other shipwreck sites along the South African coast. Although underwater heritage has enjoyed blanket legislative protection since 1986 (under the terms of the National Heritage Resources Act any wreck older than 60 years of age is protected) a long tradition of salvage dating back to the early 18th century left a widely held perception that the contents of shipwrecks are there for the taking. However, two decades of legislative protection and a huge amount of work done by the South African Heritage Resources Agency, the IZIKO Maritime Museum and others to publicise the protected status of shipwrecks has slowly borne fruit. There is now a general awareness and grudging acceptance, particularly within the diving community, of the protected status of shipwrecks.

But legislation cannot stand alone. Of equal importance to the protection of underwater cultural heritage is an understanding by those using the resource and the wider South African public of what underwater cultural heritage is, and why it is worth preserving. Without winning over hearts and minds legislation can never truly succeed.

For a few years SAHRA, in conjunction with the IZIKO Maritime Museum, has been developing a pilot Cape Peninsula Shipwreck Route. The route aims to introduce Capetonians and visitors to the city to the hundreds of wrecks that lie in the waters of the Peninsula and thereby increase general public awareness of the importance and fragility of our underwater heritage, while at the same time formalising access to a number of popular, threatened wreck sites.

Land-based information boards are planned for a number of sites on the route around the Cape Peninsula, and the first of these has been installed adjacent to the slipway at the popular harbour of Hout Bay, from which divers access the *Maori* (Fig 2). An accompanying pamphlet has been produced. In addition, underwater information plinths will be installed at the sites often visited by divers, such as the *Maori*. These plinths will not only provide information about the history of the particular wreck and layout of the site, but will also carry a strong conservation message, stressing the legal protection that such sites enjoy, and the responsibilities of divers when visiting them.

While this approach to managing threatened underwater sites is in some senses *post hoc*, if it proves successful in managing risk on a heavily utilised site such as the *Maori*, SAHRA envisages its useful extension to other threatened, or potentially threatened sites, in the future. It is hoped that an increased awareness amongst visitors of the archaeological potential of a well preserved wreck like the *Maori*, will ensure the long term survival of the site.



Figure 2: Cape Peninsula Wreck Route sign for the *Maori*

THE MAORI

LEAVE THE WRECK AS YOU FOUND IT - THOSE WHO COME AFTER YOU WANT TO ENJOY IT TOO. ENJOY YOUR DIVE ON THE MAORI.

At about one o'clock on the morning of 5 August 1909, the Shaw Savill steamship, Maori, went aground and sank near Duiker Point south of Llandudno.

The Maori was a typical cargo vessel of the time. She was a 6300 ton steel screw steamer, 122 metres (402) feet long, powered by a 400 horsepower triple expansion engine, and was built in England in 1896. She traded between England and New Zealand and when she was wrecked was bound for Cardiff in New Zealand with a cargo which included 2300 tons of railway rails, explosives, English machinery, and stores of various descriptions.

The Maori left Llandudno on 28 July, and departed at midnight on 4 August. She steamed 190 miles from off Sea Point, Bony, reached her anchorage at Llandudno, she ran aground a rock near the shore in about 1000 metres (3300) feet.

She began striking immediately and the crew took to the lifeboats. In the confusion fifteen crewmen were left behind. Their presence was discovered later in the day by local fishermen who managed to get a line across the wreck. The remaining crew had to wait for relief for four hours before a rescue operation was set up on the rocks adjacent to the wreck, and they could be hoisted to safety.

THE WRECK

The Maori lies perpendicular to the coast with her stern to the sea, her bows to the east, and her base lying east to west, at about 75 metres offshore. When caught on the rocks she was 7 metres on her stern, 10 metres on her bow.

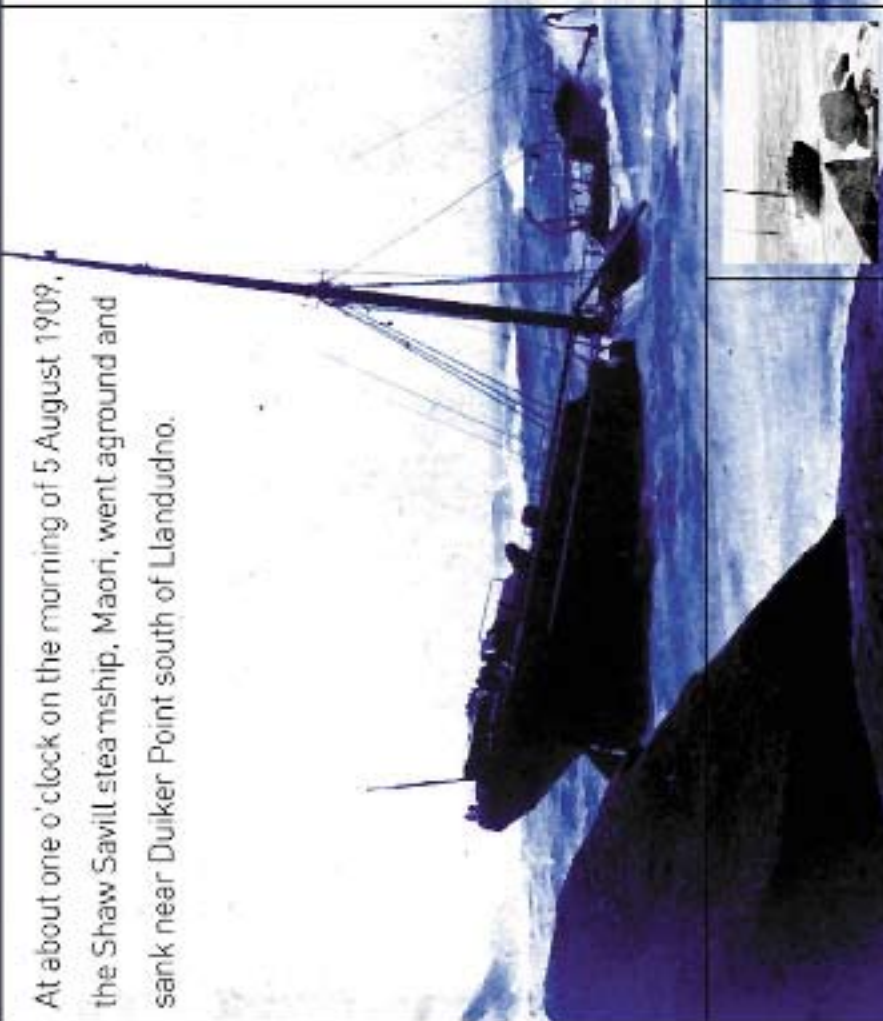
Even so the Maori lies in the relative shelter of Maori Bay, she is remarkably well preserved, and is structurally largely intact - a rare occurrence in the North Atlantic. The weathering conditions here, however, are not ideal, and the hull plating has been severely damaged and removed, particularly on her upper deck and in the vicinity of the funnel. Sections of the hull plating and many of her supporting frames are still on the seabed around the wreck.

An attraction of the Maori for divers has always been the fact that much of her cargo remained in the hull after she sank. Today, piles of railway rails, iron pipes, and other cargo are still visible near the stern of the wreck, but the rest of the cargo, which was mostly iron, is still buried under some tons of the hull's remains of the cargo of coals, and other cargo, which are still visible.

WRECK DO'S AND DON'TS

The Maori has over the years been damaged by visitors, and this is evident in the structural integrity of the wreck. It is an archaeological potential, and its survival is a gift to us. To enjoy it, you must not have a negative impact on the special wreck, or else you will lose it for good.

- Don't damage the wreck in any way - a wreck is not like a reef which can regenerate if damaged. It is fragile and non-renewable resource and any damage is permanent.
- Don't take souvenirs - removing anything from the wreck without a permit is not only illegal, it destroys the value of the site for those who follow you.
- Don't anchor at the wreck - drop your anchor away from the site to avoid damaging the wreck and its contents.
- Remember that although it is possible to enter inside the hull on the Maori, this is a restricted area because of the state of the wreck and for advanced diving.



If you'd like more information about the Maori or wreck, in general, contact: The Maritime Archaeologist, South African Heritage Resources Agency, P.O. Box 4573, Cape Town, 8000 or visit: www.maritimeheritage.co.za, or SA Maritime Museum, 98 & Waterfront.



▶▶ CAPE PENINSULA WRECK ROUTE