

Ships of Gold

By PHILIP BOWRON

Thoughts of sunken treasure ships bring to mind images of Spanish galleons full of Inca gold and jewels, but the Royal Navy has its treasure ships too. One of these was HMS *Sussex* lost in 1694, the other HMS *Edinburgh* lost in 1942.

HMS *Sussex* was the flagship of Admiral Sir Francis Wheeler; she was an 80-gun warship and carried a crew of 500. Built at Chatham Dockyard in the reign of William III she sank in a severe storm on 19 February 1694. At the time she was escorting a fleet of 40 warships and 166 merchant ships to the Mediterranean. She sank when caught in a strong easterly wind, water entered her open gun ports and all but two of her crew perished. The body of Admiral Wheeler being washed ashore a few days later clad only in a nightshirt, evidence of the swiftness of her end.



It was in 1995 that HMS *Sussex* first came to the attention of Odyssey Marine Exploration, a Tampa, Florida, based company. A researcher had uncovered a diplomatic letter that they showed to the company which hinted at a great lost treasure aboard the *Sussex*. Further research carried out in archives in England, France, the Netherlands and the United States finally brought the story to light.

It seemed that at the time of her sinking HMS *Sussex* was carrying out a secret mission for the British Government. She was carrying a cargo thought to consist of tons of gold coins as a payment to the Duke of Savoy, an ally of Britain in the War of the League of Augsburg. The money was payment to the Duke for his continued support against King Louis XIV of France. With the sinking of the ship the payment never arrived and the next year the Duke secretly changed sides bringing the war to an end in a stalemate.

Since 1998 Odyssey have been conducting offshore search and survey operations during the course of which they have located 418 target sites. A number of these have been of great archaeological interest including that of the wreck of the *Melkarth*, a shipwreck thought to be of a Punic or Phoenician merchant vessel dating from the 3rd to 5th Century BC.

Only one of the sites located contained a cannon and that was in a location very close to the position reported by the fleet secretary in 1694 as being where the *Sussex* sank. The suspected wreck of the *Sussex* is at a depth of 1,000 metres (3,280 feet) in a location off the coast of Andalusia, Southern Spain.

On Friday 27 September 2002 a partnering agreement was signed between the Ministry of Defence Disposal Services Agency (DSA) and Odyssey Marine Exploration for the conducting of further archaeological exploration of the wreck suspected to be that of HMS *Sussex*. This was the first time any government had entered into an agreement with the private sector for the excavation of a sovereign warship.

The agreement was criticized by archaeologists as little more than a treasure hunt by the British Government. Profits from any gold coins recovered are to be split on a scale that favours Odyssey at first. They will receive 80% of the proceeds up to \$45 million, 50% from \$45 million to \$500 million and 40% above \$500 million, the rest going to the British Government.

In December 2005 Odyssey Explorer returned to the Mediterranean to begin the initial phase of the *Sussex* project plan as approved by the British Government. In January 2006 Odyssey announced that it had completed environmental and archaeological survey operations that it believed satisfied Phase 1A and a large part of Phase 1B of the plan and submitted a report to the British Government. This was reviewed by the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the Sussex Archaeological Executive committee who confirmed that it met all the requirements of Phase 1A and authorized Odyssey to complete Phase 1B of the plan.

On 26 January 2006 Odyssey received a verbal communication through diplomatic channels requesting it to suspend all operations until an expert was appointed by the Junta of Andalusia, the regional government of the Spanish state of Andalusia to observe operations on the wreck site.

Meetings were held in February 2006 with the Governments of Spain and the United Kingdom and the Junta of Andalusia to resolve the issue. During these meetings Odyssey agreed to re-submit a new archaeological plan taking into account the requirements requested by the Spanish authorities and this was submitted in March.

A response was received in May 2006 raising a number of technical questions. Odyssey submitted clarification of these points in early June and is awaiting any final comments before resuming operations on the site. It can only be hoped that this issue will be resolved soon so that excavation of the site can continue to confirm whether the wreck is indeed that of HMS *Sussex*.

A more recent wreck is that of HMS *Edinburgh* who sank through enemy action in 1942. HMS *Edinburgh* was a Town class light cruiser commissioned in 1936. She was built in Newcastle-upon-Tyne by Swan Hunter and Wigham Richardson, her keel being laid down on 30 December 1936. She displaced 10,635 tonnes and had a maximum speed of thirty-three knots.



Her armament was quite substantial and included twelve 6-inch guns and twelve (later 8) 4-inch guns. She had numerous anti aircraft guns of varying calibre and six 21-inch torpedoes in a pair of triple racks. However her armour was quite light being 4.88 inches on her main belt and 1.5 inches at it's thinnest, she was expected to be fast enough to avoid being hit rather than having the need for the thickness of armour found on battleships of the day.

Launched on 31 March 1938 she was initially attached to the 18th Cruiser Squadron at Scapa Flow in Scotland. Her wartime career was quite varied and saw her taking part in a number of minor operations with the Home Fleet in 1940 as well as hunting for a German surface raider. She escorted convoys to the Middle East and South Africa in 1941 and while on patrol in the Bay of Biscay intercepted the German vessel *SS Lech* on 22 May 1941.

The following year saw her escorting two convoys QP4 and PQ13 to Russia before returning to Scapa Flow. On 6 April 1942 she left Scapa Flow to escort the 24 ships of convoy PQ14 to Russia. Bad weather with unseasonal ice saw 16 of the ships turn back to Iceland; another was sunk by a German U-Boat, the remaining seven vessels arriving safely in Murmansk on 19th April.

HMS *Edinburgh* left Murmansk on the 29 April to cover the return of convoy QP11; this was to be her last voyage. She was spotted on 30 April by the German submarine U-456 under the command of Captain Max-Martin Teichert which had been alerted to the convoy by German aerial reconnaissance. U-456 fired a torpedo which struck the starboard side of the ship. Listing heavily, only quick action by her crew closing the watertight bulkheads prevented her from sinking. A second torpedo was fired by U-456 which struck the stern of the *Edinburgh* wrecking her steering gear.

The *Edinburgh* was now taken in tow and attempted to head back to Murmansk. On 2 May off Bear Island she was attacked by three German destroyers and torpedoed again. Her crew abandoned ship as she began to sink and were taken on board accompanying destroyers. HMS *Foresight* torpedoed her to complete the process, fifty-six ratings and two officers being lost with the *Edinburgh*.

At the time of her sinking HMS *Edinburgh* was on a secret mission carrying a consignment of 4.5 tons of gold bullion as part of Stalin's payment for the supplies that the Allies were shipping to him. This was made up of 465 gold ingots carried in ninety-three wooden boxes. These were stored in the armoured bomb-rooms on the starboard side of the vessel close to the first torpedo's impact point.

The British Government first attempted to salvage the gold in 1954 when they offered the salvage rights to Risdon Beazley Ltd, a salvage company operating out of the UK. Unfortunately strained relations between the Soviet Union and the West forced the project to be put on hold. Matters were complicated even further in 1957 when the wreck was designated a war grave.

However the British Government were still keen to recover the gold and in the early 1980s offered the project to Jessop Marine whose methods of using divers and complex cutting machinery rather than the explosive orientated methods of their competitors were thought more appropriate for a war grave.

The survey ship *Dammtor* began the search for the wreck in the Barents Sea in April 1981, and after only 10 days discovered her resting at a depth of 245 metres (800 feet). Specialist camera equipment was used to record the wreck and was used to help Keith Jessop and his divers plan the salvage operation.

In August 1981 the dive support vessel *Stephaniturm* journeyed to the site and salvage operations began. During the operation several divers were injured before a diver finally penetrated the bomb room on 15 September and recovered a bar of gold. When bad weather finally called a halt to the operation on 7 October 431 ingots had been recovered with a value worth in excess of £43,000,000.

With marine exploration such a big business now and more advanced and sophisticated equipment becoming available all the time who knows what other lost treasures lie waiting below the waves to once again see the light of day.

With acknowledgements to the Nautical Magazine for the article.

See also the following websites for extra information

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Sussex_\(1693\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Sussex_(1693)): [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Edinburgh_\(C16\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Edinburgh_(C16)):
<http://www.andalucia.com/history/hmssussex.htm>