

Photos of 18th century pork vessel released by team of English divers

Ancient wreck discovered off Dildo Island in summer of '98

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The Compass

The first pictures of an 18th-century pork vessel found off Dildo Island this past summer were recently released by a team of Royal Air Force (RAF) divers from Lynham, England.

The underwater photos are a little dark, but you can see several remains of timbers lying on the ocean floor.

Gerald Smith of Dildo, amateur local historian and owner/operator of the tour boat *The Heritage Explorer* received the underwater photos of the wreck about a month ago.

The pictures are part of an informative diving report for Cold Splash '98, a diving expedition which the RAF carried out in Newfoundland this past summer.

This was the eighth expedition for the RAF Sub-Aqua Club in Newfoundland, each of which has been highly successful, particularly in discovering unrecorded wrecks - including several of historical importance.

The Sub-Aqua Club, including five members with Arthur Kingdom as squadron leader, works in close liaison with the Cultural Heritage Division, the provincial Department of Tourism, and Culture and Recreation.

They provide diving support on archaeological projects as directed by the different departments. They also give personal experiences of diving in very cold water. All details and discoveries are conveyed to each department.

Last year, the diving expedition was carried out at four locations; South Dildo area for a survey of what remains which the team graphed and plotted for the Provincial Government and at Ferryland to assist with an

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- Sub-Aqua Club report

underwater archeological dig, tracing the location of an original sea wall.

At Petty Harbour, the diving team investigated known sites and searched for new sites near Cape Spear. Evidence of a wreckage was found which may warrant future investigation. The divers revisited the relics of four large iron ore carriers at Bell Island as well.

It was during their expedition at South Dildo that Smith met with the divers and asked for their assistance in determining the existence of the pork ship *The Gasper*.

For almost 200 years, the "legend" of the ship was passed down through generations by many residents of Dildo.

According to the legend, sometime around the late 1700s or early 1800s the ship was bound for St. John's carrying a large load of pork. It is not known from where the ship set sail, but it has always been speculated that she was blown off course in a north easterly storm, hit the Red Rocks off Dildo Island and sank somewhere near the Island.

The load of pork she had been carrying floated into a crevice on Dildo Island, which locals later dubbed as the Pork Gulch. Men from Dildo sailed into the Island, gathered up the pork and used it to feed their families that

winter.

Smith, who won a tourism award in 1996 for his wise use and conservation of our natural resources, has always had a dedicated interest in the preservation of the area's history. He directed the divers to the location where the ship was assumed to be and in a few hours they returned with the news: "We found her, Matey! We found her."

After their return to England, the Sub-Aqua Club put together a report on their expedition which ran from July 30 to Aug. 20.

Information obtained from the report dated Sept. 28, 1998 states, "The wreck off Dildo Island was found not only in the position suggested by Smith, but also in the depth suggested. The wreck lay in 50 metres of water and was completely untouched.

"It is a wooden schooner type; most of the decking and planking had rotted away leaving the ribs clearly visible and with a large mound of stone ballast. Part of what may have been the mast could be seen some distance from the main wreck. The remains of some pork barrels were also visible, perhaps originally containing salt pork?"

Several dives had been carried out with the purpose of measuring the wreck and taking

photographs. The wreck measured 72 feet in length, although it is speculated a few feet of timber is missing from each end. The position of the wreck was plotted and a map drawn of the area.

With the information and proof of the ship's existence now in his hands, Smith is quite pleased.

"Anyone who knows the legend of the ship can appreciate what this means," he said. "The potential this can have for the future tourism industry is unbelievable."

The area is tied into the Baccalieu Trail which runs from Cupids in Conception Bay to Blaketown, Trinity Bay. It is the site of three archaeological digs.

Consideration is also being given to exploring the wreck again in the future, by the Sub-Aqua divers. The next dive would include taking video footage.

"Next to being able to actually go down and see the wreck, seeing a video of it all would be like having a dream come true," said Smith, who would also like to have a piece of the ship's timber brought up to be displayed at the Dildo and Area Interpretation Centre.

Smith is still looking for a final piece of the puzzle - the ship's registry.

"It would certainly give us a lot more information on where she set sail from and it would also give a definite confirmation to her name," he said.

Smith plans to do some research on this over the winter months. He is also awaiting the arrival of several more pictures taken by the diving team.

"Actually being able to see evidence of the ship that myself and many others have dreamed and wondered about is very exciting," he said. "It is not just folktale any longer."