

Derelicts of I have known...



An aerial of Mullet Bay, St George's about 1920, with the derelicts Sally Wren and Priscilla.

By Edward Harris

'A derelict is a vessel abandoned at sea. Derelicts that survived more than a few days at sea were usually wooden sailing vessels' Dr Philip L Richardson, 1985

Lest you jump to the conclusion that this is a political essay, I hasten to add that there may have been a number of derelicts over the years in our august House of Assembly, but I cannot vouch for knowing them, any more than I can tell you what I wrote last week.

Rather this is a note on maritime derelicts, a feature of our heritage that has been with us ever since man took to the

waters and seas in floatable vehicles of one type and size or another.

Oceanic derelicts, and most others, carry the additional burden of disdain, for not only do they look bad, but they have often been abandoned by their owners.

Such is the fate of a number of vessels that reached the Bermudas, the bones some of which yet lie in the silts of our bays and harbours.

A life of politics and one of the sea have much in common: a lot of wind, some hot, some cold, rapidly changing climates, great waves of enthusiasms, and doldrums of calm days, when one often seems to go backwards rather than forwards.

A day or week is said to be a long time in politics and the same applies to ocean travel, where one is dealing with forces of nature as fickle and unpredictable as the voting public.

On the great highways of the seas, it is here today and gone tomorrow, if a hurricane passes or cargo shifts, or as in the cruise of a lifetime, a small fire renders all useless, engines and latrines included.

The best of leaders or of pilots is often no match for the maelstrom lurking unknown just over the horizon.

Many derelicts are the result of abandonment on the high seas, while others decline at anchor, as owners are unable to raise capital for the next voyage.

Others, like one now 'on de rocks' at Ely's Harbour, die on their moorings or are driven ashore, there to await a fate worse than death, like the slow turn of the knife of a lingering fatal disease.

Derelicts have been with us, almost since time immemorial, particular on the human side, and will likely survive the human race, or indeed be its last cultural outcry.

Some years ago, Dr Philip L Richardson, scientist emeritus at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, made a study of derelict sightings in the North Atlantic in the late 1800s, and produced a series of diagrams to illustrate his essay, one of which is kindly reproduced here, with the addition of the location of Bermuda. He observed that 'during the years 1887-93 a total of 1,628 derelict sightings were made. The repeated sightings of 200 derelicts identified by name gave the first large-scale and long-term measurement of ocean trajectories' of such wayward vessels.

As can be seen from one of his charts, Bermuda was in the thick of a Sargasso Sea of abandoned sea-trash, all of which presented great hazards to navigation of the day.

Such a chart might be made today just for floating and semi-submerged containers, to say nothing of the dereliction of the ocean seas caused by the masses of discarded garbage of all floatable forms.

An example of the unpredictable nature of riding the ocean currents and surface winds is the derelict barquentine, *John S Emery*, eventually left to rot on the shore of Smith's Island in the far east of Bermuda, near the land once perhaps known to a few Pequots.

Owned by a Boston company of that name, the vessel appears to have made a maiden or early voyage as far as Sydney, Australia, in July 1890, but on 21 August 1923, she left Mobile, Alabama, bound for San Juan,

Puerto Rico, with a cargo of some 600,000 feet of lumber.

After being demasted and pounded by unrelenting seas, the complement of the ship was rescued by the steamer Samland and brought into New York on 12 October, 1923.

The abandoned *John S Emery* was eventually found and towed into Bermuda, “waterlogged and dismantled”, over a thousand miles north of her original destination in the Greater Antilles.

Then there was the Bermuda-built, *Minerva*, which sailed for East Africa in 1849, possibly to engage in a spot of illegal work.

A gale struck the ship in the mid-Atlantic and it was abandoned. One morning, fourteen months later, occupants in Sandys Parish awoke to find the *Minerva* aground at Ely’s Harbour, not so fresh from her aborted visit to the eastern coasts of Africa.

Now on their last legs of much corroded ironwork, most of Bermuda will have seen the two derelicts at Black Bay in Southampton, below Gibbs Hill Lighthouse.

One of those was the *Norrköping* (1908) and the other the *Emily A Davis* (1901) both relegated to that position for breaking-up in 1920, the fate of many derelicts, such as the remains of the great Admiralty floating dock, Bermuda, at the entrance of the bay at Spanish Point.

The final breaking-up of the Black Bay vessels, built at Sunderland, England, in 1869 and 1876, is the work of Nature, not of man, and is ongoing at an accelerated rate as one writes.

Another Bermuda derelict was the *Priscilla* of the early 1900s, now underwater at Mullet Bay: the name of that vessel was carried forward into the 1950s, when it was used by Clyde Leseur for one of the Island’s first mini-cruise boats, a reconditioned US Navy torpedo boat from the Second World War.

The log of the last voyage of the *Priscilla*, a commercial venture to the West Indies (navigator Captain John Frederick Leseur), was donated to the National Museum of Bermuda by Clyde’s sons, John and Paul Leseur and their wives, Betsy and Penne, a few years ago.

One thing is for sure, derelicts come and go and will continue to do so, so you can rest assured that there will also be a derelict or two for you to know in your time, whether from the high seas or from life itself.

Edward Cecil Harris, MBE, JP, PHD, FSA is Director of the National Museum at Dockyard.

Comments may be made to director@bmm.bm or 704-5480.