

A wreck of an historic name



Photo by Mark Bloomberg A portion of the wreck of the Cristobal Colon.

“The wreck of the *Cristobal Colon* produced an orgy of looting such that many homes in Bermuda were adorned by items from the ship ... literally hundreds of Bermudians engaged in this modern day piracy”. —Dr. William Cooke

Were it but for a small change in winds or navigation, Bermuda might well have been discovered by the ‘Admiral of the Ocean Sea’, one Christopher Columbus, as he made his way eastward from the Caribbean on his epic journey of 1492—93, having unbeknowningly discovered the ‘New World’ of the Americas.

The appearance of the island on the world stage, for formerly it knew of no human inhabitants, fell to the credit of the Spanish pilot, Juan de Bermudez, who found the place on his way home late in the year 1505 and subsequently lent his name to the archipelago.

Thus Bermuda is one of the few places in the western hemisphere of North and South America that carries the name of its discoverer, Columbus losing out to Amerigo Vespucci, another Italian adventurer who proved that the ‘Americas’ were not an outlier of the Asia continent, but a world unto themselves.

For all that and while missing out on the big ‘placename’ allocation, that of Christopher Columbus resounds in the name of a country, a number of towns, the ‘great Columbia’ River and other literary acknowledgments of the fact the Cristobal Colon, in Spanish, or Cristoforo Colombo in the land of his birth at Genoa, Italy, was the person who, as they now say, put America ‘on the map’.

Bermuda fortunately does not have to share its name in the same amplitude as that of the great discoverer, now downgraded on Wikipedia, no doubt by the politically correct, as having the occupation of a ‘maritime explorer’, but we are somewhat more infamous for the ‘Triangle’ of fact and fiction about disappearances hereabout.

The Spanish have kept the Admiral’s name alive in a fitting maritime fashion in the naming of battleships and other vessels, most notably in a Bermuda context that of the *Cristobal Colon*, a steamship of the interwar years that discovered the island in 1936 in unfortunate circumstances.

On 25 October in that year of Fascist ascendancy in the land of its making, the vessel ploughed into the reefs fringing the island in the northeast quadrant, a few miles east of the famous ‘North Rock’, pinnacles of hard rock that are the only part of the reef that show above water at high tide, remnants of a much larger dry-land Bermuda.

The subsequent looting that took place over a period after the crew was removed is a blot on the character of Bermuda, though some think that such ‘rape and pillage’ should be an escutcheon in addition to our coat-of-arms that has a ship crashing into a waterside cliff, or an additional bar, if you will, to a Bermudian medal of honour.

Many a local home has objects taken so from the *Cristobal Colon* up to, and thereafter, the time the vessel was blown apart in the early months of the Second War World, being used for target practice.

For an example of local mendacity, William Edward Lockhurst wrote in 1941 that ‘One looter was caught red-handed with a fine radio set, which he stole from the wreck.

In court he insisted the set had not been taken from the *Cristobal Colon*. “What would I do with a Spanish radio?” he protested plaintively to the magistrate. “I can’t understand Spanish.””

According to researcher Dr. William Cooke: ‘The *Cristobal Colon* was built for Transatlantica Spanish Line by Soc Espanol de Construct Naval at El Ferrol in 1923. She was 499.4 feet long, 61 feet abeam and displaced 10,833 tons. She was one of the most luxurious cruise ships of the time.’

However in 1936, civil war was raging in Spain and the *Cristobal Colon* departed for Cardiff in Wales, where she took on fuel for a transatlantic voyage, being cleared for Mexico with no passengers, but a curiously large

crew of 160.

In the last hour of 25 October, while steaming at her full 15 knots, the ship ploughed into the reef at Bermuda, some of the 'crew' later claiming that they were headed to Cuba to pick up arms and munitions for Loyalists forces in Spain.

At Bermuda on the North America and West Indies Station of the Royal Navy at the time was the light cruiser of the Danae Class, HMS *Dragon*, which was called into service in an attempt to salvage the *Cristobal Colon*.

Several attempts were made to pull the vessel off the reefs, but she was stuck solid and that and other attempts at salvage were given up.

The crew remained at Bermuda for three months, until passage could be obtained for them to return home to Spain, where the victorious Fascist side in the Spanish civil war summarily executed some of them.

Finally, four years later came the event many honest, carpetbagger Bermudians were waiting for, namely the auction of the contents of the *Cristobal Colon* that had not been appropriated from the ship by 'various groups of marauders' and 'from all over the Colony bargain and souvenir hunters swarmed eastward' in an action not dissimilar, perhaps, to the recent last days of White's Supermarket in Southampton.

In one instance, as Lockhurst noted, 'the ship's steering wheels were bought by two men who once followed the sea and retained a sentimental attachment for anything pertaining to it, Robert Aitken of Devonshire and Hugh Gray of Sandys', though he added that neither man seemed to know what they might do with such souvenirs.

Today, the *Cristobal Colon* is the largest shipwreck at Bermuda and a source of delight for visiting divers.

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