

+ THERE ARE LEGENDARY SHIPWRECKS AND THEN THERE ARE ICONIC SHIPWRECKS, BUT THE RMS LUSITANIA IS BOTH. SINCE HER SINKING SHE'S BEEN SHROUDED IN POLITICAL CONTROVERSY; HER STORY IS ONE OF CONSPIRACY, GREED, COURTROOM BATTLES, AMBITION AND OBSESSION. PHOTOGRAPHER LEIGH BISHOP, WHO'S SPENT MORE TIME ON THE WRECK THAN ANY OTHER DIVER, SHARES THE STORY OF AN OCEAN LINER THAT LITERALLY CHANGED THE COURSE OF HISTORY.

# THE LUSITANIA

The Lusitania is often referred to by the technical community as the 'Mount Everest' of wreck dives. For decades historians have been baffled by the endless mysteries locked deep within the Celtic sea and in recent years British technical divers have been trying to unravel some of these. The story of the legendary RMS Lusitania, perhaps the second most famous shipwreck of all, is one of iconic household status that transcends time.

Words can't describe the excitement of dropping through the Celtic Sea to 93m/307ft and the decks of one of the most famous shipwrecks in history. As a deep wreck diver I'm incredibly lucky to be one of a team of divers who've been granted a permit by local authorities to experience the grandeur of the Lusitania.

Passing through a mid water thermocline, the unpredicted Atlantic tidal currents around the old head of Kinsale bring only five metres visibility. As the water darkens, my high-intensity diffused light fires up to flood the area of wreckage I arrive on. At first everything is confusing; I'm somewhere amidships which has collapsed considerably. I attach a powerful strobe on the end of the anchor line to aid my way back, drop down to where the wreck meets the seabed on the starboard side and begin moving along the wreck. I reach a collapsed and broken section of covered promenade deck and a classic and well-documented window appears from the gloom - I'm just forward of the second funnel stack. Of course no funnels remain on the wreck to form a typical landmark, but this is the rough area of today's exploration and one that hasn't been documented for some time.

During 1996 a cultural preservation order was placed on the site designating Lusitania an 'historic shipwreck of interest'. Rumours that several old paintings by the likes of Rubens and Monet contained in lead tubes were amongst the wreckage were enough to convince the Irish of its worth and status.

If such paintings were recovered they could well be of national importance and would no doubt fire up serious debate about actual ownership!

These are complicated dives. The wreck is deep, big, and shows considerable collapse throughout. On my next dive, descending into darkness, my partner and I fire up 200 watts of light between us and after waiting a few minutes for our eyes to adjust, we again begin to explore. Due to the depth and shattered state of the wreck you can probably count on one hand the number of individuals that know their way around the entire site!

There are plenty of artifacts in the area which can be used as navigational landmarks so we decide that this second drop is suitable for the start of a video survey of the wreck. We planned to run a guide line from the bow to the stern, then at strategic spots, we can establish branch lines to run off at pre-determined points to allow designated teams to search and film systematically. We'd then be able to create the first video 'mosaic' of the entire wreck. Heritage officials had advised they'd



Facing page -

91 An artists impression of Jim Jarrat when he became the first man to see Lusitania on the seabed in 1935 (painting courtesy of Stuart Williamson)

Videographer Kevin Pickering one of the survey team

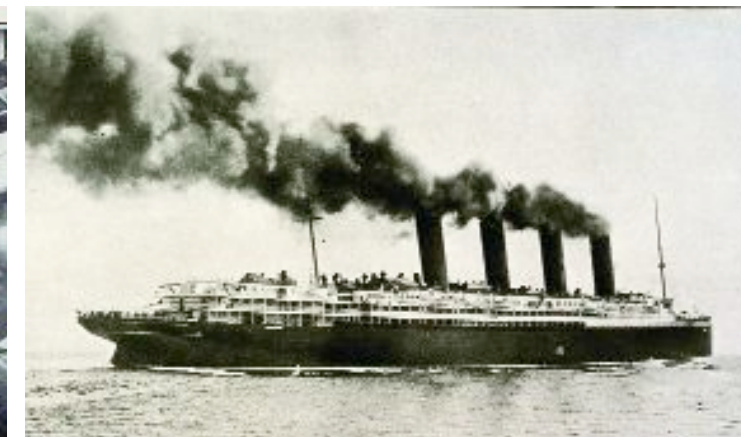
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A tropical porthole resting upside down would once would have provided cabin ventilation

A classic photograph of Lusitania in New York (Eric Sauder collection)



# CHRONICLES



Above left to right - Equipment for deep diving ready to go (the author to the right) Clergymen conduct a service for Lusitania's dead in a mass burial grave. (Eric Sauder collection) The bell that was recovered from the wreck in 1982 by Oceaneering being filmed by the BBC (Stuart Williamson collection)

A classic picture of Lusitania taken during peacetime (photo Eric Sauder collection)

Below - Divers decompressing in the Celtic Sea after a long dive on Lusitania

A diver examines a securing mechanism next to some unknown cargo lashed into position with rope

monitor our daily operations and we later discovered the Navy would frequently watch us and our activities. The Irish seem to take this wreck very seriously – the current legislation prevents even Bemis himself from undertaking controlled work on what in theory is his own property!

The wreck lies on its starboard side at an angle of approximately 30° with the keel taking an unusual curvature. Much of the superstructure has gone, removing an integral strength which may be the cause of the hull's appearance. The beam here has collapsed from its original 27 metres to approximately half that; all the funnels are missing, possibly due to deterioration. The bow is by far the most prominent section of the wreck – it is still intact and

shipshape which simplifies navigation. Swimming aft of where the bridge used to be, the wreck becomes seriously complicated in this poor five metre visibility.

As it's the second dive of our third expedition and we're focusing on laying video guidelines, we move off towards amidships heading for the stern. Our first significant location is an area of covered mosaic-tile flooring 'found in the vestibule located in First Class' where passengers entered from the boat deck. Further along and immediately beyond the first funnel void are three main freshwater tanks. Still in their original location, the working valves are readily recognisable. I'm distracted by the beckoning flash of my partner's torch – moving closer I discover

After a break caused by a period of severe weather the team return to the wreck; the next batch of dives are to concentrate on the stern section. There's more damage here than elsewhere – during the summer of 1982 the giant salvage company Oceaneering recovered three of Lusitania's four props by blasting! There's also evidence of extensive depth charging during WW2. The once proud counter stern is no longer apparent; the entire docking bridge now rests on the starboard seabed amongst a huge debris field. Here, amongst twisted sections of superstructure, are her docking telegraphs alongside the main docking bridge telemotor. Elsewhere are numerous types of windows, many with ornate filigree detail. The main bridge has collapsed on to the seabed and here we find even more

turn-of-the-century designed navigational equipment. A first class bathtub lies aft of the bridge, still intact with its original brass shower framework A few metres away is Lusitania's beautiful triple chime whistle.

There is much debate about when a shipwreck becomes historic and therefore worthy of archaeological interest. The archaeological community has in general been fiercely opposed to raising artifacts from shipwrecks by anyone apart from themselves – they argue that only they are capable of understanding the full significance of the unique arrangement of these artifacts on the seabed. Some archaeologist's even object to their own kind raising artifacts because "that would be destroying the unique arrangement for

future generations of who may also wish to carry out their own excavations and studies".

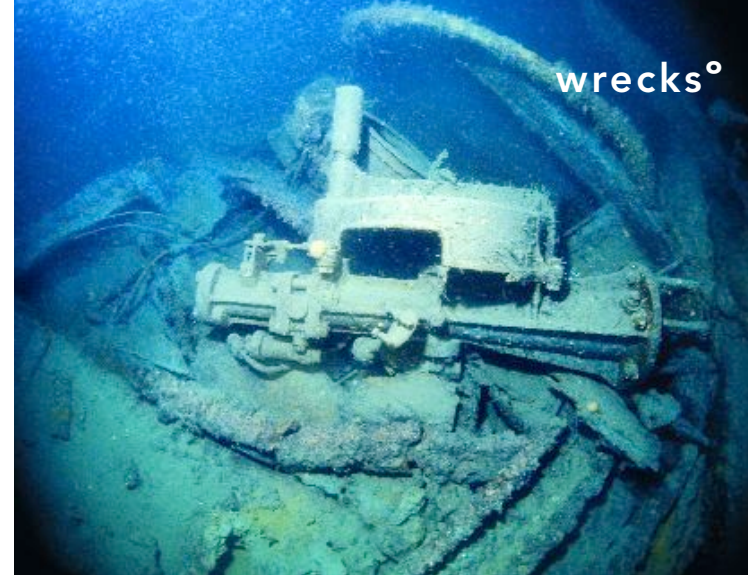
A factor in this difficult debate that often doesn't seem to be considered by this scientific community is that the bottom of the sea is not a benign environment and a shipwreck's remains will not remain perfectly preserved forever. This is especially evident in the recently observed case of the Lusitania; the exposed position of the wreck makes her particularly vulnerable to the often-strong Atlantic undercurrents and swells. Added to this are the highly corrosive forces of nature itself. The scouring action of currents and sand movement plus the pounding of wreckage/artifacts against rocks/wreckage are clearly perils for wrecks in shallow



he's come across a rare example of a tropical porthole. Unique in itself, the small vents above the window would have allowed a constant flow of fresh air through a humid First Class cabin, while internal clack valves would prevent entry of water during rough sea conditions. Lying free of its fixture, we had to remove a small amount of netting before we could photograph this rare artifact. This discovery signals what's still to come – wherever you go on the remains of Lusitania you're confronted by the very affluent standards of the early twentieth century.

On 7 May 1915 on a return journey from the US, Lusitania was struck by a torpedo fired from the German U-boat U-20. The ship sank in only 20 minutes with the loss of 1,198 lives. The Great War had begun and 1915 was a period of unrestricted submarine warfare in and around British waters. The Allies were outraged over the sinking and anti-German sentiment ignited throughout Britain. Many Austrian and German owned premises were looted and destroyed. Apart from the loss of a national treasure, the staggering death toll included 123 Americans which in turn would eventually draw the United States into the Great war and change the course of history.





A beautiful and fine example of an open boat deck window

The bridge telemotor that once steered the great ship by manoeuvring her rudder

Lieutenant Walter Schwieger commander of U-20 responsible for the sinking of the Lusitania.

water. But even wrecks in deep water such as the Lusitania are subject to slow destruction through the activity of bacteria eating into the ferrous metal of the hull, thus creating deposits of rusticles. For deep shipwrecks of this vintage, rusticles remain the main enemy as they're removing 0.1 of a ton of iron from the steel construction every day. Estimations suggest a period of possibly 90 years before this wreck biologically implodes and becomes a mere iron ore deposit on the ocean floor.

The wreck's hull is in poor condition and appears to be folded in on itself. Whether this is due to collapsed deck levels with no internal strength or previous salvage attempts is unclear. Just how much strength the hull plating has in order to remain in its present condition may be determined through forensic analysis. The strength of the rivets naturally will



determine the life of the present hull configuration, so an analysis of rivets of a specific collective trend may determine a given life span. A cross-sectional analysis of rivets to measure the quantity of slag (metal content) will give an indication as to

whether the original construction contained optimum quantity of sufficient materials within the wrought iron. Through an analysis of this kind it may be possible to estimate the wreck's time span from its present state. The wreck lies along a bearing of almost 230° southwest to northeast, in fast currents that will help her condition to deteriorate further.

No team member witnessed any artifacts within the wreckage that may be recognised national treasures. But it's important to consider that Lusitania's fittings and fixtures (including navigational equipment) could be viewed as such treasures for future generations and most certainly should be used for some form of preserved educational purpose.

As it stands, the Heritage Service will not grant a licence for the recovery of artifacts unless they are done so within the parameters of an archaeological pattern. While the heritage department 'DUCHAS' do not have the means to carry out this kind of work, the question of funding arises repeatedly, plus where restored artefacts would be displayed.

If this wreck site has become one of historic importance, or a national site of interest, then it should be treated as such. As Lusitania is one of the first wrecks less than 100 years old to have such a preservation act placed upon it, then perhaps it should also become one of the first wrecks to have artifacts raised and preserved before it is too late.

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The wreck of Lusitania is currently owned by New Mexico diver and businessman F Gregg Bemis Jr. In 1967 the wreck was sold by the Liverpool & London War Risks Insurance Association to former US Navy diver John Light for £1,000. Bemis became a co-owner of the wreck in 1968 and by 1982 Bemis had bought out his partners to become sole owner. He later went to court in England in 1986, the US in 1995, and Ireland in 1996 to ensure his ownership was legally watertight. None of the jurisdictions objected to his ownership but in 1995 the Irish Government declared it a heritage site under the National Monuments Act, which prohibited him from interfering with it or its contents. After a long legal wrangle, the Supreme Court in Dublin overturned the Arts and Heritage Ministry's previous refusal to issue Bemis with a five year exploration licence in 2007, ruling that the then minister for Arts and Heritage had misconstrued the law. Bemis planned to dive and recover and analyse whatever artifacts and evidence can help piece together the story of what happened to the ship. He says any items found will be given to museums following analysis. Any fine art recovered, such as the Rubens rumoured to be on board, will remain in the ownership of the Irish Government.

In July 2008 Gregg Bemis was granted an 'imaging' license by the Department of the Environment, allowing him to photograph and film the entire wreck, and should result in the first high-resolution pictures of it. Bemis plans to use data gathered to assess the wreck's deterioration and to plan a strategy for a forensic examination of the ship, which he estimated would cost \$5m. Florida-based Odyssey Marine Exploration (OME) have been contracted by Bemis to conduct the survey. The Department of the Environment's Underwater Archaeology Unit was to join the survey team to ensure research is non-invasive.

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