

Shipwreck still interests Heysham inhabitants

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A shipwreck off Heysham has fascinated inhabitants of the village and its surrounding area since the vessel ran aground over 100 years ago.

Retired ship engineer and Heysham resident Ken Calverley tells Greg Lambert how he fell in love with the sunken cargo ship – The Vanadis of Jakobstad in Finland – and how he researched its dramatic history, then rescued and restored the ship's cannon, which he hopes will be put on display in Heysham for future generations...

It was a sunny day, September 20 2005, when Ken Calverley walked out across the Heysham sands to get a close-up view of the wreck of the Vanadis. After a 20-minute walk accompanied by his grandson Thomas, he reached the sunken hull of the ship that had been wrecked at Half Moon Bay for his entire life.

"We were surprised how long the hull was and what good condition the wood was in to say it had been buried in the sand and wrecked over 100 years ago," he says.

"As I stood and looked at the wreck I thought to myself what would life have been like on board the Vanadis. It must have been a terrible experience when the Vanadis went on the sandbank and was pounded by the raging sea and damaged by gale force winds."

Ken, who worked on ship maintenance at Heysham Harbour for more than 33 years, knew the basics of the story – that the Vanadis had been wrecked off Heysham in a storm in 1903, before being blown ashore and coming to rest at Half Moon Bay.

When they returned home, he found himself looking at pictures of the wreck taken by his grandson - curious to find out more about the Vanadis and exactly how it came about its demise.

Fascinated by the shipwreck, Ken made regular walks out onto the sand over the ensuing weeks.

On one visit, he came across a most interesting find in the stern of the rotten hull.

"Covered in rust and scale and buried partly in the sand we found a cannon, about three feet in length. We did not think a sailing ship would need to carry a cannon in 1903. When we got home I telephoned the Lancaster Maritime Museum and told them of our find. After some days they got in touch and said they had no room for the cannon. I couldn't believe it. If this isn't maritime history I don't know what is."

Disappointed but undeterred, Ken looked up the Vanadis on the Internet but most of the information he discovered was written in Swedish. So he wrote to the museum in Jakobstad, Finland, where the ship was first built.

"To my surprise they soon answered my letter and sent me pictures of the Vanadis in her sailing days," he says. "They thanked me for the photographs and information I sent them about the Vanadis and said they had some diaries written by crew members in Swedish, but they would translate it for me if I was interested. I wrote back and said yes. I received them a few weeks later – they told me about the terrible weather and crossings of the Atlantic Ocean that the ship had been through.

They also said the ship had a cannon because there could have been rogue (pirate) ships in the Eastern seas during its early days at sea."

According to the information Ken received from Jakobstad museum, the Vanadis was built in Jakobstad in 1874. In Nordic mythology Vanadis is another name for Freya – the goddess of fertility, youth, beauty and the dead – and she was represented in the ship's figurehead.

The cargo ship, originally owned by a rich Finnish shipping merchant called Otto Malm, was 185 feet long and 35.1 feet breadth with a gross tonnage of 1,102 tonnes.

The Vanadis made its first journey to England on November 12, 1874 – destination Hull. Other early

journeys took the ship to Singapore, Java and New York.

Tragedy struck the frigate on December 7, 1882, when in the English Channel, heavy seas washed over the ship and pulled five men overboard to their deaths. A sixth casualty of the same journey died of stomach trouble.

In July 1894 the Vanadis was hit by a hurricane as it sailed towards the Florida coast. The ship was battered for many hours by storm force winds but arrived in Pensacola, despite all sails having been blown to shreds and severe damage to masts and rigging.

On August 25 1898 the Vanadis left Plymouth heading for the north American coast to pick up a cargo of timber. On October 2 they were hit by another massive hurricane north of the Bahamas. The main top sails were torn to pieces and the mast was destroyed.

Somehow the crew survived, and set to work to put up masts out of the wreckage left on the decks, and rig up the sails and get the ship sailing again.

In a subsequent letter to his wife, first mate Frans Hagglund described this hurricane as so devastating the Vanadis could easily have been wrecked and 'lost with all hands'.

But after a few more days at sea the ship was able to limp into the city of Savannah in Georgia.

The Vanadis stayed there until early 1899 as repairs took many months. The ship was then sold to John Anderson from the Island of Aland in Finland. Over the next four years the frigate continued to sail, mainly bringing timber to Europe from America.

Its final trip began on January 13th, 1903, headed from Darien in Georgia, USA with a cargo of timber to the port of Fleetwood. But on arrival at Fleetwood on 22nd February the Vanadis ran into a storm, this time in Morecambe Bay as gales reached storm force in Heysham Lake.

The ship rang aground on Sunderland bank in the entrance to the River Lune in extremely rough seas. A Fleetwood lifeboat, the Maude pick-up, was sent out to rescue nine of the crew and the other members of the 20-strong crew managed to make their own escape in a boat. All survived.

The ship then floated off Sunderland bank and drifted up past the entrance of the new Heysham Harbour – which was not open to ships until 1904. The Vanadis was then was blown ashore in Half Moon Bay about five miles from Sunderland bank.

"It's amazing that the ship survived two hurricanes, yet was eventually wrecked in Morecambe Bay," says Ken.

According to records supplied by Jakobstad museum, the new owners had not maintained the ship's windlass and both the captain and the pilot agreed this was the cause of the wreck. After the wreck, the cargo was removed by horse and cart and sold to the highest bidder. As she lay on the shore the ship was stripped of her decking and broken masts.

"On the day the Vanadis was blown ashore and wrecked, the people of Heysham would have been on the shore looking for bits of the wreck," says Ken.

He says a local blacksmith salvaged some of the yellow metal sheathing from the hull, while the ship's figurehead was retrieved and became a feature of the rose gardens of Heysham Head, until it was sold when the Head was closed down many years ago.

As years went by the hull of the Vanadis was slowly covered with sand before gradually being re-exposed by the elements about a decade ago.

Shortly after his phone call to Lancaster Maritime Museum, Ken and his friend, fisherman Trevor Owen from Sunderland Point, decided to rescue the cannon he had uncovered in the wreck.

"After all, you don't find a 100-year-old cannon every day!" says Ken.

On Sunday November 11, 2005, Ken and Trevor ventured out onto the sands on a quad bike on their rescue mission.

"The cannon was very heavy and it was hard work to get it on the back of the quad bike," says Ken.

The pair attracted attention from some dog walkers, who reported them to the police – saying someone was looting the over 100-year-old wreck!

"I told the police I had contacted the museum, they said they had no room for it so we decided to

go and save it as it was a bit of Heysham's heritage," says Ken. "They agreed it was a good idea. We put the cannon in fresh water for the winter months until May 2006 to get the salt out of it. Most of the rust was removed with a wire brush and it was in quite good condition to say it had been under sand and sea for over a century."

Using pitch pine wood washed up on Middleton Sands from the old Heysham Harbour jetty, Ken built a carriage for the restored cannon to sit on.

"We had a hard job getting four iron wheels for the carriage but I know a local scrap dealer Howard who found us some after a long search. I can't thank him, and Trevor, enough for their help."

Ken says he looks at the finished cannon and realises the whole experience has been worthwhile.

"When I returned to the wreck some weeks after rescuing the cannon, the rollers and iron work that had been with the cannon had gone, washed out of the stern end and sunk in the sand, lost forever."

Ken thinks it won't be long before the wreck itself is completely covered again.

"I went out again in July and the middle of the hull's back was broken, and filled with sand. The surrounding sand isn't safe to walk on now, it's quicksand. I don't think I'll go out again – I think the winter gales might finish her off."

The cannon is currently in storage, but Ken intends to talk to the Heysham Heritage Centre in Heysham Village to see if they can put it on permanent display.

"I've said all along that it should belong to the Village," explains Ken.

"After all, it is an important part of Heysham's heritage."

Our thanks to Charlie Overett and Ian Miller for helping us take photos of the Vanadis