

The Gun Rock Mystery - Hypothesis by Joe Mallon for Website



The 1970 Tyne Tees Television film footage

Some film of the 1970's Gun Rock Dives was found in November 2016 after decades of searching by many Tyneside branch BSAC members. It only represents however a small fraction of what was actually filmed or televised and seemingly only survived by accident because it was an outtake, failing to reach the TV editing suite presumably because it was poorer quality or not relevant to the main headline story. The photo above shows this film when I first located it in a North East Film Archive still having the "Farne Island Spanish Warship" label, which was the story Tyne Tees Television and the national media were spinning to the British public at the time. Even the Sunday Times highlighted the Spanish Armada theme on 5th July, 1970 featuring Bill Smith BSAC 114's Diving Officer waving aloft a glittering sword hilt "of *distinctively Spanish design*" under the headline "*The Deep Secret of the Bladeless Sword*". The local press however picked up the story and countered with experts from Newcastle & Durham Universities reaching consensus that from examination of the recovered artifacts it was a seventeenth century shipwreck.



The day the Sunday Times printed their article making Bill something of a GunRock Star also happened to be the same day this film footage was taken featuring a very serious Bill Smith explaining how his branch were undertaking a comprehensive survey of the shipwreck, then proposing to lift a cannon and other artifacts from the seabed under the supervision of experts from The National Maritime Museum and Institute of Nautical Archaeology.



As a 17 year old schoolboy studying for my A levels at the time I followed avidly the nightly TV broadcasts of the experts examining the artefacts recovered, not by the Lloyd Bridges, Hans Hass or Jacques Cousteu's of the world but ordinary Geordie men and women, albeit in strange rubber suits. This inspired me, so within the year had signed up to a Scuba Diving club when I went down to a London College. They took me diving to Plymouth's Fort Bovisand where I met Alan Bax one of the TV experts whose speciality was 17th Century Shipwrecks and listened to his perspective on the Gun Rock wreck. On return to Tyneside a few years later I joined BSAC 114 branch, meeting and diving with many of the original Gun Rock team taking particular interest in their tales of what they found on what they thought was an undisturbed wreck. I have been researching this shipwreck on and off ever since.

Although Bill Smith's Tyneside team discovered a great number of artifacts in 1970 it seemed there was an unexplained absence of coins or bric a brac of a normal undisturbed wreck. The National Media and the collective Marine Archaeology Establishment at the time considered this to be an undiscovered virgin shipwreck, but in 2017 I unearthed several documents which now cast doubt because it has now become evident that throughout the 18th Century articles appeared describing how one of our great if overlooked Diving pioneers made repeated visits to this very shipwreck, inspecting its cannon and even removing a section of its oak structure.

Although he is now overshadowed by Halley (the guy who owns that comet that keeps pestering us and developed a diving bell) there is extensive evidence that a Charles Spalding trialed his improved diving bell on Gun Rock before going on to fame and fortune

in his more functional two man version. There were many articles in the printed media from 1783 onwards celebrating the life and death of Spalding with at least 3 describing his Gun Rock dives. Spalding's death in 1783 with his diving boots on prompted the Hibernian magazine of his native Edinburgh to print out Spalding's original report of 1776 into his own early dives with a smaller but less maneuverable single man version of his original diving bell. He describes how he tested it out on flat sandy seabed of Dundee and Leith harbours before taking it down in an open boat to the rocks of the Farne Islands.

Due to adverse weather he was confined to Bamburgh Castle where he acknowledged the hospitality of Dr John Sharp and gathered intelligence of what he describes as a *"Dutch ship of war, lost in the year 1704"*.

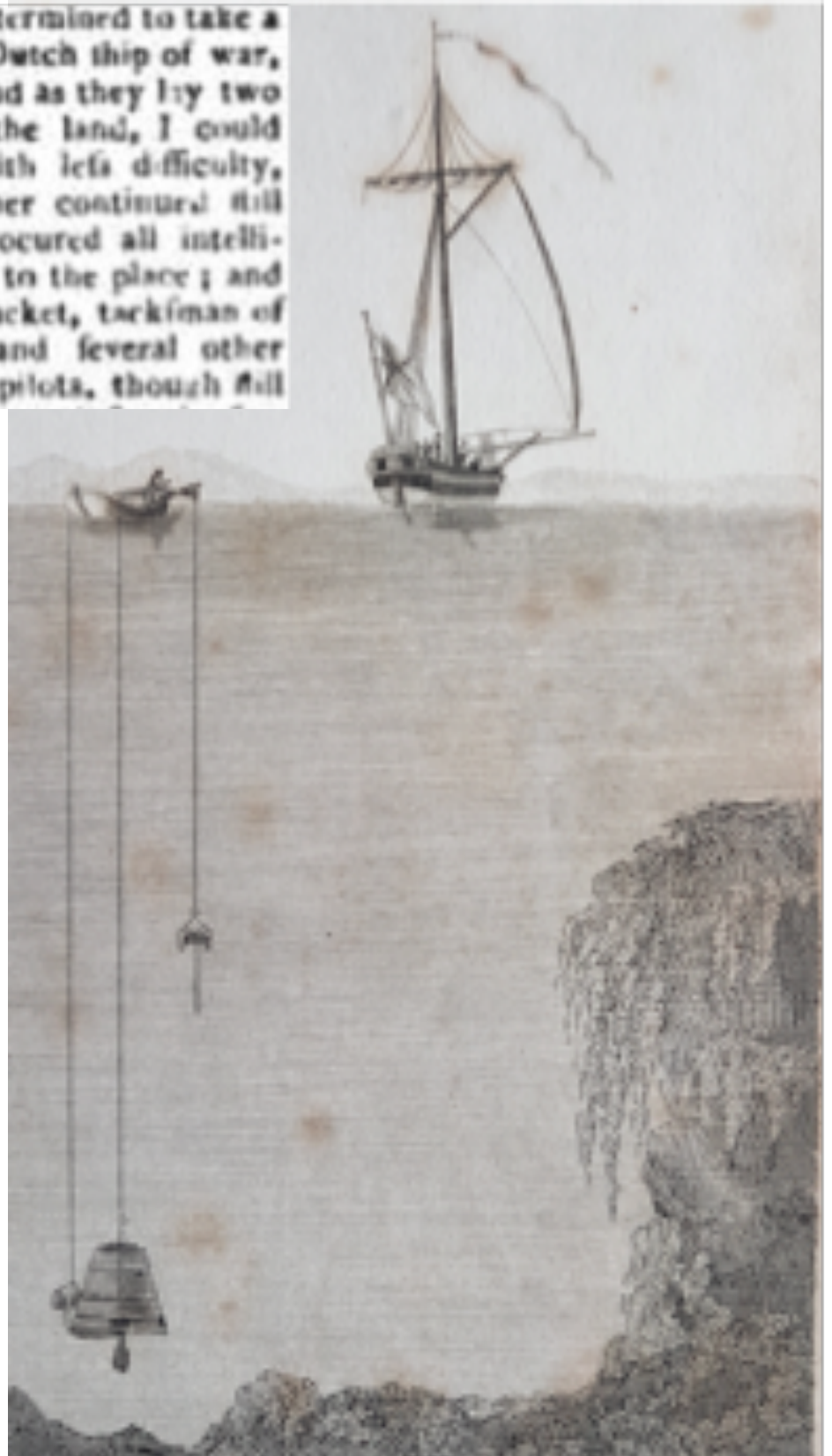


Charles Spalding's Original Single Man Bell 1775

His original mission though was to try and recover silver and other goods from the wreck of The Peggy, a ship he had commercial interests in. After just one short, aborted and presumably frightening dive he seems to have accepted its unviability and rather than keep trying for the known valuable cargo on the Peggy he diverted all his available time in search of *"where the long looked for cannon lay"* at a known location closer to the mainland. On his 5th dive he succeeded, but must have been disappointed with the cannon he found being only iron. He would have been informed by Dr Sharp that the wreck had been dived before by a father and son team called Evans who recovered in 1744 not only his famous signal gun but also a brass cannon they sold for profit. Spalding apparently gave up on the Peggy's silver and the Gun Rock's cannon but went on to develop his more functional two man bell which he worked on more lucrative wrecks. But did he leave behind his equipment or his ideas for salvage work to continue?. It seemed so - there were reports that some local men using very similar gear to Spalding's succeeded in getting rich from the Peggy's silver and when that ran out or the tides weren't right could they have resisted the lure of easier pickings on Gun Rock. Spalding makes it clear in his accounts that he obtained local intelligence of a *Dutch man of war lost in 1704* and as he was hosted for several weeks by Dr Sharp in Bamburgh Castle in the September of 1775 it is most likely that he got this information from Sharp himself whose diaries still survive confirming that his famous distress signal gun was actually a cannon from that very wreck. Sharp a few years later in 1778 commissioned a chart on behalf of

The Lord Crewe Charity Trust he managed, which has the first written mention of the name Gun Rock on the submerged reef west of Staples Island. It is almost certain therefore that Gun Rock was the submerged reef that Spalding dived with his original single man bell which is the one illustrated below suspended from an open boat alongside a small sailing ship with several people on it, replicating Spalding's account below.

any great weight, I determined to take a view of the guns of a Dutch ship of war, built in the year 1704, and as they lay two or three miles nearer the land, I could execute this design with less difficulty, especially as the weather continued still favourable. Having procured all intelligence possible, we went to the place; and being joined by Mr. Blacket, tacksman of the islands, his son, and several other brave fellows, my two pilots, though still



Shortly after this dive Spalding returned to Scotland, remedied the problems he had experienced with this first model and concentrated on his two man self controlled diving bell in which he achieved fame, fortune but his ultimate death in 1783. The Hibernian Magazine in consequence produced this tribute.

The Hibernian Magazine 1783 Pages 470-473 A letter written by the late Mr. Spalding, describing his Experiments with the Diving Bell

I was obliged to comply, very unwillingly, with their intreaties; though part of their assertions came too truly to pass; for, in sailing home, we cleared the rocks and islands with difficulty, but not before eleven o'clock at night, and even then with hard labour.

Convinced, from this, that with an open boat nothing could be accomplished to purpose, and except in June and July, no man would risk himself with me in a sloop, to continue a few days and nights at anchor there; I was obliged to abandon this ultimate aim of all my attempts: yet though my boat was too small to raise my great weight, I determined to take a view of the guns of a Dutch ship of war, lost in the year 1704, and as they lay two or three miles nearer the land, I could execute this design with less difficulty, especially as the weather continued still favourable. Having procured all intelligence possible, we went to the place; and being joined by Mr. Blacket, tacksman of the islands, his son, and several other brave fellows, my two pilots, though ill with me, having no stomach for the service, I went down four different times, but could find no marks of any wreck, notwithstanding my walking about in five and six fathoms water, as far as it was thought safe to allow rope to the bell; continuing generally twenty minutes or more each time, at the bottom. On this occasion I was obliged to carry a cutting hook and knife, to clear away the sea-weeds, which at this place are very thick and strong; without this method I could not move about. At the fifth going down, each trial being in a different place, I was agreeably surpris'd to find a large grove of tall weeds, all of them from six to eight feet high, with large tufted tops, mostly growing in regular ranges, as far as the eye could reach; a variety of small shells, and other shell fish, swimming about in the intervals.

On a survey of the ground, I found myself on the extremity of the place where

which part of the weight for sinking the machine hung, then giving the signal, brought the weed along with me. To one side of the root was fastened a piece of rock, about seven pounds weight; in the middle a piece of decayed oak, very black, on the other side a black substance, which on a few hours exposure to the air, changed into a dull reddish colour, resembling crocus martis.

Pressing business requiring me at home the Monday following, I set sail for Leith; our compass being attracted by the great quantity of iron work in my boat, we were, during the night, in the greatest danger, being twice entangled amongst the rocks, and very much chafed with the coil for want of proper care: but escaping these dangers, we safely next morning arrived at Leith.

The proposed alterations in constructing a Diving-bell to hold two persons, which can be managed by a sloop of one hundred tons, or a little under that burden, are—

To have the machine on the common circular plan, able to contain two hundred gallons English, or a little more, with proper pulleys within, by which the weights which bring it to the full sinking degree, can be lowered down to the bottom; on pulling the rope fast to its weight, the person or persons in the bell can lower the machine to the bottom, or raise themselves with the bell, so as to take in air from the barrels, as often is necessary; by the same method they may bring the bell to the surface, and the balancing weight can be taken in afterwards. The great and obvious importance of this alteration is, that the bell, as constructed formerly, could never be lowered safely with a man, on any wreck or any rocky bottom; but, on the contrary, with the utmost hazard (till the ground was known) of being overturned: by the present improvement no danger can attend it; fishermen, say, even the most timid landlock will, by this means, be soon brought to
it,

Sir

The following account of the late Mr. Spalding's Experiments with the Diving Bell, as written by himself, and communicated to the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, who rewarded his ingenious improvements with a bounty of Twenty Guineas,

“On a survey of the ground I found myself on the extremity of the place where the long looked for cannon lay and one very large piece was nearly covered with round stones thrown upon it by storms from the south-east. By the appearance and sound, I judged it to be iron, but to form a more certain idea, I tried to pull up a strong weed, expecting some part of rust, if iron would adhere to the fibres of the root

.....To one side of the root was fastened a piece of rock about seven pounds weight; in the middle a piece of decayed oak, very black on the other side a black substance which on a few hours exposure to the air changed to a dull reddish colour”

CHARLES SPALDING

Although Spalding is fairly categorical that he located the guns of a Dutch Ship of War wrecked in 1704, his source Dr Sharp actually only records the term “**probably**” presumably because although he was certain of it being a Dutch Warship, there remained some doubt of the date of its sinking as indicated in the actual diary text below

Dr Sharp's History of Bamburgh Castle (Handwritten in Dr Sharps hand)

This gun belonged to a Dutch 40 Gun Ship which was lost on one of the islands probably.....in the year 1704. Lay 40 years at the bottom of the sea, till the year 1744, when one or two divers (Nm and Richd Evans, Father and son) coming to look for wreck brought it up, along with a brass six pounder, which latter was carried away to be sold or melted down, but this nine pounder being left on the sands near Monks House was in time covered up and forgot, till by an uncommon high tide in 1767, the sand over it being washed away, it was discovered after being sunk in the sands for 23 years....It was proved by Mr Wooler (?) the Engineer with 4/16 (lb?) powder and+ brought to Bambrough Castle, and a ship carriage provided for it. It has been hammered to bring off the rust, and has been frequently scaled and painted. Mr Wooler supposes it originally weighed about 1 ton and a half. The Chamber is the smoothest part of the inside; probably owing to it having been charged when it was sunk in the sand, for a charge was found in it. For 13 years past it has been used as a Signal Gun when ships are in distress or driven ashore, and for several other purposes. It has now been loaded with 4lb of powder but generally with 3lb. On Sept 1780 it was fired the 118 since. I got it this last time with Ball. It has since been sometimes fired with Whinstone to bring off the misting the middle of where it straitest, but without much effect.



Sharp writing the above in the 1770's must of been unaware of this map in a leather bound atlas first published in 1724 by Herman Moll showing a "Dutch Man of War" wrecked in 1689. This Holy Island/Staiples chart included has on it next to 'Bamberow Cast.' a reference to 'The Grimstone Rock is only seen at Low water, upon this in ye Year 1689 a Dutch Man of war was lost with a great many Scots Passengers on Board'. This Grimstone Rock which is also indicated with an X to the west of *Pinacles* and *Staples* and SE of *Swademan*, *Megstone* & *Oxscarr* is clearly the reef we today call Gun Rock. This chart could not have been put up for sale in 1724 if there was any contemporary evidence in the previous decade or two of another later ship carrying over twenty cannon on the same reef. Herman Moll was probably the foremost cartographer of the day, acclaimed as such in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and employed by Greenville Collins for his celebrated Coasting Pilot Charts. Moll could not have risked his reputation on misinformation for such a busy sea route so well known and close to home. On the same chart, showing islands off Britain he has a reference next to the Scilly Islands '*Gill Stone...Sr Cloudesly Shovel was cast away in the Association on ye 22nd of October, 1707*'. As this is now known to be accurate the Association having been discovered by Royal Navy divers on the Gilston Ledge Reef in 1967, then there must be due credence given to his Dutch Man of War lost on *The Grimstone* in 1689

Molls's 1724 Charts of Notable Shipwrecks on Farnes & Scilly Islands

Moll together with the great shipwreck authors of his day Daniel Defoe & Jonathan Swift, was a great frequenter of the London Coffee Houses where fact and rumour about ships wrecked, abounded. Sea captains & Marine merchants also mixed in these establishments and it is no coincidence that one of them the now world famous *Lloyds of London* gradually changed its business from selling coffee to Marine Insurance. Maybe Moll's many contacts gave him access to confidential documents or older records of shipping news. Probably the most authoritative and reliable of these was The London Gazette of 1689 copies of which which fortunately still survive to this day.

These records indicate that in the early months of 1689 there was a great deal of military shipping movement up and down the North East coast mostly in convoys controlled by Dutch and English warships. The bi-weekly London Gazette reported this shipping activity throughout 1689 as follows with one almost illegible entry of great relevance to our quest.

Edinburgh May 16. Several new Batteries have been lately raised against the Castle of Edinburgh upon which will be planted the Cannon and Mortar pieces that have been brought by Sea from England: and three of the English Regiments that were quartered on the Borders of this Kingdom are expected to Morrow.

Edinburgh , May 19 Yesterday in the Evening a Dutch Man of War with 40 Sail of Small Merchant Ships Came into this Frith, which put to sea again this Morning.

Newcastle, July 23. The last week two Dutch Men of war came with some Scotch Vessels before this Bar; and Several Ships went out from hence to pass under their Convoy for Holland.

Newcastle, Oct 22. There are now in Tinmouth-Haven above 80 Sail of laden Ships. Two were lately cast away as they were coming in, and several of the Men drowned.

Newcastle Jan 24. Yesterday marched from hence 500 danish Horse towards Scotland. The same day came into Sheeles two Ships from Denmark having on Board 300 Foot Soldiers; They came out with 3 other Vessels which they lost Company with. This Evening the rest of the Danish Horse are expected here in their march towards Scotland.

Newcastle Jan 30. The Nonsuch Frigat is arrived here with Eight of the East-Country Ships under her Convoy, the rest of their Company having being separated from them in bad Weather. The English Ships from Holland are come in here; and their Convoy is gone with the Scotch Ships to Scotland. There lies a Fleet of Colliers in Tinmouth, ready to sail with the first fair Wind.

Berwick Febr 15. There was lately cast away to the Southward of this place a small Frigat which was supposed to be the Dutch Convoy bound with some Merchant Ships to Scotland

We can see from above that the term "cast away" at that time meant a ship being wrecked and can presume that a "*Dutch Man of War*" would have been a ship carrying cannon. The smaller Dutch Frigates in William III 's invasion fleet of November 1688 are known to have carried 24 cannon so one of these is likely to be "Wor Ship".

So how do we now reconcile this clear historical evidence with the Wessex Archaeology findings of the Gun Rock Wreck being an 18th Century merchant transport ship carrying a mixture of cannon about 25% of which were in a damaged state before its sinking. There are several possibilities, perhaps the most obvious being that Gun Rock has claimed multiple shipwrecks and this was suggested by a Greenwich Museum expert back in 1970. It would after all not be unusual for an uncharted submerged reef in a busy shipping lane with strong, tricky tides and variable winds to claim several wrecks over the ages. The recorded application for a lighthouse on Staple Island as early as 1673 suggests there was the historic cause for concern normally associated with frequency of shipwreck.

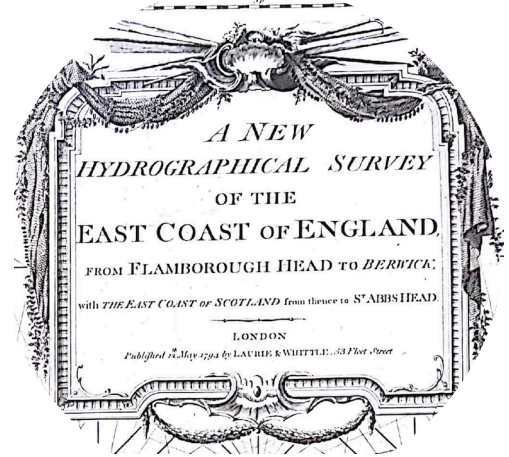
We also know however from the comprehensive archaeological work carried out by Colin Martin on a similar shipwreck (the Dartmouth wrecked in 1690) that it was normal practice for frigates of this period to carry old or damaged cannon as ballast because presumably this optimised the concentration of necessary weight where it was most needed below the waterline without taking up excessive space. Ship's crews of this era were expert in lifting cannon in and out of tight spaces so it may have been the case that spare guns a bit worse for wear tended to be kept in reserve below deck. There are also reports of Dutch Ships frequently carrying in them non-standard captured British cannon as ballast, but alternatively these may have been destined for the siege of Edinburgh perhaps more as a show of force rather than destructive functionality. It is on record that Sharp's Bamburgh signal gun salvaged from Gun Rock was fired over a 100 times even though it was badly damaged and also 17th Century cannon were often used without ammunition as salutes or warnings. William of Orange's invasion fleet of over 500 ships had to be drawn up at very short notice at a time of war with France so perhaps one of his less important frigates had in any case to make do with sub-standard armament, as they were fast and expendable but not expected to be in the front line. There are therefore many possible explanations for the variety and condition of the cannon identified on the Gun Rock Shipwreck site.

We know also from the artists sketches that Staple Island or Pinnacle Island as it was then known had a manned lighthouse together with occupied farmhouse from the early 18th Century. Also throughout the early decades Holy Island had a garrison stationed to guard against Jacobite activity, most prominent being the 1708, 1715 & 1745 rebellions involving French naval support off this coast, so it would have been highly unlikely for any vessel capable of carrying over twenty cannon to sink on Gun Rock unobserved during this period.

The main questions perhaps are how reliable a source is Herman Moll, and why his chart has not previously been discussed in the many books, articles and reports on the Gun Rock shipwreck. Moll was acknowledged as the greatest cartographer of his age and it is pertinent that his "*Holy Island, Fairn Islands and STAIPLES*" was included as the ninth in a set of "*fifty new and correct maps of the counties of England and Wales*". This meant it was included between Hampshire and Berkshire under the title Isle of Wight, in doing so eluding the attention of researchers looking for Northumberland records. It is also likely to be one of the first charts drawn up in the set, probably a few years before the 1724 publication date for the atlas, so very close to the Wessex Archaeology date of sinking.

Addendum August 2018

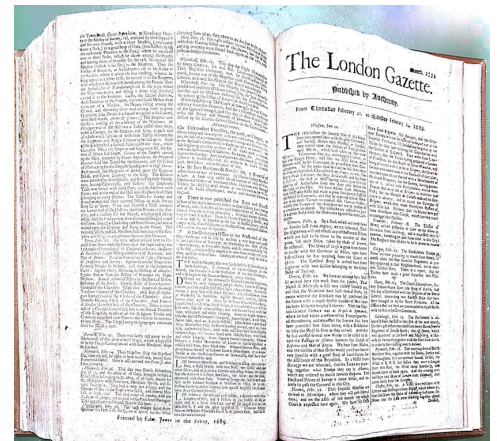
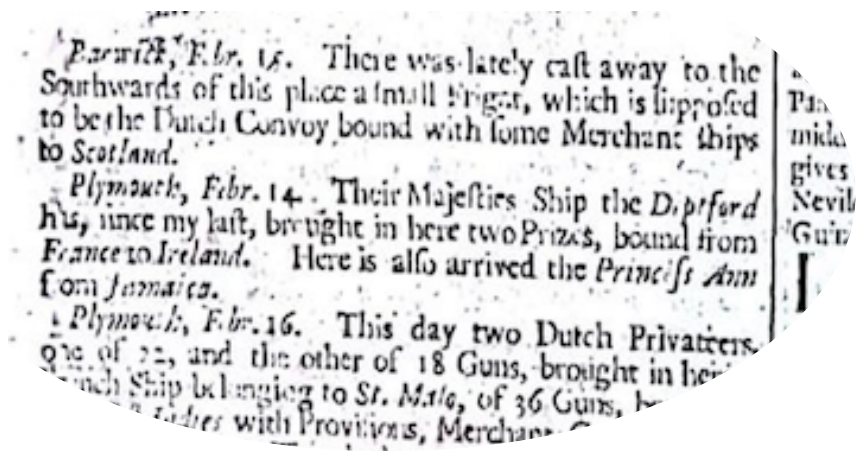
It was a possibility that Moll invented the name Grimstone to describe the shipwreck reef but another chart (dated 1794) has now turned up in the National Archives also showing the name Grimstone in the same position. Both this “hydrographical survey” and Moll’s 1724 map were semi- official London charts differing therefore from maps produced locally by Sharpe in 1778 and Frazer in 1789 who labelled the reef Gun Rock, presumably the term used by local mariners who kept the memory of the shipwreck alive.



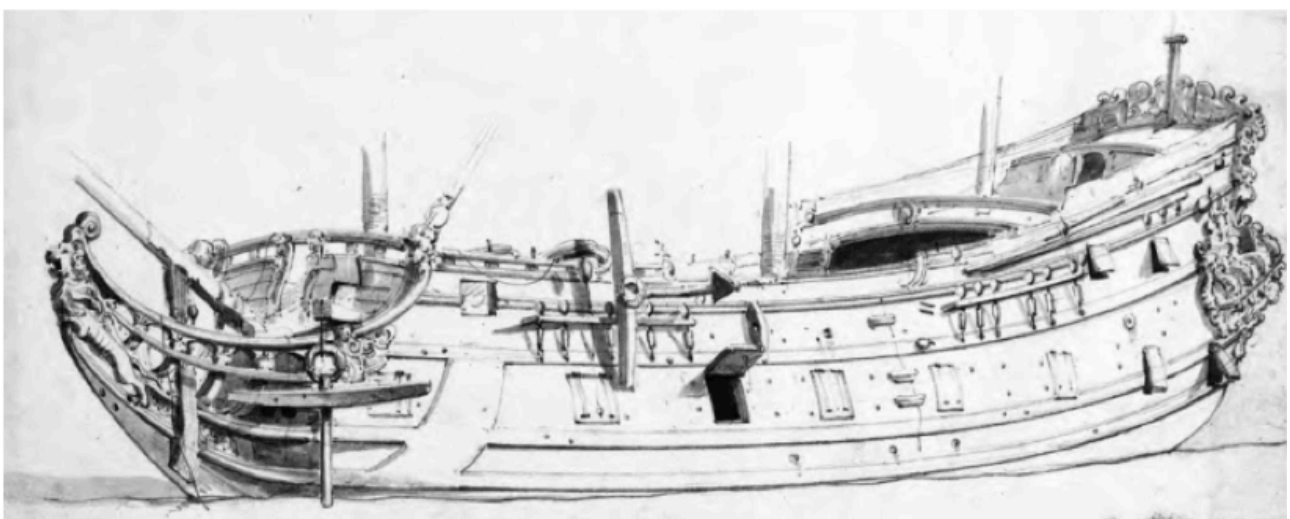
A check was made on a separate (original paper) version of the 1689 London Gazette at the National Archives which was far more legible and confirmed the previous interpretation. This inspection made very obvious that the February 1689 entry was published after the April to December 1689 entries because in the 17th Century the

authoritative London Gazette records of 1689 conformed to the *Old Style* of the Julian calendar whereby the 25th March marked the beginning of the year so the Dutch Invasion, usurping of James II and coronation of William & Mary must have all occurred over a year prior to the shipwreck. The 1689 London Gazette extracts have therefore been re-ordered. There had been concern that the “almost illegible entry of great relevance” might have misinterpreted the following extract because it had been taken from a poor online digitised copy. It was confirmed that the damaged copy did indeed refer to a Frigate but the word “separated” has been corrected to “supposed” and it is now understood that the word Convoy refers to the lead or protecting ship rather than a group of ships sailing together.

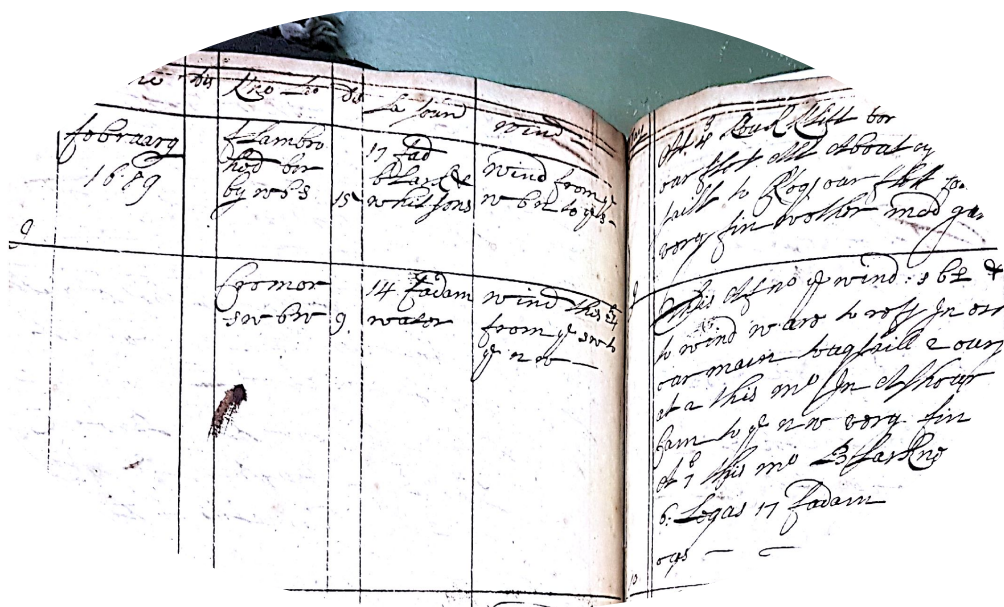
Berwick Febr 15. There was lately cast away to the Southward of this place a small Frigate which was supposed to be the Dutch Convoy bound with some Merchant Ships to Scotland



The consequence now is that the Dutch Records of their frigates who disappear from history in 1689 can now be considered because the Gun Rock shipwreck occurred at the end of the year 1689 rather than the beginning. There are now three named Dutch frigates which took part in the 1688 invasion whose fate is unknown after the year 1689. Dutch artists of this period produced many images of their frigates which were often to a standard pattern like this of one built in 1666. (probably with 22 gunports incl 2 at rear)



Other records exist which may reveal more. There are copious details for instance from contemporary British vessels like the Frigate Nonsuch which in January 1689 seems to have shared convoy duties alongside our Dutch frigate.



The local Parish records also give us a few tantalising clues. The 1689 burial records do actually hint at a shipwreck with the body of Joan Cornelison, a dutch seaman being buried in early spring belonging to ("Cutan or Cusan") maybe referring to his ship. Also there are also at least 4 "souldiers" buried that year 3 of whom may have been stranded survivors as they were unnamed whereas the local garrison soldiers must surely have been known by name.

There could be records relating to the many Scottish passengers reported by Moll to have lost their lives on the Frigate so research is ongoing. (anyone who can add to this please email me at joe.mallon@btinternet.com)

J Mallon August 2018