

Wrecked ship's cargo is

New chapter in the 75-year-old story of Deerness's 'Tennessee teak'

By Craig Taylor

Through history, we Orcadians, like many other island dwelling inhabitants of the world, have made use of items which have landed upon our shores — either through good luck, bad luck or a series of unfortunate events.

There are tales of enterprising islanders around the globe making use of all sorts of items, often put to use in places they were never originally destined to be.

Some of these "treasures" were washed ashore from faraway lands, others transported by ships, which met an unfortunate end on rocky shores nearby.

That trend continues even today in these most modern of times as, in Deerness, wood from a 75-year-old shipwreck is transformed using a computerised tool into items of beauty.

Dockers working in the heat of a bustling port, most probably in Burma, never would have thought that the load of prized teak with which they were filling the cargo hold of the Norwegian cargo ship *Tennessee*, would end up in windswept Orkney, after the ship was

wrecked off the coast of Deerness in May 1940.

The *Tennessee*, carrying 7,900 tons of general cargo, ran aground in Roana Bay after a collision, in thick fog, while en route from India and Burma to Norway and Sweden.

According to records, the ship had arrived in Torshavn on April 11, 1940, two days after Norway was invaded by the Germans.

She had initially been bound for Oslo, but was diverted to Leith.

From Torshavn, she proceeded to Kirkwall, remaining there for several weeks, reportedly to have her cargo cleared by what was known as Contraband Control.

However, the *Tennessee* ran aground on May 25, 1940, while returning to Kirkwall after a collision with the British ship *Baron Fairlie*.

She had left Kirkwall that same morning, in convoy with seven other ships, *Tennessee* being the leading vessel.

Shortly after departure, heavy fog set in and her speed was reduced.

According to Admiralty instructions, the convoy was to stay together then split up into two columns.



Linsey Drever in the former Coastguard look-out building in her garden, at Howes in Deerness. She is sitting in a chair which came off the wreck of the *Tennessee*, and holding a Coastguard log which records the grounding and salvage attempt of the ship.

(Craig Taylor)

However, just before they were about to alter course at 1.05pm, the crew of the *Tennessee* suddenly spotted a vessel on their port side, about 40 degrees forward of abeam, crossing their course about 50 metres away.

Baron Fairlie's assigned station had been at the very rear of the convoy, but, for reasons unknown, she had passed all the other ships in the column.

The *Tennessee's* attempts at avoiding the *Baron Fairlie* failed, and the British ship ran into her about three minutes later, striking her on the port side, near the bridge.

Records say: "This resulted in a 3' x 6' hole near the 'tweendeck on the port side

and forward of Hold No. 3, which immediately started to flood, while *Tennessee* was listing heavily to port."

An attempt was made to return to Kirkwall, but, at 2.40pm, she ran aground in Roana Bay, on the east side of Deerness, and was unable to refloat herself.

According to Linsey Drever from Howes, Deerness, who is fascinated by the stories of the shipwrecks around the parish, Coastguard "watchers", in the look-out hut, which is still in her garden, did not know of the wreck because of the fog.

A young local girl, Aggie Hepburn, ran to tell them, having seen the masts sticking out from across the land.

At first, Coastguards were reluctant to believe young Aggie, as there had been no distress signals.

Linsey explained that her grandfather, Magnus Wylie, was one of the watchers — part of a team which would record shipping and aircraft movements from the viewpoint, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

She has copies of various Coastguard logs, and other records, which detail the salvage efforts following the grounding.

She has also researched the story which tells how tons and tons of cargo were at first simply thrown overboard in an initial attempt to refloat the stricken ship.

Despite the seriousness of the accident, there was no loss of life. Only one crewman required hospital treatment, for an eye injury caused by a piece of steel.

Fishing vessels, and later tugs, were used in the salvage attempt.

These included the tugs *Imperious*, *Charing Cross* and *Brigand*, which tried to get the *Tennessee* off the ground, but she would not budge.

26th May 1940. 06.00 - 12.00 5 hrs watch
 1 Coasting Vessel probably 33 AMEL visibility 3/4
 bearing 0.45° 3 1/2 mts 330°
 3 BAP fighter planes passed 3 flying F
 3 Coasting Vessels British 0.80° 3 3 1/2°
 1 " " 0.85° 3 3 1/2°
 55 MV "Tennessee" throwing cargo out
 of fore hold
 1 fishing trawler British 0.40° 3 165°
 1 Coasting Vessel " 0.45° 4 300°
 3 BAP planes "Gladstone" circled SE west S
 Wind S Force 4 Visibility 3-4 mts
 James Foubister

Wind S.E. Force 4. Visibility 7 miles 10.00
 3rd July 1940. 22.00 - 02.00 4.00 hrs Watch
 Had an enquiry from C. J. Kirkwall about a light
 showing on board wrecked vessel *Tennessee*
 reported by Copinsey Lookout. As no light was
 visible from here I phoned up Copinsey Lookout who
 informed me that it was an electric light
 on the wreck and was lit for about an hour
 but was out now. Reported information to C. J. Kirkwall.
 Received further information regarding the above
 light from Wm. Tompson, who had come to the shore
 and seen a flare light burning on the wreck and
 drifting about with the tide. Someone working on board
 the *Tennessee* had set it going and thrown it into the
 sea. This report was also confirmed by James Dickson
 reported this information to C. J. Kirkwall at 10.30
 Wind light & variable. Visibility on full moon

Coastguard logs recording the fate of the *Tennessee*.

Two divers were sent down to investigate, and found the vessel's bow to be well grounded.

Over the ensuing days, as more and more of the cargo was removed from the *Tennessee's* holds in an attempt to lighten the ship, further attempts were made to pull her free — but to no avail.

Despite pumps being in continuous use, there was no

keeping back the water, and the ship was declared a total loss, with the area where she grounded known locally as "Tammy Tiffy" rocks.

Despite being declared a total loss, much of her cargo was salvaged as well as the load of teak — it also included monkey nuts, soya beans and cases of tea.

As often happened with shipwrecks, various other items, such as



The *Tennessee* aground off Deerness in 1940.

