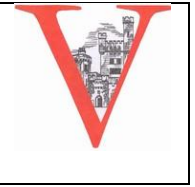




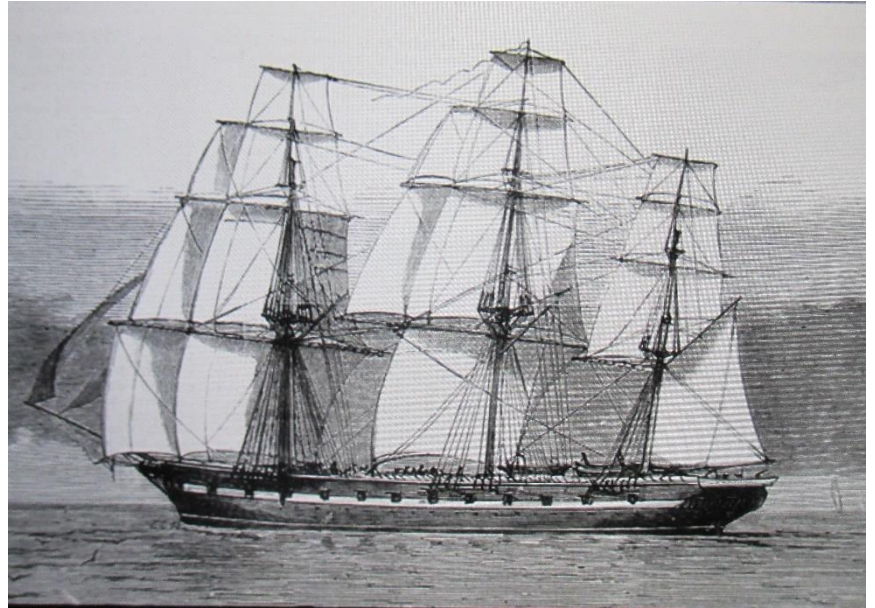
VENTNOR & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY



Shipwrecks 1: HMS Eurydice

Sunday 24th March 1878, in Ventnor was a bright day, although cold and breezy. By early afternoon the Esplanade and the nearby cliffs were busy with visitors and residents taking in the early spring sunshine. Around three o'clock. Some of them caught sight of a fine sailing ship off St. Catherine's Point. She was bearing east under full sail, her captain plainly intent on arriving in port before nightfall. By half past three, the crowds at Ventnor had a clear view of the vessel as she skirted the bay, her white canvas and black and white hull forming an arresting picture. From her mizzen mast, a white ensign declared that she was a government ship, namely the wooden sailing frigate, *Eurydice*, recently fitted out for the training of ordinary seamen. She had just spent the winter cruising the West Indies and, with a complement of over 350 men and officers, was making for Portsmouth.

As the frigate bore east off Bonchurch in the strong northwesterly breeze, the crowds at Ventnor began rushing for shelter as a mass of dark clouds appeared above the downs, followed by gale force winds and driving snow. The storm lasted little more than half an hour, clearing almost as quickly as it had begun. When those who had been on the cliffs looked again for the frigate, no trace could be seen. On Ventnor beach, it was later observed that a small schooner out at sea was signalling for assistance and a rowing boat was despatched in response. It was then discovered that the frigate had capsized in the sudden storm and just five men had been picked up. The boatmen returned to shore to get medical help and Drs Moreton and Williamson were taken out to the schooner. Two men were alive but the remaining three were pronounced dead, despite repeated efforts at revival. One of the dead was the first lieutenant, the only officer to survive the actual capsizing. The lieutenant had succumbed to prolonged exposure in the bitterly cold sea.



The country at large was deeply shocked as the news of the loss of the ship spread. The *Times* on 26th March 1878 remarked that the catastrophe baffled conjecture as to its causes. The worst of it was that the seamen were nearly all young, scarcely more than boys. The *Eurydice* had been built in 1843, a wooden sailing ship of 921 tons, reckoned then to have been among the fastest and smartest 26-gun frigates in the Navy. In 1877, she was converted to a training ship at John White's yard in Cowes and completed for sea at Portsmouth Dockyard later that same year, before sailing for the West Indies on 13th November.

After the testimony of the two survivors had been gathered and after the wreck of the vessel had been located some two and three quarter miles ENE of Dunnose, the masts visible above the water, the possible reasons for the capsizing slowly became clear. Before reaching the sea area off Dunnose the vessel had been in comparatively smooth water, the high downs affording shelter from the northwest winds. Two men walking the cliffs between Shanklin and Sandown recalled seeing her 'bowling along', under full sail, at nine or nine and a half knots. Just beyond the Head, though, a blinding snowstorm seems to have rushed in from the high ground above Luccombe, the strength of the wind forcing the frigate off its northeasterly bearing. Steps were immediately taken to shorten her sail, but the vessel began heeling fast, with water running over the starboard side, washing away the onboard cutter. Then she began to capsize to starboard, hastened by the fact of the ports being open, allowing water to rush in below decks. So quickly did this all happen that most of the men on board were trapped and drowned in the hull, even though the frigate actually righted itself before it struck the sea floor. The Admiralty took immediate steps to try to recover the wreck and search for bodies, but it proved a tortuous process. Not until early September was the frigate floated into Portsmouth where she was later broken up.

An inquest for the three dead seamen rescued was held in the coffee room of the Royal Hotel, Ventnor, on 27th March 1878. The Coroner's verdict was that their deaths were all accidental, no blame being attached to the captain, officers or men. A young Winston Churchill recorded the tragedy in the memoir of his childhood days. He had been living in Ventnor aged about four and saw the ship pass the one day and another day saw only its masts protruding from the water.

Michael Freeman, [Ventnor & District Local History Society](#). This account draws heavily on the many reports in the *Times* newspaper, the majority of which have been separately transcribed and posted online.