

Shipwrecks 2: The Clarendon

The *Clarendon* was a West Indiaman, a 345-ton wooden sailing ship that was caught in a fierce storm and driven ashore below Blackgang Chine around dawn on 11th October 1836. She hit the beach broadside and was then pounded by mountainous waves that caused her to break up within a very short time. The eleven passengers aboard all perished and only three members of the seventeen-man crew survived. The terrible disaster prompted the building of the lighthouse on St. Catherine's Point, its burners first illuminated on 25th March 1840.

The ship had sailed from Basseterre Roads, St. Kitts and Nevis, in the West Indies, on 27th August 1836, laden with rum, sugar, molasses, coconuts and live turtles. The voyage had been largely uneventful until they entered the English Channel where they experienced several days of strong winds and rain. The wind then moderated for a time, but off Portland they were caught in an intense storm direct from the south-west that drove the ship towards the Island. The crew lost their bearings during the night and were caught in the current that sets in from the Needles around Brightstone, Brook and Chale Bays. During the storm, the ship's cargo shifted such that they could carry canvas only on one tack. It was as dawn began to break that the crew realised they were landlocked in a deep bay. They immediately crowded on all the canvas they could, but the shifted cargo had caused the ship to heel and prevented the vessel from getting sufficiently to windward. By this time, small groups of locals had begun assembling on the beach at the base of the cliffs at Blackgang. The ship had been spotted in difficulty off Atherfield and a few people had followed its progress along the coast. In very stormy weather, it was commonplace for inhabitants to venture to the cliffs or down to the shore in case there were vessels in distress. Some locals looked to cargo that might be washed ashore and to scavenge the remains of foundered vessels. Others, especially the seafaring men, looked to saving lives.

As the *Clarendon* was driven closer to the shingle shore, most of the crew and passengers were seen to be assembled on the after deck. According to one of the survivors, it had been agreed that, as soon as the ship struck the beach, each man would try to save a woman. The idea was to jump overboard on the crest of the first wave in the hope that it might carry them the short distance to the shore. In the event, the women were too terrified to jump and one of the crew, William Byrne, jumped alone, eventually ending up deposited high and dry on the beach. Meanwhile, some of the fishermen on the shore had found a rope in a nearby boathouse and one among them, John Wheeler, having tied one end around his chest and passed the other to willing hands on the beach, began wading deep into the surf to try to rescue the souls who had by now all been swept off the ship. He managed to save two crew members but could do no more, for by then the seething cauldron of the sea was strewn with debris from the wreck. To have ventured into the water again would have meant certain death.



It was at this point that Mark Norman, Ventnor's prolific diarist (see SWC Thursday 12th March 2015), arrived on the scene. He had heard of the wreck after staying overnight at a friend's cottage near Wroxall and the horror of the scene remained etched in his mind for the remainder of his life. A frothy mist partially obscured the atmosphere, but there was no mistaking the huge perpendicular waves that were forming abreast of the heavy backwash, then curling over, before breaking like thunder and sweeping up the beach right to the base of the cliffs, causing onlookers to run for their lives. He observed a number of dead turtles that had apparently bled to death from wounds inflicted by the broken timbers of the wreck. Soon dead bodies were being deposited on the beach. Norman was dismayed at the behaviour of some of the onlookers who appeared just to stare at the corpses. With the help of others, he conveyed several to the boathouse, by then in use as a temporary morgue. One body was that of a young woman bereft of most of her clothing. Norman asked some of the women onlookers to lend an item of clothing to cover her before she was moved. He was disgusted that none was willing and removed his neckerchief and pocket handkerchief to improvise. The body was almost certainly that of Caroline Shore, eighteen years old. She was travelling home with her parents and three other siblings (among them a nine-month old infant) to stay with an uncle in Newport. The family was interred in the cemetery there: together in death, so Norman remarked. However, the infant child, sadly, was never found. One of the surviving crew members poignantly recalled how Caroline and one of her sisters had been in their cabin playing the piano and singing the previous night, all 'as glad as could be'.

For months after the disaster, debris from the wrecked ship littered the shore around and some of the larger oak timbers were used in buildings, including the inn at Chale which was subsequently renamed the *Clarendon*.

Michael Freeman, [Ventnor & District Local History Society](#). Source: this account draws from the manuscript diary of Mark Norman, in the possession of the Society.