

Shipwrecks 3: The Underley

The fully rigged iron clipper *Underley* was en route from London to Melbourne when she went aground near the foot of Luccombe Chine in the small hours of 26th September 1871 in an easterly gale. She was steering west by north at the time and making around 11 knots under plain sail when the Pilot on board observed what he thought was a bank of cloud ahead and ordered the fore royals to be closed up in anticipation of a change in the wind direction. However, it was not cloud that lay ahead but the cliffs at Luccombe and the vessel struck hard in an area of sand on what was otherwise a rocky shore known as Yellow Ledge. The crew were immediately ordered to furl the canvas, but before long the ship had slewed round broadside on and got her stern fixed on the rocks. Distress rockets were fired and the Shanklin and Ventnor coastguards were on the scene by daybreak. The ship's captain requested that they telegraph Portsmouth Dockyard for government tugs and the *Medusa* and *Grinder* duly arrived by mid-morning and attached a hawser to the stricken vessel. However, the *Underley* was stuck so fast that the hawser eventually broke. A new hawser was fetched later in the day and another attempt made to refloat her at high water. This, too, failed. In the meantime, the 29 passengers on board, all emigrants to Australia, were taken off on one of the tugs and conveyed to Portsmouth. The crew remained in the hope that the vessel might be saved.

The following night, another gale blew up and seas began breaking over the ship as she lay broadside on. By dawn on the 27th September the *Underley* was waterlogged and had started sustaining significant damage to her hull plates. The Captain then decided it was time to abandon ship and a number of the crew, at some risk to their lives, eventually got ashore in one of the ship's boats. Another crew member then volunteered to swim ashore with a thick rope and, in due course, a stout hawser was put in place between ship and shore enabling the remainder of the crew to be rescued. Unfortunately, one among them, the 25-year old steward, was washed into the sea at the last minute and, although wearing a life jacket and reputed to be a strong swimmer, drowned before reaching the shore. The crew members were taken to East Dene at Bonchurch where they were cared for by John Snowden Henry and his wife. Mrs Snowden Henry welcomed the men on the shore at Luccombe and reputedly gave each a tumbler of port and brandy.

The *Underley* was a fine ship, just six years old when she foundered. Built in 1866 by the Lune Shipping Company at Lancaster, she was fitted out with highly appointed passenger cabins and had holds over twenty feet deep for cargo. At 1292 gross registered tons, she was heavier than the famous clipper *Cutty Sark* at 963 tons (built 1869), but much shorter at 225 feet. Unlike the *Cutty Sark* which was a composite ship, the *Underley* was built of iron, even her masts. At the time she grounded, she had in her holds 200 tons of iron, 25 tons of gunpowder, several tons of nitroglycerin and carbolic acid, plus a variety of general cargo.



By 28th September, the ship was in the hands of the Underwriters and salvaging began under the direction of Dabells of Blackgang. When sea conditions permitted, lighters were moored alongside, water was pumped out and, with the further assistance of divers, most of the cargo was removed. Some livestock, including pigs and sheep, were successfully brought ashore. Ducks were left to swim, but the chickens and canaries on board were all found drowned. Passenger luggage was recovered, as were some of the crew's possessions. The next step was to try to salvage the ship itself. Breaches in the hull were patched and additional pumps installed to lighten the vessel sufficiently to enable her to be safely refloated and towed to port. However, the weather yet again intervened and one night the *Underley* was driven further on to the rocks and broke in two. She had become a total loss. Today, remnants of some of the heavily rusted iron frames and plates remain in twenty feet of water quite close to Luccombe beach. The cause of the disaster was established as basic human navigational error. From the Owers Light off Selsey Bill, the course set by the Pilot could do nothing other than land the ship on the Island's coast.