

Maritime Rescue Institute
Coastal Notes – 23 January 2007

This week's pictures of the beachcombers at Branscombe beach in Devon following the grounding of the container ship MSC Napoli show an exaggerated version of a tradition that has been ongoing for centuries. Salvaging goods washed up from the sea has long been seen as a welcome addition to often poverty stricken lives. It's claimed that in some parts of the coastline, lights were deliberately set so as to decoy ships ashore to ensure a profitable shipwreck. They didn't wish the sailors any harm, they just wanted the cargo.

This practice died out with the introduction of lighthouses and the Coastguard service. There were too many eyes and ears on the coast to allow such unlawful activities. Of course, wreckage still appeared on beaches, and it was often a race against time for the local populace to spirit away as much as they could before the arrival of the authorities. Perhaps the most famous is the whisky laden ship, the Politician, immortalised by Compton MacKenzie in Whisky Galore, when the islanders used every means at their disposal to secure their share of the bounty that had been delivered right on to their doorstep. The Receiver of Wreck had a hard time getting any co-operation to carry out his duty. What's less well known though, is that some of those who were found to have unlawful possession of the whisky actually were arrested, tried and jailed for failing to declare their find.

The law takes the view that all goods washed up on a beach belong to someone. All such goods should be reported to the Receiver of Wreck who will try to find the rightful owner. Wreck is defined in section 255 of the Merchant Shipping Act 1005 as including 'flotsam, jetsam, lagan and derelict found in or on the shores of any tidal water'. The duty of the Receiver of Wreck is to give legal owners the opportunity of recovering their property, and to ensure that a salvage award is paid to the legal salvor, when due. The Receiver of Wreck will recover any costs incurred from the public purse.

On recovering wreck material, the finder should declare it promptly (where possible within 28 days) to the Receiver of Wreck giving a description of the wreck and will usually be asked to hold it to the Receiver's order. A salvor acting properly under the law is entitled to a salvage award. Finders who do not report their finds are liable to pay a fine of up to £2,500 for each offence, will lose any salvage rights, and have to pay the person entitled to the find twice the value of the find. Finders who do not report their finds may be prosecuted, and those who are found guilty will then have a criminal record. It could be a high price to pay for some 'free' nappies.

One other aspect of this event is that by opening the containers and spilling the contents to the four winds, the beachcombers have made the clean up operation so much more difficult: unwanted or unusable goods now litter the beach and will have to be cleared manually.

MRI has 3 fundraising events coming up soon. The first, on February 11th at Aberdeen Football Club sees Charlotte Keating showing her Indulgence collection on the catwalk pre London Fashion week. Items will be available to purchase or order post show. The following Saturday, 3 of our youngest volunteers are going to jump out of a plane at 10,000 feet just to raise money for us. That's got to be worth a sponsor! Then in March Ann Williamson will undertake a Himalayan trek on behalf of MRI. Ann did a High Atlas trek in 2005 raising well over £1,000 so again well worth sponsoring. She funds these expeditions out of her own pocket, meaning every penny of sponsorship ends up here in Stonehaven.

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For further information or to get involved with MRI as a volunteer, please contact 01569 765768 or email hamish.mcdonald@btconnect.com.