

## Quest for the Wreck of the First Rate *Victory*: From Salvage to Science

Sean A. Kingsley

*Wreck Watch Int., London, UK*

For here, when the night soars round, and under  
The white sea lightens and leaps like fire  
Acclaimed of storm and applauded in thunder,  
Sits Death on the throne of his crowned desire...  
Of the iron of doom are the Casquets carven,  
That never the rivets thereof shall burst...

*Les Casquets by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1884)*

The loss in October 1744 of the First Rate flagship the *Victory* gave birth to one of the most enduring mysteries in British maritime history: how could the greatest warship of the Early Georgian age of sail, manned by up to 1,100 people and armed with 100 bronze guns, simply vanish? Reports of extensive wreckage washed onto the Channel Islands confirmed by an Admiralty search and rescue mission, inspired a conviction that the *Victory* collided with the black rocks of the Caskets and was lost off Alderney. An enquiry held by Trinity House subsequently investigated claims that the keeper of the Casket lighthouse failed to keep its lights burning and was the main cause of the flagship's loss. This paper presents the historical evidence underlying the myth of the Caskets sinking and the testimony for the alleged inattentiveness of the lighthouse keeper. Odyssey Marine Exploration's discovery of the physical wreck in April 2008, 100km west of Alderney, finally resolved the mystery and revealed the Caskets theory to have been based on a chain of incorrect presumptions.

© Odyssey Marine Exploration, 2015

### 1. Introduction

On 12 October 1744 the waters of Spithead were strewn with battered warships relieved to have arrived safely home. Following a cruise to Lisbon and southwards to the Straits of Gibraltar, the fleet of Sir John Balchen, Admiral of the White, was caught homeward bound in a ferocious storm in the western English Channel.<sup>1</sup> All but one of the 17 English and eight Dutch warships that originally left Spithead with Balchen on 25 July 1744 (Richmond, 1920: 106) limped back to port. Only the flagship *Victory* failed to materialize beyond the horizon, the 100-gun First Rate pride of the navy and greatest warship of the Early Georgian age of sail. Despite the Admiralty dispatching ships in quest of Sir John's flagship, and many modern attempts to locate her, the *Victory* simply vanished for 264 years until Odyssey Marine Exploration discovered her wreck in April 2008 (Cunningham Dobson and Kingsley 2010).

This paper examines the contemporary historical sources describing the Admiralty's official position about the fate of the *Victory* based on wreckage washed onto the Channel Islands and a search and rescue mission. The results of a formal enquiry convened by Trinity House, at the behest

of the Admiralty, into whether the lighthouse keeper failed to keep the Caskets Light burning on the night of 3-4 October 1744, directly causing the flagship's destruction, are presented. Ultimately, only Odyssey's physical discovery of the wreckage in 2008, over 100km west of Alderney, revealed the unexpected truth about the *Victory*'s fate.

The final naval actions of the *Victory* before heading home to southern England are relatively well chronicled. The navy had dispatched the flagship to disperse the French squadron blockading the entrance to Lisbon and liberate a convoy desperately needed by Admiral Matthews in the Mediterranean. Sir John successfully scattered the enemy, freed the merchantmen and escorted them to Gibraltar. The squadron captured several French privateers and was instructed to intercept the homeward bound Spanish fleet of Admiral de Torres, which was protecting great treasure returning from Havana. Accompanied by 12 English and seven Dutch warships, the *Victory* was charged primarily, however, with pursuing the Brest fleet and by 9 September Sir John had taken up station to blockade Cadiz and await the French and Spanish forces anticipated from the west (Richmond, 1920: 111-12; Harding, 2010: 108, 209).



Fig. 1. 'The Loss of the Victory, 4 October 1744' by Peter Monamy. Photo: courtesy of Richard Keen.

The decision of Balchen's fleet to return to England was influenced by several inter-locking factors that came to a head in a Council of War convened on the *Victory* off Cape St Vincent, southwest Portugal, on 9 September 1744. The council consisted of Admiral Sir John Balchen, Admiral of the White and Commander in Chief, James Steuart, Vice Admiral of the Red, William Martin, Vice Admiral of the Blue, and Captains Henry Osborne, Thomas Smith, Thomas Griffin and Samuel Faulknor (ADM 1/909). The squadron had been waiting a week at this location for Captain Saunders in the *Saphire* with the storeships, victuallers and trade bound for the Mediterranean, which was confined to Oporto due to the French presence off Cape Roxent. Meanwhile, Admiral Balchen's entire squadron was running low on water, a concern compounded by the condemnation of a great quantity of beer, "Stinking, not fit to drink, and thrown overboard". Some 32 butts of the *Duke's* beer was condemned on 26 August (ADM 51/282).

On the same day as the British Council of War, Admiral Graves advised that his Dutch warships were low on water and provisions. As a consequence, the Dutch had separately decided at their own Council of War to part company with Balchen. The French naval chain formed from the Straits of Gibraltar to the English Channel was an increasing threat (Richmond, 1920: 109). Letters from Gibraltar described 14 French warships of 60 to 74 guns in Cadiz and six more

cruizing. The British Council of War unanimously resolved to proceed off Cape Spartel and escort Captain Osborne in the *Princess Caroline* with his squadron of warships, storeships, victuallers and trade now with Balchen's fleet into the "Gut of Gibraltar", to advise the *Saphire* by letter to wait in Lisbon for further orders, to redistribute provisions to the Dutch and "then to proceed to England with the utmost expedition" (ADM 1/909). The anticipation of potential bad weather was a probable further concern for Balchen. As Sir Cloudesley Shovell allegedly declared, cited after his death in 1707 in a letter from Horace Walpole to George Montagu on 14 January 1760, "an admiral would deserve to be broke, who kept great ships out after the end of September, and to be shot if after October" (Walpole, 1837: 4). The combined fleet finally left Spartel on 14 September (Richmond, 1920: 112).

The illness of the Dutch crew may have been an additional contributing factor that limited Balchen's fighting force. On 6 September 1744, sickness onboard the *Damiaten*, *Edam* and *Assendelft* warships was considered so acute that they were sent at full speed under Commander Schryver into port to seek medical help. By 10 September 100 men on the *Damiaten* were sick with fever of whom 36 died. Struck low, "The small compliment considered, and the small number of able sailors on board, it was impossible to navigate the Ships, and much less for their being of service in annoying the Enemy... the sickness proved of a more dangerous and infectious nature than imagined" (ADM 1/3242). The Dutch ships were still laid low in Lisbon on 20 October. Within a week of Balchen's squadron safely reaching Spithead, the Lords of the Admiralty ordered Admiral Steuart on 11 October "to be supplied with a proper quantity of vinegar to wash their insides, to prevent the increase of sickness in them" (ADM 2/206).

Until the bitter end Admiral Balchen remained resolutely committed to confronting the French threat. Sir John's alleged last words heard in public were reported by *The Penny London Post* on 12-14 November 1744 after he was advised that the rich Acapulco treasure ships convoyed by Admiral Torres were expected off the coast of Spain imminently and would be a huge catch. Despite the lure of gold, reputedly "the gallant old Man answer'd, very briskly, Believe me To-, I had rather fight Six French Men of War than carry Six of the richest Galleons to Britain."

On the morning of 4 October 1744 the eye of a storm swept across the Isles of Scilly and scattered the returning fleet (Fig. 1). Rumor and counter-rumor struck the land as the fleet limped into Spithead and a worrying wait began for the return of the *Victory*. From the safety of the *Duke* off St Helen's on 6 October 1744, Admiral James Steuart, who had accompanied Balchen during his cruize, reported that "Not finding Sir John Balchen here, I conclude he is

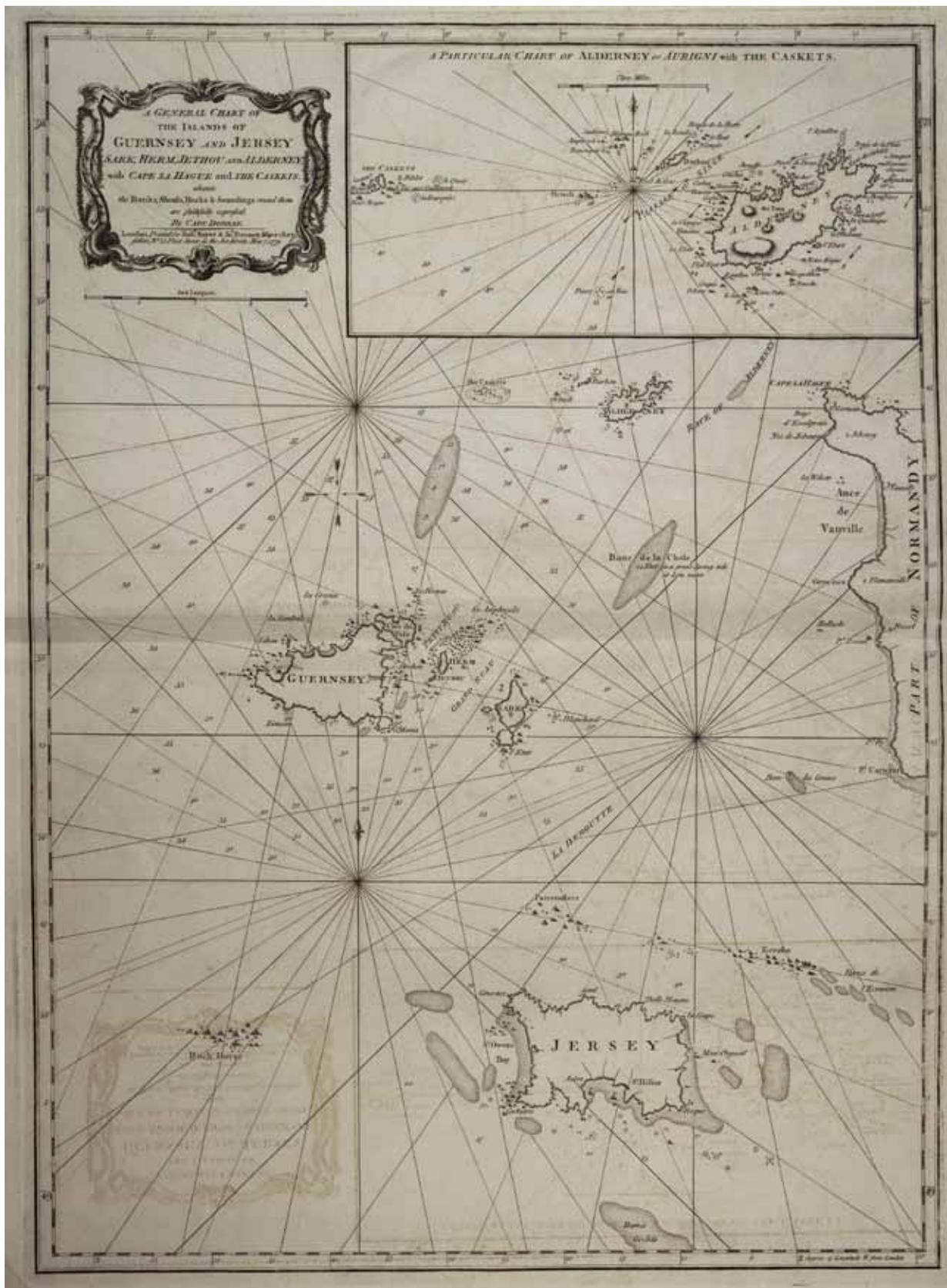


Fig. 2. A General Chart of the Islands of Guernsey and Jersey, Sark, Herm, Jethou and Alderney, 7 May 1779, by John Bennett, Nicholas Dobree and Robert Sayer. Photo: the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London (PBD8506(9)).

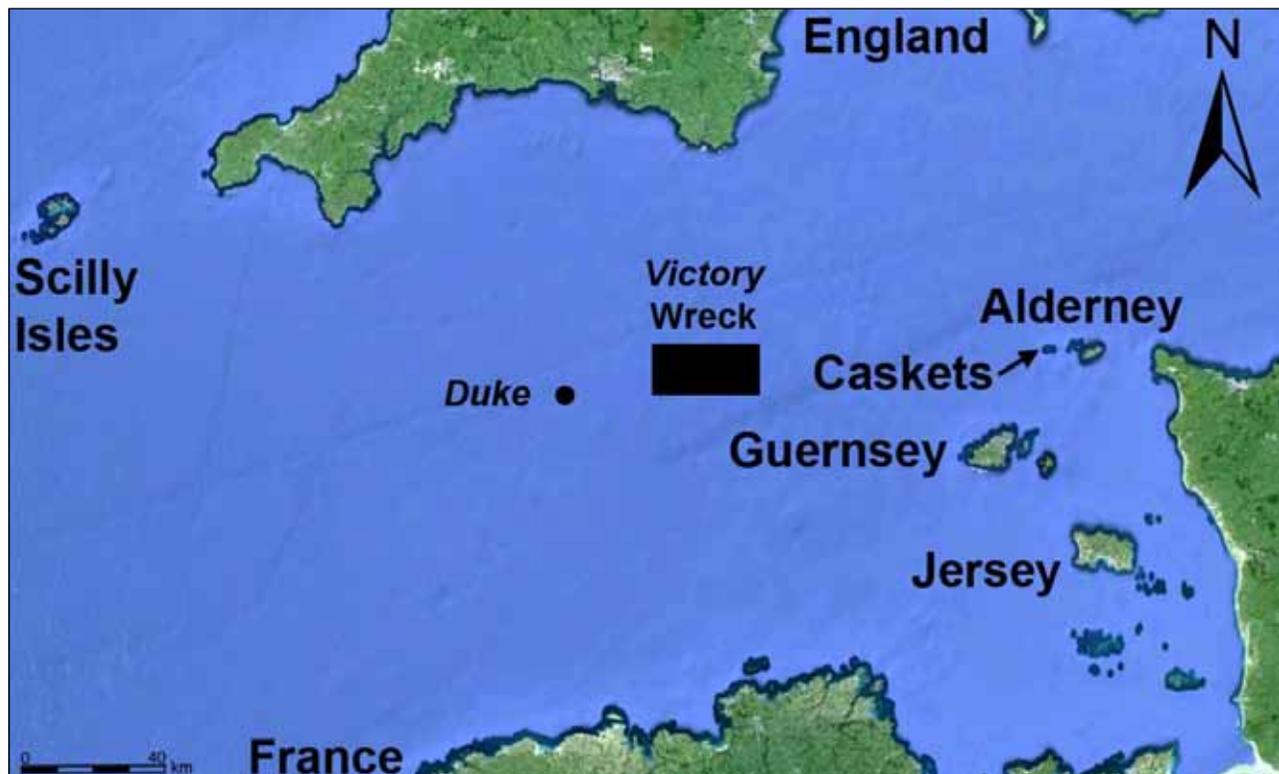


Fig. 3. The western English Channel depicting areas of interest in the sinking of the *Victory*, and showing the very general location of the wreck site.

blown to the Etward of this place, and hope he is got safe under Dungeness, or in the Downs, and will soon get back here" (ADM 1/909). Admiral Graves reached Spithead on 9 October 1744 but without news of Sir John, forcing Steuart to write to the Admiralty suggesting a sloop be sent in search of *Victory* (ADM 1/909).

By 13 October a deflated Steuart informed Thomas Corbett, Secretary to the Admiralty, that "I am under the greatest concern imaginable about Sir John Balchen, not yet having heard any thing of him" (ADM 1/909). As the *Victory* failed to materialize, the newspapers went into overdrive speculating about the whereabouts of Britain's greatest naval deterrent, with *The Daily Advertiser* of 9 October reporting that:

We hear that the Duke, Admiral Steward, and the George, Admiral Martin, are arriv'd at Spithead, from a Cruize off Cape St. Vincent, with the following ships, the Princess Amelia, the Suffolk, the Griffin, the Monmouth, the Prince Frederick, the Exeter, the Augusta, the Princess Mary, the Sunderland, the Aetna and Scipio Fire Ships, the *Fly* Sloop, and the Dutch Vice and Rear Admirals; and that they left Sir John Balchen last Wednesday off Scilly, in a hard Gale of Wind, with several more Men of War; and that Sir John has seen the Transports safe into Gibraltar-Bay.

On 13 October the same newspaper speculated that "It is generally agreed that Sir John Balchen, in the *Victory*, is drove upon the Coast of Ireland." Two days later *The Daily Advertiser* incorrectly proclaimed that "Yesterday, an Express arrived with the Account that Sir John Balchen, in the *Victory*, was arrived at Plymouth, in a shattered Condition." *The Penny London Post* of 12-15 October captured the pervasive national spirit that the "The Pain of the Publick for the Safety of Sir John Balchen in the *Victory* is very much increased, as the Letters from Portsmouth on Saturday bring no Manner of News relating to him."

By 15 October *The Penny London Post* had concluded that "The *Victory* is certainly lost near Guernsey, and every Soul perished... It is also fear'd that the Grampus Sloop of War has shar'd the same Fate, as there is no News of her, and the Time of her Cruizing expired several Days since. Madam Balchen and her Daughters are under great Affliction for the Loss of the Admiral. There was a Man on board the *Victory*, that went to try an artificial or false Horizon to Halley's Quadrant, also three Danish Gentlemen who went with the Admiral for Experience. The Count ---, a Nobleman of Denmark, who is here, was to have gone on board her, had not the Earl of Winchester forgot to give Orders for his Reception on board."

Fresh news reached Poole from Guernsey through Captain Miller of the *John and Mary* that a fore topmast, several long oars marked *Victory*, and a portmanteau full of clothes apparently belonging to Captain Cotterel of Wolfe's Regiment of Marines had been driven ashore on Alderney, indicating that the warship sank with all hands near the island (*Penny London Post*, 17-19 October). A few days later the *Penny London Post* reported on 22-24 October that 971 mariners, including officers and seamen, a great number of marines and about 50 "Gentlemen Volunteers, related to some of the best Families in the Kingdom" were on board the warship when she sank, with the result that "Abundance of Persons, whose Sons or Relations were Officers or Volunteers on board the *Victory*, are going into deep Mourning; and it is impossible to express the Sorrow which appears on every Brow on this melancholy Occasion." The flags of Greenwich Hospital, where Sir John Balchen served as governor, were left unhoisted on Sunday 21 October as a mark of respect for the admiral's demise (*Westminster Journal*, 27 October 1744).

On 5 November *The Daily Gazetteer* reported a new turn of events in the search based on intelligence that "They write from Paris, that they have had an Account from the Coast of Normandy, of a great Wreck coming on Shore there, suppos'd to be of some large Ship lost upon the Caskets; whence it seems highly probable, to be the Remains of the *Victory*." On 5-7 November *The Penny London Post* announced that several bodies had washed up on Alderney. At some time between 10-12 November, Lady Balchen was incorrectly rumored by the same newspaper to have died of grief.

As desperation for news about the whereabouts of the stricken *Victory* escalated, on 31 December 1744 the Lords of the Admiralty decided to "offer a reward of one hundred pounds to any person who shall recover the said wreck" (ADM 2/206/377). On the same day the Navy Board solicited the Lords Commissioners of His Majesty's Treasury "for money to enable you to pay the wages to the companies of his majesty's late ship the *Victory*" (ADM 2/206/279), the outstanding sums to be diverted to the deceased's families.

## 2. The Quest for *Victory*, 1744-1746

The Admiralty acted rapidly to ascertain the *Victory*'s true fate. Seven days after the flagship parted company with the fleet off the Isles of Scilly, Admiral Steuart instructed Captain Grenville of the 50-gun *Falkland* and Captain Lloyd of the somewhat storm-battered *Fly* sloop on 11 October to prepare immediately for a search and rescue mission

(unless stated otherwise, all Admiralty communications in this matter described below derive from ADM 1/909).<sup>2</sup> The sloop was stocked with two months' provisions out of the *Sandwich* for an allowance of 100 men. Grenville's orders were to proceed to Guernsey and the Caskets, and having no intelligence of Sir John Balchen at the Channel Islands to proceed in search of *Victory* to the Owers, Chichester, Dungeness, Dover, the Gunman, Ripraps, the Downes and the Goodwins.

If word was received of *Victory* having passed northwards along the back of the Goodwin, the *Falkland* and *Fly* were ordered to dock at Dover to secure Deal Pilots for their own vessels and the *Victory*. A very good pilot familiar with the coast of France had already been appointed to the *Falkland*. The search and rescue vessels were also informed "to range alongshore from Dungeness to the Southforland, that in case of the *Victory*'s masts going away and she thereupon being under a necessity." Thereafter, and with all else failing, the two ships were to head for France. After being prevented from departing by bad weather, the *Falkland* and *Fly* finally left port on 12 October. The following day Admiral Steuart wrote to the Admiralty that "all the hopes I have left, are that he [Balchen] may have been obliged to cut away his masts and come some where to an anchor."

The worst fears of the navy were realized at the Channel Islands (Figs. 2-3), where Captain Thomas Grenville dispatched the "very melancholy" results of his enquiry to the Admiralty on 18 October 1744 (ADM 1/1830). Grenville met Captain Strahern on Guernsey, the island's commanding officer, and was immediately informed that the tide had thrown several pieces of a wreck onto the island and adjoining Jersey and Alderney, particularly two topmasts and a topsail mast found at three different places in Guernsey. Grenville visited these locations on horseback along with his carpenter to record the dimensions and marks on the wreckage:

upon the west end of Guernzey just opposite the Hanways, a Topmast 71 foot long, and 22 inches Diameter, with VICT [plus the letter 'M' on top of the 'IC'] mark'd upon the heel of it; upon the north part of the island another Topmast 64 foot long and 21 inches Diameter, without any mark at all upon it, and at some distance from thence a Topsail yard 62 foot 8 inches long and 13 inches Diameter with VICT<sup>y</sup> wrote in white painted characters upon the quarter of it. The first of these Topmasts is plainly the *Victory*'s Main Topmast, and I should think a spare one upon her Booms, as there were no signs of Rigging or croplines or sheaves about it; the other, tho not mark'd, is as plainly by the Dimensions her fore Topmast and I believe a spare one for the same reasons as the former. The yard must I think have been her Foretopmast yard as it had sheave holes cut for the Reef Tackles, which it

would not have had, were it a Spritsail or Crossjack yard, tho all three are of the same Dimensions.

Captain Grenville considered the wreckage “certainly strong Evidences of her being lost some where about these Islands”, but while riding found an even stronger indication from a peasant who had just salvaged a carved figure thrown ashore by the tide. Upon learning of this discovery, “we went to his house to look at it, and my Carpenter immediately knew it to be one of the figures placed upon the Pillars that supported the *Victory* Balconies. This figure I bought of the Countryman, and have brought it with me, in order to compare it in the Dock yard here.” Grenville proceeded to describe additional strong circumstances pointing to the loss of the *Victory* on the Channel Islands, including on Jersey the stump of a mast upwards of 3ft in diameter that “must have been the *Victory*’s Main Mast”. The Governor of Alderney wrote a letter describing the discovery on the island of a barge’s oar marked in white lead ‘Vict’ and a portmanteau trunk “full of rich laced cloaths, and several letters in it dated 1742, and directed to Capt Cottrell of Col Wolf’s Regiment of Marines. This Gentleman was Captain of Marines aboard the *Victory*.”

Captain Grenville was forced to conclude that “These circumstances put together amount to so strong a proof that the *Victory* has run upon some Rocks and is entirely beat to pieces, consequently the unfortunate People in her have had little or no chance of saving their lives; I believe not a single life is saved; the Rocks she is supposed at Guernzey to have run upon, are either the Hanways or the Rock Doure: I had thoughts, if the weather had been good enough, to have hired a boat and have examin’d the Hanways very narrowly...”

The *Falkland* was not only responsible for the emergence of the Admiralty’s orthodox position that the *Victory* sank on the Caskets, but also a corresponding causal factor of the sinking. Accordingly, Grenville finished his letter by explain how he had been “informed by ever body at Guernzey, that the Casket Lights are so ill kept at present that several affidavits have been made there before Mr Dobree, Deputy to the High Admiralty Court, by Masters of ships that have frequently passed very near the Casket Rocks without seeing any light and sometimes even made the Rock in the night: it is not impossible that the want of this Light may have been one occasion of the *Victory*’s misfortune”. A scrap of paper affixed to the above letter, based on a memorandum handed to Grenville’s surgeon by a Guernsey man, stated that Captain Millar from Pool “saw the *Victory* as he believ’d Saturday the 5th Inst. at 11 o’clock at night steering S.W.B.S. & heading the Hanways” (ADM 1/1830).



Fig. 4. A mid-19th century engraving of the Caskets Light (from Clarke, 1851).



Fig. 5. The Caskets Lighthouse off Alderney (Illustrated London News, 1868).



Fig. 6. Engraving of the Race of Alderney from the Caskets in the 19th century.



Fig. 7. The royal patent seal of King George I granting Thomas LeCocq of Alderney rights to a lighthouse on the Caskets in 1723 (London Metropolitan Archive MS30071/4).

After the *Falkland* and *Fly* returned to Spithead from Guernsey empty handed, James Steuart wrote to Thomas Corbett on 19 October that he was satisfied “By what I can learn, I judge he [Admiral Balchen] must have been lost upon the Roach Doure, rocks to the westward of Jersey. Before Sir John Balchen sailed from Spithead, he took on board the *Victory* from the Sandwich an hundred of the choicest seamen I had in that ship, as lent by his order; so that she must have had at least 950 men on board, and as good seamen as any in Britain.” The *Daily Gazetteer* summarized the *Falkland*’s enquiries on 22 October, adding that “likewise had Intelligence from People belonging to Guernsey and Alderney, that they heard, at the Time she [*Victory*] was Supposed to be in Distress, upwards of a Hundred Guns fired.” The latter detail was not included in Captain Grenville’s official letter to the Admiralty and must be considered little more than hearsay.

At much the same time onboard the *Princess Royal* in Portsmouth harbor, Admiral Steuart received independent reports of wreckage landed around the Channel Islands. Steuart wrote to the Admiralty on 18 October about his extreme concern derived from a piece of news arrived from Southampton with Mr Lock of the *Builder’s Assistant*, “who reported that a lobster vessel arrived at Hamble, in that neighbourhood, Sunday in the afternoon last from Jersey, with an account that an accommodation ladder marked *Victory*, part of a rudder with lbs 500 of iron on it came ashore on that island; two spare topmasts, and a yard, marked *Victory*, at Guernsey and several quoins of guns, a portmanteau with cloathes, barge-oars, and part of a barge near Alderney” (ADM 1/909).

And so a deep-rooted myth was born. *Victory* had fallen foul of the Caskets, a series of large rocky islets 11km west of Alderney and about 1.6km in circumference rising 4-20m above sea level, and sunk man and ship with 100 bronze cannon, a crew of 1,100 people, including 50 volunteers drawn from the most aristocratic families of the land, and one of the most accomplished admirals of the age, the 74 year-old Admiral Sir John Balchen, who had devoted 58 years of service to His Majesty’s navy. No memorial medals were struck, as was common following a notable shipwreck, such as commemorated the sinking of the First Rate *Royal George* at Spithead in 1782. The Admiralty made no public announcements about the tragedy (despite inside Navy bickering that the *Victory* had been badly built and partook of the “general mistake”: Kingsley 2015). The psychological impact of the loss of the *Victory* on Early Georgian Britain must have been acute at a time when a French invasion was feared during the War of the Austrian Succession. With the ultimate naval deterrent lost, every home in England was vulnerable.

The emerging view of the loss of *Victory* on the Caskets was cemented by the accounts of wrecked remains washed onto the Channel Islands reported by Mr Nicholas Dobree Senior, a merchant of Guernsey and the local Navy Board agent. Following a request from the commissioners of the navy, Dobree enquired about anything saved on Guernsey from the *Victory* and reported back on 12 January 1745 (ADM 106/1007/12). Dobree spoke with the governor’s agent on the island about what had been collected in the naval stores, which included a stay sail “saved upon the island of Serck, which by its largeness is supposed to have belonged to the *Victory*”, and concluded that the accident took place “near the Caskets or between the Caskets and Alderney Island, which seems too clear.” An oar was found on Alderney “upon which the *Victory*’s name is mark”, while on 6 October:

a great quantity of small pieces of broken wood fit but for firing, & pieces of sash windows & small gun carriages marked GR, as also Capt. Cotterel's Portmantle were found on shoare upon the Island of Alderney, and several trunks & other light flotting things were seen passing along the shoar that day, & the top of the stern have been found upon the coast of France as I am informed. Whatever was of light flotting was drove by the violence of the wind by the leeward and by consequence came upon Alderney, but what had any hold in the watter must have been drove by the violent tide that runs 6 or 7 knotts about N.E. & S.W. between the Caskets & Alderney, so could not be drove upon Alderney.

Dobree annotated the bottom of the letter with some measurements of the salvaged wreckage, which according to his view included a 74ft-long main topmast, a 64ft fore-top mast and a 64ft yard (ADM 106/1007/12, repeated in ADM 354/128/80).

As the notoriety of the *Victory's* loss reverberated down the halls of the Admiralty, the renowned shipwreck salvor John Lethbridge petitioned the navy on 15 January 1745 to be permitted to search and recover guns from the *Victory* in his diving engine (pers. comm. Trevor Newman, 3 January 2015). Lethbridge advised that he could work at a depth of 10 fathoms with the right dive engine for the cost of £20. His own communications with various sea captains convinced the salvor that not only were the *Victory's* guns heard firing in distress near the Caskets on the fateful day, but that another source physically saw the ship's lights abruptly go out (ADM 106/1012/167).

Processing the vestiges of the *Victory* washed ashore on the Channel Islands took another 16 months to resolve. By 3 January 1745 Nicholas Dobree had informed the Admiralty that the warship's masts, yards and pumps had not yet been recovered from Guernsey due to bad weather (ADM 106/1027/1). Isaac Dobree wrote to the navy on 24 April 1745 asking for directions for the payment of the two topmasts, yards and pumps salvaged from the *Victory* in the custody of his father because "the poor people that saved them are continually harassing us for their part of yr salvage, which we cannot venture to pay them without your expert orders" (ADM 106/1042/61). Overleaf in Isaac Dobree's letter, the navy annotated orders to "Desire Mr. Dobree to cause all the particulars at Guernsey belonging to his Majesty's late ship the *Victory* to be collected together & then to employ two or three proper persons to value them on oath & according to their valuation to pay the persons salvage for the same not exceeding one third part of their value & to draw on us for the amount". The salvaged finds were to be secured in the best manner using a captain of his majesty's ships to transport them into any of the King's Yards. Meanwhile, rumors continued to

circulate about a wreck off the Channel Islands, and Peter Dobree informed the navy on 19 July 1745 that he did not know the name of the shipmaster whose vessel hit a wreck off the Caskets, only that the ship's home port was Weymouth (ADM 106/1007/86).

A new use for the salvaged material was sought in January 1746, when Captain James Webb of the warship *Surprize* brought the St Malo 'Southseaman' privateer the *Superbe*, "a large & rich vessel", into Guernsey. The prize's mizzen had been cut down, so Webb applied to Dobree to buy the *Victory's* foretopmast to turn into a mizzenmast for the French vessel. The naval agent duly obliged, but in April the same month Dobree wrote to the Commissioners of the Navy to advise that compensation was required because "before he could take due possession thereof was obliged to pay two Guineas for the salvage, which your Honours will be pleased to let me know how I must be reimbursed" (ADM 106/1042/62). On 5 May 1746 Commissioner Vanbrugh issued a warrant at Plymouth to report the value of the *Victory's* topmast supplied to the *Superbe* prize (ADM 106/1051/181).

Finally, on 1 May 1746 Commissioner Hughes issued warrants to officers to expect to receive at Portsmouth dockyard two topmasts, some yards and pumps saved out of the *Victory* sent from Guernsey (ADM 106/1043/50). Meanwhile, Thomas Wilson wrote onboard the *Deal* on 17 June 1746 to Sir Jacob Ackworth in his capacity as Commissioner of His Majesty's Royal Navy in London (rather than as Surveyor), that he had sailed from the Downs to Farley in search of additional reported wreckage from the *Victory*, but "notwithstanding we had fair weather & was wth: our marks bearing and distance for eight low waters could see nothing of yr mast wich makes us doubtful of its either being concealed under water or broke away" (ADM 106/1053/255).

It took the Commissioners of the Navy until 31 October 1746 to list the stores (all described as decayed), lately in the custody of Mr Dobree at Guernsey, saved out of the *Victory* and brought to Portsmouth by the *Folkstone* (ADM 106/1046/144): a main topmast, foretopsail yard, mizzen topsail yard, mizeen gap, 30ft hand pumps and 24ft hand pumps. Finally, what survived from the otherwise vanished *Victory* had arrived home.

### 3. Scandal on the Caskets

The failure to discover the physical wreck of the *Victory* caused great soul-searching in naval circles and a desire to understand the true reasons of her loss. Nicholas Dobree formally complained to the Admiralty about the neglect of the Caskets Light by its keeper, Thomas LeCocq, on 15 October 1744, a case that was referred by the Lords

Hon<sup>ble</sup> Sir,  
 Trinity House  
 June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1745

Pursuant to the Reference of the R<sup>ts</sup> Hon<sup>ble</sup> the  
 Lords Comm<sup>rs</sup> of the Admiralty Signifyd by yours of the 30<sup>th</sup>  
 Nov<sup>r</sup> Last, & desiring that this Corpor<sup>on</sup> would Enquire into  
 a Complaint made to their Lordships on the 15<sup>th</sup> of that Month  
 by M<sup>r</sup> Nic<sup>o</sup> Dobree Sen<sup>r</sup> of Guernsey against the Casket-  
 Lights, Setting forth, that the great Neglect Committed by  
 not having a due Light kept upon the Caskets was partly  
 Imputed to have been the Cause of the unfortunate Loss of the  
 Victory that there had been Numbers of Affidavits taken  
 before their Court, by Masters of divers Vessels by which it  
 appears that there was no Light upon Caskets the Night  
 from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> Oct<sup>r</sup> which was the very Night in  
 which the Victory is Supposed to have been Lost & since  
 that time by several other Affidavits it appeared that this  
 Casket-Lights have been so very much Neglected that  
 these very Masters of Ships who have made their Affidavits  
 have run Eminent Danger of having been Lost on said  
 Rocks, that this Neglect (he is afraid) have been very  
 fatal to many other poor Vessels, & all this may be  
 Imputed to the Avarice of the Manager of this Light  
 which have kept upon the said Casket-rock but three Men  
 viz<sup>t</sup> Two Frenchmen, Roman Catholiques & Subjects to  
 the French King & an Alderney Man, one of those  
 Frenchmen he transported there by his own Authority  
 without any Legal Judgment, & there have kept him as  
 a Prisoner for many years;

I am Commanded to Acquaint you for their  
 Lordships Information that this Corpor<sup>on</sup> have Enquired

Fig. 8. The Trinity House report into the role of the Caskets Light in the sinking of the Victory, sent to the Admiralty on 22 June 1745 (ADM 6/134).

Commissioners of the Admiralty to Trinity House on 5 December. Dobree's letter to the Admiralty asserted that "not having a due Light kept upon the Caskets is partly imputed to have been the Cause of the unfortunate Loss of the *Victory*". The naval agent claimed that numerous affidavits sworn by the masters of diverse vessels at the court in Guernsey proved no light was maintained on the night of 4-5 October 1744 and, indeed, that since then "this Casket Light have been so very Neglected". Dobree imputed the fatalities to the "avarice of the manager of this Light", who kept on the rock two French Roman Catholics subject to the French king, one of whom illegally transported to Alderney was a felon (ADM 6/134). Trinity House asked Dobree to send the affidavits cited in his letter to London (LMA MS30010/10, MS30048/4). The corporation's General Court, attended by high-ranking naval officers that included Admiral Vernon and Sir Jacob Acworth, was charged with enquiring and reporting to their lordships of the Admiralty "every particular thereof" (LMA MS30004/10).

The complaint was immediately dispatched to Mr LeCocq, who was asked to attend the corporation as soon as possible "to answer every particular" (LMA MS30004/10). A messenger was sent by express to Lulworth, where LeCocq was reportedly staying, but ascertained he had already set sail for Alderney on 27 October. The Collector of Customs at Southampton forwarded the dispatch to Alderney (LMA MS30010/10, 8 December 1744).

The idea that the *Victory* sank off the Caskets would have come as little surprise to the Admiralty and fitted into the rocks' notorious reputation as the graveyard of the English Channel. At least 392 ships were wrecked around Alderney, Guernsey and Sark between 1278 and 1962, a figure easily doubled if vessels lost around Jersey are added. In legend the Caskets notoriously sunk the *White Ship* in 1120, drowning Prince William, the only legitimate son of King Henry and heir to the throne. In *The Man Who Laughs* (1869), Victor Hugo described a fictitious "barbarous lighthouse" built by the king on the Caskets after his son's death, a "flaming pile of wood under iron trelis, a brazier behind a railing, a head of hair flaming in the wind" (Dafter, 2001: 42), no doubt inspired by 19th-century reality. King Henry I was said to have never smiled again for the rest of his 15-year reign following his son's death (Clarke, 1851: 4). The voyage from Southampton or Weymouth to the Channel Islands was considered more dangerous than sailing all the way from Liverpool to New York (Ovenden and Shayer, 2002: 8).

The absence of lights around the Channel Islands and the Caskets' danger to shipping was an escalating concern during the first half of the 18th century. In 1709 the

Governor of Alderney had unsuccessfully petitioned Queen Anne to erect lights on the Caskets (Clarke, 1851: 10). No lighthouse was built on the Channel Islands, however, until a group of shipowners approached Thomas LeCocq, the proprietor of the rocks, to establish a light. At a Trinity House Court hearing on 7 November 1722 a proposal by LeCocq was read "for erecting Lt:houses on the Casket Rocks as was also a Subscription of a great number of merchants masters and owners of ships voluntarily offering to pay one ½ penny per ton in and one ½ penny out from all British ships double from strangers and six pence a voyage from coasters towards maintaining such Light:houses." On 27 February 1723 Trinity House received several subscriptions from New Castle, Yarmouth, and several coastal ports "signifying the usefulness thereof and the reasonableness of the dutie proposed and their consents to the same", and after some debate about whether the new light would be of benefit and security to navigation "carried in the affirmative". The decision to grant Mr LeCocq a term of 61 years at a rent of £50 per annum was reached by the Duty Master and Wardens and read out to the Trinity House Court on 6 March 1722 (Fig. 7). LeCocq agreed to cover the lighthouse's construction at his own cost (LMA MS30004/9).

The lighthouse was constructed with a unique design on a triangular pattern of lights on three towers established on the highest rock to distinguish it visually at sea from other lights on the shores of England and France (Figs. 4-6). Each tower contained a coal brazier inside an armorer's forge kept alight by hand bellows. The fire itself was housed within three glazed lanterns built 30ft above sea level (Couling, 1982: 17; Ovenden and Shayer 2002: 20; Bonnard, 2009: 120). The three towers were named St Peter, St Thomas and Donjon (Dafter, 2001: 42). A 1727 sea chart specified the dimensions between the lighthouse's towers as 68 yards, 40 yards and 54 yards. Glazing the lanterns was intended to reduce coal consumption and prevent cinders blowing out of the fire. Very few lights anywhere were enclosed in this style at the time (Graham, 1972: 60). The Alderney lights were first lit on 30 October 1724.

The maintenance of the lights was a sensitive issue and the diligence of the keepers had been questioned on several occasions before the fateful night in October 1744. The *Daily Journal* of 8 November 1729 reported that a ship from Topsham belonging to Mr Will Hulls & Co. sailing to Guernsey almost crashed onto the Caskets at 11 o'clock at night. During the near miss, "the Water from the Rock dashed on Board of her, and by great Providence they had just Time to tack about, or in half a Minute's Time 'tis probable they had been lost. The Light of the Caskets which should have been lighted before Night, were not then up."

I am farther Commanded to Signify upon  
 the whole, that this Corporation are of Opinion,  
 that M<sup>r</sup> Dobree's Complaint is groundless and  
 Malicious, and that M<sup>r</sup> LeCocq hath Sufficiently  
 Justify'd himself as to the due Care of the Lights  
 on the Nights betwixt the 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> October, the

Fig. 9. Conclusion of the Trinity House enquiry into the role of the Caskets Light in the sinking of the *Victory*, sent to the Admiralty on 22 June 1745 (ADM 6/134).

A hearing into the maintenance of the Caskets' light was heard before Justice Le Marchant, the Bailiff of the Island of Guernsey, in the presence of William Le Merchant, Helier Bonamy and Peter Carey, Jurats of the Royal Court in Guernsey, in November 1729 (*Daily Journal*, 13 November 1729). John Kingston, Master of the 130-ton burden *Virginia* merchantman, made an oath alongside the ship's mate, carpenter and boatswain that they also almost met disaster while sailing from Topsham to Guernsey on 11 November because:

blowing a strong Gale, and being under their two Courses, stretching to the Southward, expecting to see the Caskets Lights, between Ten and Eleven of the Clock at Night, they spied, to their great surprize, the Caskets Rocks just near them, within a Cable's Length, which obliged the Deponents to Ware the Ship round, or less should have been intirely lost within about a Minute, and that they really believe the Rebound of the Sea kept them from the said Rocks, and that before nor after, they did not see any Lights during the whole Night, from the Caskets.

These near misses led to former complaints being made against Mr LeCocq and the Caskets Lights in 1729, which a Trinity House enquiry found to be groundless (LMA MS30004/10).

The Court of Trinity House was informed on 2 February 1745 that Thomas LeCocq had attended the corporation to answer Nicholas Dobree's complaint, when three affidavits were read against him, while the light's keeper supplied four affidavits of his own countering the accusation and a statement asserting that "the Complaint is only founded on the Inveterate Malice & Envy of the

said Dobree & his agents... groundless & Malicious that his Conduct & Character have been grossly aspers'd & that he hath Constantly taken the best Care of the Lights that could be taken". LeCocq was granted a further three months to lay before the corporation the Journals of the Lightkeepers and the testimony of supportive persons of undoubted reputation (LMA MS30004/10).

Eight months after the sinking of the *Victory*, Thomas LeCocq returned to Trinity House in early June 1745 with a great number of affidavits (Fig. 8). A report ordered by Trinity House's 'By Board' to be written for the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on 10 June 1745 into the role of the Casket Lights in the sinking of the *Victory* (LMA MS30004/10) was received by the navy on 22 June (ADM 6/134 for the source material presented below). Dobree's original complaint referred to a number of supporting affidavits, but despite Trinity House requesting their submission only three were subsequently produced of which just one was relevant to the case of 4-5 October. Two others related to later dates as a proposed indication of general poor light maintenance. In turn, Thomas LeCocq "hath attended accordingly, with a great number of affidavits from the Masters of Divers Vessels belonging or Trading to Guernsey, Jersey & Alderney, & from Several Inhabitants of Alderney, some of whom live within Sight of the Lights."

The first affidavit supplied by Dobree was signed by Joseph Miller and Mark Meadow, two masters of sloops who jointly swore that "on their passage from Poole to Guernsey on the 5th. Oct. they fell in with the Casket rocks on the night about three of the Clock in the Morning, & being very bad Weather they were like to be wreck'd on

them, there being no Light on the Lighthouses.” Miller and Meadow’s testimony, however, was rejected by Commander Diamond of Poole, who sailed on their sloop during the fateful voyage as mate and pilot. Miller was characterized as “a young Man & not well acquainted with the Coast and Channel near Guernsey & Jersey, for which reason Diamond who had been Master of Several vessels trading betwixt those Parts & England for more than twenty years was Hir’d to go with him & had the Sole Direction & Care of the Sloop on that Voyage...”

Trinity House ascertained that the ship actually sailed from Poole on 5 October at around 5 o’clock in the evening, “where it is observ’d that this was after the night Complain’d of & did not get far Enough in the Ensuing Night for them to see the Casket rocks or lights; that Miller was not upon Deck all that Night; that after their arrival at Guernsey, Miller, in company with another Master of a Sloop, came to Diamond & ask’d him if he would not Swear that there were no Lights on the Casket rocks on the 5th Octr. in the night, to which Diamond answer’d he would not, nor could Either he or they swear any such thing with truth, for that they had not seen the Caskets all that Night.” Diamond further testified in general that “since his knowledge and remembrance of the Casket Lights, he had always Observ’d them to be Diligently and Carefully Look’d after.”

Dobree’s second affidavit against LeCocq was submitted by John Hasford, Master of the *William* of Bear in Devonshire and two of his sailors, who swore that on 17 October “about 5 clock in the afternoon, being then on their passage from Bear to Guernsey, they saw the Casket rocks bearing E:13S distance 5 leagues or thereabout, that the night being come on & the Wind blowing fresh they were forc’d to double Reef their Sails; that the Light on the Caskets were not Lighted till about 8 & 9 of the Clock that same Evening at which time they Expected to be 1 or 2 Leagues to Leeward of them, but to their great Surprize they found themselves to be Windward about 2 Leagues from said rocks, which Oblig’d them to direct their Course for Alderney in which Harbour they Enter’d in the night in a great danger of being Lost which they verily believe was Occasion’d by the Light on the Caskets not being lighted in a proper time, & these Deponents further declares that at that time there was above forty Sail of Ships about said Rocks.”

Hasford advised Trinity House that the fleet must have been the one bound from Southampton to Jersey and Guernsey under the convoy of His Majesty’s Ship the *Torrington*, “for it doth not appear, nor is there any reason to believe, that there was then any other Fleet in those Parts”. In his defense, LeCocq produced affidavits from the masters of eight of those ships swearing that on the night in

question the fleet and its convoy were actually positioned 7 leagues north-northwest of the Caskets and “therefore that it was impossible for them to see the Lights”. The masters all further “Testify that they have for Several years almost Constantly Us’d the Trade to & from the Islands of Jersey, Guernsey & Alderney & always Observ’d the Casket Lights to have been duly kept Lighted, as they ought to have been, & that they never knew any Neglect or Default in keeping them – which General Care of these Lights is Likewise Testify’d by affidavits from nine other Masters of Ships who have us’d the Like Trade & from Divers Inhabitants of Alderney.”

The third and final affidavit was submitted by Thomas Elworthy, the commander of a privateer from Bristol, who swore that while cruising near Alderney on 12 December 1744 at the break of day, no light was maintained in the lighthouse. Trinity House found Elworthy’s testimony to be “Couch’d in Loose Terms, without a full Description of Weather, Bearings or Course” and that counter affidavits from the inhabitants of Alderney proved that good lights were lit on the night of 11-12 December.

The enquiry concluded by addressing Dobree’s accusation that the light keepers were subjects of the French king, including a criminal. Trinity House ascertained that the workers employed on Mr LeCocq’s account, namely George Duplain, Lucas LeCocq, Peter Baudonin and Nicholas Duplain, were all born in Alderney, “but that George Duplain having a Hurt by a Fall in July Last, one Marin Godfrey, a French Man born (who had Liv’d in Alderney for some years & had wrought there as a Labouring Man) was sent to supply Duplain’s Place during his Indisposition, which Continued about a Month; and that this was the only French man whom he Employ’d there in 1744... and as to a Felon or any Person under such a Description, he never Employ’d or knew any there.” Inhabitants from Alderney once again testified that no felon was employed to keep the lights ablaze.

Meanwhile, LeCocq sought out his own information from local fishermen about the supposed physical remains of the wrecked *Victory* observed off the Caskets “without ever having been able to discover any thing about it from our fishing boats, who almost every days goes them ways” (written later on 18 August 1745). LeCocq argued that a report Dobree collected from a Mr Flaming, master of a cutter belonging to Portland, “seems too frivolous & weak to be depended on.” Flaming informed the lighthouse keeper that “the weather was thik & fogy they saw no manner of land”. However, in the general vicinity of Burhou, Ortag and the Caskets were observed “two pieces of masts, or masts with some roaps still abt them as they were at an anchor. I asked him wether these masts of peaces were



Fig. 10. The LeCocq family retain business interests on Alderney into the present day. Photo: Sean Kingsley.

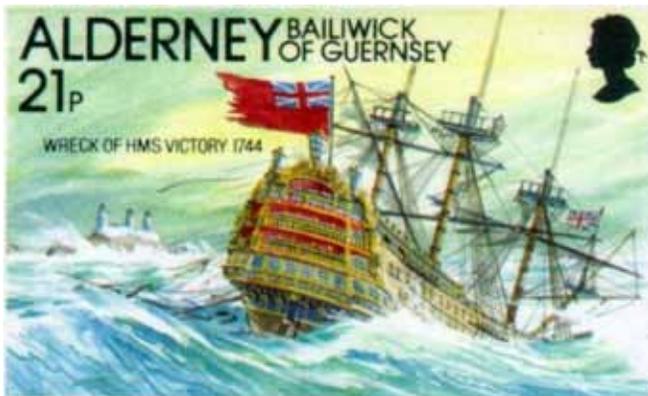


Fig. 11. A 21-pence Alderney stamp issued in April 1991 in commemoration of the wreck of the Victory.

perpendicular up and done he said they were not but were floating upon the surface of the water & that as it blew very hard they soon lost sight of them” (ADM 106/1012/240).

After hearing all the evidence, the clerk of Trinity House, John Whormby, concluded that “I am further Commanded to Signify, upon the Whole, that this Corporation are of Opinion, that Mr. Dobree’s Complaint is Groundless and Malicious; and that Mr. Le Coq hath Sufficiently Justify’d himself as to the due Care of the Lights on the Night betwixt the 4th & 5th October, the 17th & 18th Oct & the 11th & 12th December Last, and as to a due care of them at all times.” In regard to the insinuation that Thomas LeCocq caused the loss of the *Victory*, “That is thought to Savour of a Private Malice which hath been formerly Express’d against Mr. LeCocq in Groundless Complaints against those Lights” (Fig. 9).

## 4. Conclusion

Although no solid evidence can prove the opinion, the “Private Malice” underlying Nicolas Dobree’s complaint was probably a local spat between leading Channel Islands families. The LeCocqs were well known and influential (Fig. 10). Thomas LeCocq had built a “Very large and commodious pier” on Alderney, which the *Daily Gazetteer* of 1 June 1736 suggested when complete “will be of very great Service to the navigation, and probably preserve many Ships from being lost on that dismal Coast.” Across the water Peter LeCocq was a well know gunsmith and locksmith at St Peter Port in 1737 (Stevens Cox, 1999: 82). Once Thomas earned the rights to the Casket lights, the lucrative venture paid him dues estimated at £650 a year by 1745 (Graham, 1972: 58). The Casket’s enjoyed a monopoly on lighting the Channel Islands until 1860 (Ovenden and Shayer, 2002: 8). As a complaint to Trinity House dated 20 October 1725 implies, some lighthouse keepers boosted their profits by encouraging smuggling (LMA MS30048/3).

Whether LeCocq’s commodious pier was a commercial threat to Dobree’s maritime enterprise is a matter of speculation. With the Casket lights in his portfolio, at the very least the collective Dobree family no doubt felt irritated. The Dobrees (spelt Dobrée in early historical documents prior to the 18th century) had sought refuge in St Peter Port from France’s religious wars during the 16th century on an island that was decidedly anti-Catholic. Alongside other influential families on the island, by 1642-3 the Dobrees had assumed sufficient power to be authorized to “command and to governe the Island of Gurnezey, and the Castle there, as likewise the two adjacent Isles of Alderney and Sarke”, power that extended over ships and hence aspects of commerce (Berry, 1815: 167).



Fig. 12. One of the first bronze guns found on the wreck of the *Victory* in 2008. This cannon was subsequently looted in 2011. Photo: © Odyssey Marine Exploration.



Fig. 13. Despite claims part of the *Victory*'s rudder washed up onto Jersey in October 1744, it is preserved for its entire length on the wreck site (photomosaic of 2008). Photo: © Odyssey Marine Exploration.

The family had fingers in many ventures from their well-appointed home, located by the 1720s close to the harbor in the Carrefour amongst the town's great merchants. In 1727 Nicolas Dobree was paying the second highest tax in St Peter Port. The merchant and later navy agent invested in fire engines in 1707 as town constable to protect the quickly growing town (Guernsey had 12,000 inhabitants by 1756; Stevens Cox, 1999: 163), and in 1746 published charts of Guernsey and the other Channel Islands based on his own surveys. The results, printed in French and English alongside an accompanying booklet of sailing directions, were considered highly accurate and reprints were issued in 1779, 1786 and 1794. Nicolas Dobree was also singled out in 1751 as one of the first and most generous financial supporters of Guernsey's public hospital (Dicey, 1751: 84).

Meanwhile, Pierre Dobree owned the *Anne Galley* in 1742, which traded slaves, elephant tusks and camwood with West Africa and Barbados. In 1753 the merchant Thomas Dobree was appointed the Provincial Grand Master of the Masonic Lodge for Guernsey, Jersey, Alderney, Sark and Herm. For much of the 18th century 'Bonamy and Samuel Dobree' and 'Dobree and Aubin' were also merchant bankers working in London, who negotiated for the islanders bills of exchange, money investments, shipping and insurance agents, and letters of marque during times of war (Stevens Cox, 1999: 22, 26, 27, 82, 86, 102, 121, 128, 133, 180).

The Dobrees were related by marriage to the powerful De Saumarez family, whose ancestry included Philip Saumarez, First Lieutenant during the famous English navy-sanctioned privateering voyage of the *Centurion* between 1740 and 1744 that captured the rich Spanish Acapulco galleons (Heaps, 1973), and the wealthy Le Marchants (Betham, 1805: 451). By April 1758 any spat between the Dobrees and LeCocqs was probably long forgotten when members of the Dobree family sailed as a boatswain and carpenter on the 35-ton *Alderney* owned by the merchants Thomas le Coq and Company of Alderney (HCA 26/9/109). Both the LeCocq and Dobrees were privateers who held letters of marque in 1756, 1757 and 1759.

In fairness Nicholas Dobree's concerns about Thomas LeCocq's conduct may not have been entirely unfounded: in business affairs the Alderney man may have sailed close to the wind. In May 1740 LeCocq had been called to Trinity House to answer the allegation of paying a member of the corporation for advice about establishing a lighthouse on the Caskets in the early 1720s. Claiming ignorance as a "stranger in England and not knowing how to proceed", LeCocq had paid a "Gent" from Trinity House for advice, an introduction to the corporation and to solicit support from merchants and traders to build his new lighthouse. The lights' keeper admitted that "out of Gratitude for his great Trouble & Services about the Subscription & Patent, Voluntarily have him a Share of the Profits, w<sup>ch</sup>: was afterwards Chang'd into a yearly payment, first of one hundred pounds, then of one hundred & five pounds a year, w<sup>ch</sup>: he all along paid to him during his Life & hath paid to his Exer. since" (3 May 1740, LMA MS30004/10).

Setting the reputations and territorial skirmishes of Nicholas Dobree and Thomas LeCocq aside, it is clear that all parties from the Admiralty down to the citizens of the Channel Islands were convinced the *Victory* foundered off the Caskets. A chain of confirmation bias (pers. comm. Trevor Newman, 1 April 2015) linked the disappearance of *Victory* during a ferocious storm to oral testimony of 100 guns allegedly heard firing in distress about the Channel Islands and wreckage washed onto its shores.

The conviction became an historical orthodoxy that extended into the modern era (Fig. 11), when several projects sought the elusive remains of the *Victory*. Richard Keen of Guernsey, Fred Shaw from Alderney and Robert Stenuit carried out extensive searches in a Comex UK funded project to locate the flagship between May and August 1973 (pers. comm. Richard Keen, 24 March 2015). The project successfully discovered the wreck of the passenger ferry *Stella*, sunk off the Caskets in 1899 (Ovenden and Shayer, 1999: 70). Martin Woodward spent hundreds of hours searching for *Victory* from 1984, conducting magnetometer surveys across 15 square miles of the Caskets, which yielded a staggering amount

of magnetic anomalies, largely because the area is embedded with magnetic rock (Ovenden and Shayer, 2002: 22). In 1995 Captain Sally Simmons's team dived in search of the flagship in relative shallow depths ranging from 20-25m (*The Balchin Family Newsletter* 5, 1997: 20-22).

Through Odyssey Marine Exploration's discovery of the wreck of the *Victory* in April 2008, one of Britain and the Channel Island's greatest maritime mysteries was finally laid to rest (Figs. 12-14). The myth of the Caskets sinking was resolved as inaccurate despite the conviction being long-held by the Admiralty and subsequent historians. At the same time the reputation of Admiral Sir John Balchen and his officers as leading the *Victory* onto the Caskets' malicious black rocks was vindicated. Thomas LeCocq was exonerated because the First Rate flagship never sailed within sight of Alderney.

As the physical wreck now proves beyond doubt, the *Victory* succumbed close to where she was last seen (Fig. 3). The captain's log of the *Duke* entered on Thursday 4 October stated that "we lost sight of Adml. Balchen & lay in the trough of the sea till 7. Friday 5 October... The storm continued violent till 6" (ADM 51/282). As James Steuart, commander of the *Duke*, subsequently wrote from Spithead on 13 October 1744 concerning Admiral Balchen and the *Victory* (ADM 1/909), "The Duke was the last that saw him the Thursday morning about two o'clock, when she broached to, to which is more than an hour after any other of the squadron lost sight of him. When this happened I judged ourselves in the Lattd. Of 49° 34 No. that we had made 2° 14 Er long from Scilly, St Mary, one of the island's of Scilly, bearing WbN 1/2 No., 30 leagues the Lizard NW ¼ W, 12 leagues; and the Start point NEbN ¾ Er 15 Leagues."

The loss of the *Victory* was finally concluded to have occurred on 4 October 1744 (by about 4am: pers. comm. Trevor Newman, 29 March 1744) and that "all perished amounting to eleven hundred men – Admr. Sir John Balchen and many young officers of the first families in the kingdom included" (ADM 1/1782). Following the search and rescue missions dispatched to seek out the *Victory* in 1744 and 1745, confirmation of the warship's loss prompted several honorable actions by the Admiralty in recognition of the tragedy.

On 27 November 1744, "in consideration of the long and fruitful services of Sir John Balchen Knight, declared late Admiral of the White Squadron of His Majesty's fleet, and the unhappy circumstances of Dame Susan Balchen, his widow, an allowance of five hundred pounds be made to his said widow as a recompense for the effects lost in his Majesty's Ship the *Victory* and likewise that a pension of five hundred pounds per annum be settled upon her to



Fig. 14. Photomosaic of Area E on the wreck of the *Victory*, May 2008. Photo: © Odyssey Marine Exploration.

commence from the death of her late said husband and to be placed on the Ordinary Establishment of the navy" (ADM 2/206/209). Despite a problem of formality because Sir John had not secured the necessary certificates for a pension before going to sea, the Navy Board overruled this point of procedure and upheld their decision (ADM 2/206/259).

An interesting footnote in the history of the *Victory*'s final voyage was shared with the Commanders of His Majesty's Navy by Sarah Searson on 4 March 1745 (ADM 106/1018/82). Her husband, John Searson, had studied the art of navigation and for its improvement invented an instrument called a "speculum or reflecting horizon for the taking of altitudes at sea". Trinity House recommended its experimentation on navy ships on 15 October 1743 (LMA MS30004/10). Navy Board tests ascertained that the instrument would be of great service for finding latitude at sea when the horizon was thick and hazy. In 1744 examples of the speculum were undergoing sea tests on the *Prince Frederic* under Captain Norris and another four examples were being trialed on squadron ships under the command of Commodore Barnard. John Searson, meanwhile, had been ordered to go onboard the *Victory* to conduct further trials and make observations. He never made it home. For this reason his wife petitioned the navy to continue to grant her the same "favours" as afforded her husband, and supply her with copies of all papers and certificates

related to the speculum invention, so she could apply for a patent “for the sole investing the making and vending of the said speculum.” Sarah Searson described herself as very poor and with no other means of maintenance apart from any profits derived from this instrument. The Navy Board agreed to pass over all correspondence to Mrs Searson.

Currently, the extensive non-disturbance surveys conducted by Odyssey Marine Exploration on behalf of the Maritime Heritage Foundation in 2012 provide the greatest detail available about the wreck of the *Victory*'s formation, preservation and environment (González *et al.*, 2013; Prave *et al.*, 2013; Seiffert *et al.*, 2013; Cunningham Dobson *et al.*, 2014). Video footage of the wreck can be viewed through the project's virtual dive trail ([www.victory1744.org](http://www.victory1744.org)). The shipwreck's thorough *Project Design. A Mitigation Strategy for the Wreck of the First Rate Warship Victory (1744)* (February 2014: 28-31) presents a phased approach for the investigation of the site, including a detailed research program. The comprehensive study, recovery of the *Victory*'s artifacts at risk, and retention of the *Victory* 1744 Collection for museum display and public enhancement, in line with the Maritime Heritage Foundation's commitment to education, would be a fitting tribute to the sailors who lost their lives on the greatest warship of the Early Georgian age of sail.

## Acknowledgements

The loss of the *Victory* and search for its wreck has captured the imagination of many people, and I am especially grateful to Trevor Newman for extremely generously sharing information and ideas. Richard Keen and Martin Woodward kindly discussed their knowledge of former search projects off the Channel Islands.

At the Maritime Heritage Foundation, special thanks to Robert Balchin (Lord Lingfield), who also made various source material available, as well as to John Bingeman, Margaret Rule and Ivor Noël Hume. Odyssey Marine Exploration has generously supported the research over many years, with special close collaboration with its Research and Scientific Services department (John Opperman and Gerri Graca). Alice Copeland at Odyssey took great care proof-reading this paper, which was laid out by Melissa Dolce.

## Notes

1. Inconsistency exists within the sources about the spelling of Admiral Sir John Balchen's name. 'Balchen' is utilized within contemporary 18th-century Admiralty sources and in his memorial in Westminster Abbey. However, Brayley's *A Topographical History of Surrey* (1850) states that his birth register is entered “John, sonn of John

Balchin & Ann”. This is largely accurate. The Anglican Parish Register for Woking, Surrey, for 14 February 1669 records the birth as “John sonn of John Baltchin & Ann”. At the marriage of his parents, John and Ann Edsur, on 23 January 1665 at Godalming, Surrey, his father's name was again spelt ‘Baltchin’ (both Ref. Nos. GOD 1/3). Walker's genealogy of the *Balchins of Surrey* (1938), compiled chiefly from church registers and wills, demonstrates that the twins Anne and John, born four years earlier than Sir John and who only survived a matter of days, were also baptised ‘Baltchin’. The ‘Baltchin’ version of the family name was used from 1665-1683. The genealogical chart further shows that the family descended from Henry Balchild (d. 1612) and John Balchin. The surname ‘Balchin’ is used almost unanimously otherwise from 1574 (although occasionally ‘Balchyn’ as well) and throughout the 18th and 19th century.

2. The *Falkland* warship had separated from Balchen's squadron on 18 August 1744 after departing from the fleet to chase an unidentified vessel. After losing sight of the fleet, Captain Grenville opened the sealed ‘Rendezvous’ instructions written by Admiral Balchen and returned to Spithead (ADM 1/1830).

## Bibliography

- Berry, W., *The History of the Island of Guernsey* (London, 1815).
- Betham, W., *The Baronetage of England: Or The History of the English Baronets, Volume 5* (London, 1805).
- Bonnard, B., *Alderney from Old Photographs* (Stroud, 2009).
- Brayley, E.W., *A Topographical History of Surrey, Volume V* (Dorking, 1850).
- Channel Pilot Part II. Coast of France and the Channel Islands* (London, 1897).
- Clarke, L.L., *The Island of Alderney; Its Early History* (Guernsey, 1851).
- Couling, D., *Wrecked on the Channel Islands* (London 1982).
- Cunningham Dobson, N. and Kingsley, S., ‘HMS *Victory*, a First-Rate Royal Navy Warship Lost in the English Channel, 1744. Preliminary Survey & Identification’. In G. Stemm and S. Kingsley (eds.), *Oceans Odyssey. Deep-Sea Shipwrecks in the English Channel, Straits of Gibraltar & Atlantic Ocean* (Oxford, 2010), 235-81.
- Cunningham Dobson, N., Jensen, S-K. and Kingsley, S., *Benthic Species on the Wreck of the Victory (1744), Western English Channel* (OME Papers 44, Tampa, 2014).
- Dafter, R., *Guernsey Wrecks* (Tonbridge, 2001).
- Dacey, T., *An Historical Account of Guernsey From Its First Settlement Before the Norman Conquest to the Present Time* (London, 1751).

- González, J.A.M. and Lozano Guerra-Librero, C., *Dynamics of Sediment Bedforms in the Western English Channel: the Wreck of the Victory (Site 25C) in Context* (OME Papers 34, Tampa, Florida, 2013).
- Graham, R., *The Casquets... the Most Dangerous Channel Islands* (1972).
- Harding, R., *The Emergence of Britain's Global Naval Supremacy. The War of 1739-1748* (Woodbridge, 2010).
- Kingsley, S., *The Sinking of the First Rate Victory (1744): a Disaster Waiting to Happen?* (OME Papers 45, Tampa, Florida, 2015).
- Ovenden, J. and Shayer, D., *The Wreck of the Stella. Titanic of the Channel Isles* (Guernsey Museums and Galleries, 1999).
- Ovenden, J. and Shayer, D., *Shipwrecks of the Channel Islands* (Guernsey, 2002).
- Prave, A.R., Herd, D.A., Calder, A.C. and Allison, S.G., *The Wreck of the First Rate Warship the Victory, Western English Channel: Site 25C Sediment Analysis* (OME Papers 33, Tampa, Florida, 2013).
- Richmond, H.W., *The Navy in the War of 1739-48. Volume II* (Cambridge University Press, 1920).
- Seiffert, G., Cunningham Dobson, N., Van de Walle, F. and Kingsley, S., *HMS Victory (Site 25C). Preliminary Results of the Non-Disturbance Shipwreck Survey, 2012* (OME Papers 31, Tampa, Florida, 2013).
- Stevens Cox, G., *St. Peter Port 1680-1830. The History of an International Entrepôt* (Woodbridge, 1999).
- Walker, J.E.N, *Balchins of Surrey* (Westcott, 1938).
- Walpole, H., *Correspondence of Horace Walpole, with George Montagu, Esq. Vol II* (London, 1837).