

TROZE

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Neglectful or Worse **A Lurid Tale of a Lighthouse Keeper and Wrecking in the Isles of Scilly**

By Cathryn Pearce

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TROZE

Troze is the journal of the National Maritime Museum Cornwall whose mission is to promote an understanding of small boats and their place in people's lives, and of the maritime history of Cornwall.

'Troze: the sound made by water about the bows of a boat in motion'
From R. Morton Nance, *A Glossary of Cornish Sea Words*

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‘Neglectful or Worse’

A Lurid Tale of a Lighthouse Keeper and Wrecking in the Isles of Scilly

Cathryn Pearce

Introduction

Cultural historians have long wrangled over the meaning of the sea, and with the symbols of the sea’s violence and beneficence. Nowhere is this image more vivid than in the stories of shipwreck. Most seaward facing regions have shipwreck stories which are told and retold, including the shipwreck narratives which gained popularity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries during the beginning of Europe’s quest for Empire, and culminating in the chain of popular local histories published in the present.¹ Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, in particular, are well-known for shipwreck stories, but this county and duchy, in the popular mind, are not only the home of shipwrecks, but of violent, despicable wreckers. Despite the fact that other regions have their own wrecker stories, some even more gruesome than those told of Cornwall, Cornwall’s reputation still stands in the minds of the British popular imagination.

The conventional view of wrecking includes the image of the Cornish and Scillonians of the past purposely luring ships on the rocks through the use of false lights, then killing the survivors and plundering the cargoes. Alternatively, other stories focus on the role of the lighthouse keepers, who were occasionally accused of dousing the lights during storms, or who were kidnapped by wreckers so they could not light the lantern. Most secondary works that discuss wrecking discount the stories of deliberate wrecking using false lights, but the role of the lighthouse keeper remains in question. This article will investigate one of the more lurid Victorian narratives of wrecking, the tale of St Agnes Light in the Isles of Scilly, and will show how this narrative has been distorted over time, becoming mythologized, and converted into accepted orthodoxy. For this event, which occurred at the end of the seventeenth century, has come down to us as one of the few examples of deliberate wrecking, performed not by wreckers leading cows, donkeys, or horses with swinging lanterns around their necks, but by a man whose particular mandate was to save ships and save lives, making his crime even more heinous.

The Myth

Background

Michael Oppenheim, who wrote the oft-cited chapter on Cornish maritime history in the *Victoria History of the County of Cornwall*, described the founding of the lighthouse at St Agnes. In his description of the inauguration of the light, he writes:

The commencement was not auspicious, for in December a Virginian trader was lost on the reefs, and the lighthouse keeper, one Hoskins, was found to have been neglectful or worse, and to have stolen what part of the cargo he could come at.²

In his footnote, Oppenheim adds the most intriguing bit:

This was considered a deliberate case of wrecking, the fire not being lit until the ship was on the rocks. The Trinity House ordered that no Cornishman was to be employed at St Agnes.

Charles Henderson, the premier Cornish historian, wrote that:

... unfortunately the first keepers seem to have been Scillonians who used their light to assist, rather than hinder, their relations engaged in the family occupation of 'wrecking' ...³

And, as C.C. Vyvyan points out in her book on the Isles of Scilly, A.K.

Hamilton Jenkin, another of Cornwall's principal historians wrote that he had:

... found only one authenticated case of such a practice [deliberate wrecking] and that occurred in Scilly when the lighthouse on St Agnes ... was sometimes dimmed and sometimes extinguished altogether no doubt with the worst intentions.⁴

Richard Larn, in his history of shipwrecks on the Isles of Scilly adds:

This incident was considered deliberate wrecking, since the fire in the beacon had not been lit until the vessel was already on the rocks. Sadly, the Trinity Brethren who had firmly declined to appoint a keeper from amongst the Islanders announced that they did not suspect that one who had gone to live at Scilly would in three months become a wrecker.⁵

Larn uses the same information in his monumental *Shipwreck Index of the British Isles*, itself a frequently consulted source for shipwreck history.⁶

These accounts are found in the most available and most cited books on Cornish and Scillonian shipwrecks. Even as recently as 2003, the story was repeated yet again on BBC's 'Clarissa and the Countryman' travel programme when they visited the Isles of Scilly.

Obviously, many writers have been captivated by the account, but also intriguing is the way the elements of the narrative seem to shape-shift the more the story is told. I knew I needed to analyse this account, to test its authenticity. By consulting the original documents, I would not only test the story's validity, but I would be able to bring more immediacy to the narrative, by returning the detail and language that had been lost through the more superficial tellings. To do this, I had to research the documents and correspondence of Trinity House, who were given the authority to build and maintain English lighthouses by Elizabeth I,⁷ and the records of the East India Company. There were several key contradictions that needed to be examined. First, there is some disagreement as to the year the event occurred - December 1680 or 1681. Second, all accounts place the blame on either an unnamed light-keeper, or a light-keeper named 'Hoskins'. Third, the light was claimed to either have not been lit until after the ship had struck the rocks, or it was lit, but too dim to be effective. Fourth, the strongest charge, of course, was that the lighthouse keeper, 'Hoskins' was guilty of deliberate wrecking and plundering. Following from this charge is the fifth point, that Trinity House determined that no Cornishmen would be hired as keepers for Cornish lights.

The Date Question Resolved

Investigation of the records of the Corporation of Trinity House reveals a very different story. The events in question actually occurred on 14 November 1680, not 'just before Christmas' in 1680 or December 1681. In fact, it is surprising how rapidly the light was built and put into operation. The impetus behind the building of a light on the Scillies came from the loss of the East India ship *Phoenix*, Captain Wildey, master, which was 'richly Laden from India on her way home.' She 'fell upon one of the Rocks of Scilly' on 11 January 1680. Several Trinity brethren were shareholders, so her loss was strongly felt.⁸ Sir John Clayton wrote a petition asking for a light on the Scillies on the 25 February which was accepted by both the Corporation of Trinity House and the King by the end of April. The Corporation consulted Captain Wildey, 'about what conveniences was to be had on the island for Erecting a Lighthouse.'

Additionally, Wildey was able to recommend the services of Thomas Ekins of the island of St Mary.⁹ Ekins, steward for Sir Sidney Godolphin, leaser of the islands from the Crown, had been instrumental in helping the survivors of the *Phoenix*, and he would soon be rewarded by the East India Company ‘for his care & pains in assisting y^e Salvage of y^e Comp^{as} goods out of the Phoenix’.¹⁰ With this recommendation in hand, Captains Hugh Till and Simon Bayly embarked to the Isles of Scilly to seek a suitable location for a lighthouse while the Elder Brethren of Trinity House in London prepared the patent.

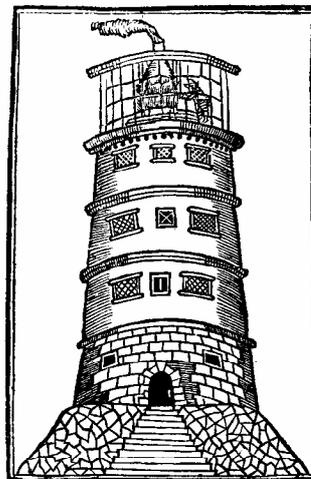
The patent for the light, signed by Charles II, gave Trinity House consent to erect a lighthouse for the protection of English subjects and ‘strangers’:

And whereas wee have bin informed of some late said Misadventures neer those Islands by the Wrecks of severall very considerable Shippes with their Ladeing belonging to our own Subjects for want of a Light Houses erected upon some Convenient place in those parts for prevention whereof in the future as much as maybe Wee have thought fitt to give and grant power & licence unto the said Master Wardens & Assistance that now are & to their Successors for the tyme being to erect and maintain one or more Light houses...

The patent goes on to give authorisation for Trinity House to collect fees from passing shipping for the maintenance of the light, and towards ‘the releife of old and indigent seamen their widdowes and orphans.’¹¹

The Lighthouse Keeper Identified

In May 1680, the Corporation accepted Trinity Brother Captain Browne’s recommendation of Samuel Hockin, not ‘Hoskins’, to be a ‘very able and Fitting man to Keepe the Light at Scilly.’ After salary negotiations, Hockin agreed to take the post. Hired for an initial three-year term, he was given the possibility of extension, as well as the benefit of having his household goods transported to St Agnes. His salary was set at £45 a year, with the promise of a rise in the future upon satisfactory performance.¹² By September, the Secretary of Trinity House, Robert Veagleman, wrote to Hockin informing him that the notices would be sent to the London Gazette and ‘to foreign parts’ to inform the maritime community that the light would be lit on the 30th October, 1680.¹³ So, in just over six months, with the patent secured, the location surveyed, the lighthouse built on the island of St Agnes, and the light keeper appointed, the beacon was finally lit.



ST. AGNES LIGHTHOUSE, SCILLY ISLES.
*From a receipt for lighthouse dues in the possession of Lord Kenyon,
dated December 19, 1690.*

Shipwreck and the Condition of the Light

The next contradiction in the story concerns the wreck of the unidentified 'Virginia trader,' actually the *Golden Lyon*, and the condition of the light. On 14 November the *Golden Lyon*, from Virginia, struck the rocks near Annet Island, in the Isles of Scilly. The second mate, Ralph Bromwell, filed a complaint with Trinity House stating that the light 'was hardly to be discerned' when the ship was within two miles of St Agnes, and that when the ship had fired its guns in distress, 'it burned very clear.'¹⁴ In none of the correspondence is it stated that the light was not burning, as was argued by Oppenheim. This is an important point, because the assertion of the charge of deliberate wrecking rests upon this action. However, what about the charge regarding the 'dimness of the fire'? We do know that just prior to the wreck of the *Golden Lyon*, several ships' masters had reported to Trinity House about the usefulness of the light. John Peirce, master of the *Elizabeth*, attended one of the meetings of the Trinity Board in London, reporting that he had:

... saw the Light on Scilly on Saturday night last gone sevenight six or seven leagues off at Sea and does believe it is the most usefull Light yet Erected and under God would be a means to save many lives ...¹⁵

At the same meeting, Thomas Freeland reported that 'when he saw it sometimes it burnt clear and sometimes Dull.' Even so, he claimed:

... that a Duch ship seeing the Light sent their Men aloft who descryed the Rocks & then ver'd off to the Southward where the ship was lost but the Men saved & sayes if it had not been for the Light they had all been Lost.¹⁶

To understand this particular case, we need to realize that Hockin had difficulty keeping the light burning clearly. St Agnes light was powered by a coal fire, laid in a grate, and it was not without its problems. In fact, most of the correspondence between Trinity House and St Agnes, even before the wreck of the *Golden Lyon*, was concerned with issues affecting the brightness of the light. There were also frequent complaints from Hockin about the quality of the coal.¹⁷ Thus, Trinity House and Hockin, as light-keeper, were already working on the problem of the brightness of the light. But this does not explain why the light brightened upon the firing of the guns, which is the second aspect supposedly proving Hockin's guilt of premeditated wrecking. The records of Trinity House are full of instances, from buoy keepers at Margate to the light-keepers at the Caskets and Lizard Light, who brightened the lights upon hearing a ship's guns, fired not in distress, but as a warning to the light-keepers.¹⁸ Thus, Hockin is not the only keeper to be censured by Trinity House for being 'negligent' in keeping his aid to navigation in working order. In itself, therefore, this action does not indicate guilt of deliberate wrecking. However, we must also keep in mind the question: Was the light 'hardly to be discerned,' as Bromwell asserted?

The Charge of Wrecking and Plundering

The second part of the charge of wrecking placed on Hockin concerned his plundering of the wreck. Veagleman wrote to him levelling the accusation that:

Further information is given [by Bromwell] that you took of the Seamens Cloths & Goods of the Ship as Soap & Serge & hid them in the Coals denying them until they were found by an Officer upon Search...¹⁹

Bromwell had also apparently informed Trinity House that Hockin had threatened him and the other officers when they tried to search the coals for additional goods. Of course, this was a serious charge, and one that Trinity House was not going to take lightly.

Upon receipt of the complaint by Bromwell, Veagleman sent out enquiries. He gave Hockin an opportunity to explain his side of the events, and warned

him that:

I am desired by Capt. Browne [Hockin's patron and Elder Brother of Trinity House] to acquaint you...these matters wilbe throughly sifted the designe of yo^{ur} placing in the Lighthouse being not to pillage but to Releve & help the poor distressed Mariners yo:^r Lers now recd do not Satisfie the Ma:^{ts} for the hideing & denying of the goods will make ag:st you. Dispatch yo:^r Answer hereunto as yo:^u tender yo:^r owne advantage.²⁰

Veagleman also wrote to Thomas Ekins, inquiring into the circumstances surrounding the wreck, and asked if the charges that Hockin 'took of the Wreckt goods & hid them among the coals' and 'threatened the Poor men when they had seen some of their Shifts and Clothes' were accurate.²¹ Perhaps more importantly, Captain Rich, master of the *Golden Lyon*, was consulted as were masters of other vessels who were in the area at the time of the wreck to determine the light's brightness. While the responses to these enquiries are not in the letter-books, we can assume their replies by Veagleman's responses. On 20 January, Hockin is informed that Ekins 'Does justify you against the Report of the Mate of the Golden Lyon...'²² However, Veagleman goes on to warn him that 'the board have Resolved to take the Report of Capt Rich upon the whole,' and cautioned Hockin that he should be:

... very carefull to performe your Duty and take heed of Receiving any Wreckt Goods, East India Goods or other Goods whatsoever least your runn your self into a primunires [sic].

In other words, Hockin was being threatened with a writ whereby he would be summoned and be required to forfeit his goods and estate if found guilty.

At this juncture, Hockin's innocence and future with Trinity House was in doubt. By February 1681, the Trinity House Court Minutes record that further correspondence had been received from Thomas Ekins, whereby Ekins cast blame upon Ralph Bromwell, 'who gave a false Report to this Board to clear himself.' Ekins also shed light on the goods supposedly stolen by Hockin:

... though he denied them to the said Bromhall [sic] & others yet he Owned and delivered them to the Captaine M'chant & others concerned who gratified him for his Paines.²³

Thus, the goods had been saved and turned over for salvage, as was required by law. Ekins's defence was corroborated by a note from John Crudge, Deputy Governor at Scilly:

... largely vindicating M^r Hockin as to his innocency of the matter wherewith he was charged & affirms his Department to be not onely harmless but comendable.²⁴

Veagleman was pleased to inform Hockin that he had been found innocent of the charges. Therefore, contrary to the published accounts, Hockin was not 'subsequently found guilty,' as noted by the Isles of Scilly Museum booklet on shipwrecks,²⁵ nor did he lose his position. We still find him as head light-keeper until February 1684, three years after the wreck of the *Golden Lyon*. He lost his position, not through wrecking or plunder, but by his failing health and his irascibility with the Islanders and with his assistant light-keeper, Thomas Vinton.

Cornishmen as Light-Keepers

Finally, we need to investigate the last charge, that the wrecking of the *Golden Lyon* and its subsequent 'plunder' caused Trinity House to ban Cornishmen from being light-keepers at St Agnes. This charge has been misinterpreted and exaggerated by additional authors, including Fidler and Morrison, who argue that 'Cornishmen were apparently once reckoned unsuitable for jobs as

lighthouse men', alluding to Trinity House's suspicion that all Cornishmen were wreckers.²⁶ It is more accurate to say that Trinity House did not want a Scillonian as a keeper at St Agnes, but in the correspondence, it appears that the initial request came from the East India Company. When Trinity House appointed Samuel Hockin as the first keeper of St Agnes, he was directed 'to provide **one upon the place** or elsewhere, to be yo^r Assistant.'²⁷ [author's emphasis]. The same request was included within the instructions for the survey party led by Captains Till and Bayly. They were to agree with Hockin 'on his choice of assistant.'²⁸ This directive changed with the East India Company's Order of Council supporting the establishment of the light. They indicated their wish that:

... [the light] be managed by the said Society [Trinity House] & not by any particular persons nor be farmed out, nor any person or persons permitted or suffered to be employed on the place to look after the keeping, y^e said light y^t may have any advantage or benefit by any goods or ships wrecked or cast away.²⁹

The East India Company was referring to the usual practice of Trinity House, which was to issue patents to individuals for the construction and upkeep of lights, such as that done with the establishment of the Lizard Light in 1619 by Thomas Killigrew.³⁰ As far as their concern with persons having 'any advantage or benefit' from wrecks, this apprehension is most directly evident with the East India Company's experience with the Scillonians after the wreck of the *Phoenix* in January 1680. They requested the Admiralty Court to enquire and bring restitution for goods that 'have been imbezzled or conveyed away by any of y^e Inhabitants of y^e Island.'³¹ Thus, here we have evidence of the East India Company's suspicion of the Islanders of Scilly prior to the wreck of the *Golden Lyon*, one that in other versions of this story gets confused with Trinity House.

It is true that Trinity House subsequently adopted the policy set forth by the East India Company. When Hockin's assistant, Thomas Vinton was discharged, Veagleman wrote to Ekins asking his help to find as a replacement 'a person from y^e Maine.'³² Eventually, in February 1684, Hockin was replaced by Phillip Fisher from Chatham, who was requested to find himself an assistant who 'is to be noe Islander of Scilly, but such as One from any other place.'³³ Although Fisher brought with him his own choice of assistant, that person was soon discharged. By April 1685 we find Veagleman writing a terse letter to Fisher:

My Masters are a little Concerned that you should contrary to your Instructions, taken One of the Islanders to Assist you in keeping the Light...before you were provided w:th another from the Maine.³⁴

Although Trinity House attempted to maintain the policy of not hiring 'local', John Christy, an Islander, served as assistant keeper from 1743 to 1777, outliving six consecutive keepers 'from the Maine.'³⁵ Indeed, by 1794, Trinity House had completely reversed their policy and was actively recruiting light-keepers for St Agnes from among the Islanders of Scilly.³⁶

Summary

Although several versions of the story insist that Hockin was a Cornishman, and that it was his guilt that initiated the Trinity House policy to ban Islanders from the position of keeper, neither he nor Thomas Vinton, his assistant keeper, were Scillonians, as alleged by Henderson, and neither were they Cornishmen. This confusion may have arisen from the Hockin surname, which is very common in Cornwall, yet there is no evidence that Hockin came from Cornwall. He certainly was not a Scillonian. Additionally, the policy came at the instigation of the East India Company, prior to the wreck in question. What can we learn from this case? It does not prove that Hockin was completely innocent of

plundering; it is well-documented that plundering was a common activity on the part of the Islanders - in fact the activity is found on all parts of the British coastline. Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly did not have a solitary claim on the activity.³⁷ But what it does show is that this particular case is not 'a deliberate case of wrecking' and so cannot be used as evidence for its existence.

Making of the Myth

How did this narrative convert from the misfortune of a shipwreck to one of deliberate wrecking, and transmogrify from a fairly minor event into mythic status? From the foundation of the story in the Trinity House and East India Company records, it is possible to trace the story as its elements transformed and to provide an analysis of the process. Two major elements come into play: first, understanding source availability at the time of writing each account is crucial, and secondly, looking for what Raphael Samuel describes as 'displacements, omissions, and reinterpretations through which myths in personal and collective memory take shape.'³⁸ In other words, what is called in literary theory the 'dynamics of corruption,'³⁹ will illuminate how errors have crept in through the retellings to create a substantially different narrative that has become part of popular consciousness.

Source Availability

As has been mentioned, the major sources illuminating this case come from the Corporation of Trinity House and from the East India Company. It is difficult to determine exactly when some of these sources became available to the researchers seeking to compile the St Agnes story. The Trinity House records consulted are now housed in the Guildhall Library, London, and they were, for a time, in the private hands of Captain W. Chaplin, an elder brother of Trinity House. They were not turned over to the Guildhall for researcher use until 1992. Other records held by Trinity House were destroyed by bombing in 1940. The East India records were available from at least 1896, when a finding aid for their marine records was compiled, though it is unknown how available they were to outsider researchers.⁴⁰ Knowing this, however, we can still infer the sources used in the secondary narratives.

The earliest published histories of the Isles of Scilly, those of Robert Heath, Reverend John Troutbeck, and Reverend George Woodley, do not speak of a lighthouse keeper-cum wrecker at St Agnes.⁴¹ Heath, an officer at the garrison at Scilly, wrote what he claimed was 'the first account of the Isles of Scilly'. He gives an excellent physical description of the light at St Agnes, and he admits that:

... some are of the Opinion, (not without Reason) that in the Time of the former Light-Keeper, it has been suffered to go out, or sometimes not lighted.⁴²

However, neglect is not necessarily an indication of deliberate wrecking, nor does Heath make this allusion. Indeed, he is at pains to vindicate the Islanders against charges of wrecking and cruelty to shipwreck victims. Reverend Troutbeck, Chaplain to the Duke of Leeds, Governor of the Islands, was sent to Scilly in 1780, where he remained and became part of the island community. Unfortunately, rather than producing new information about the St Agnes light, he uses Heath, and even repeats Heath's vindication completely verbatim. Reverend Woodley, on the other hand, claims that Heath 'more than insinuates that sometimes the fire was never kindled', but chooses not to comment. Indeed, he completely denies the act of wrecking, claiming that the 'assertion of some writers' that the house furniture was built of wrecked timber, was false, that it

was actually built from legally salvaged wood.⁴³ If a case of deliberate wrecking by one of the light-keepers was known within the local lore it should have found itself within the pages of these writers, if only to repeat the story or to deny it, but nothing of the sort is evident. As well, it is doubtful whether any of these early writers would have had access to the official records of Trinity House or the East India Company. Thus, none of these important early sources have added directly to the myth-making process of St Agnes light.

Dynamics of Corruption

So what were the earliest narratives to mention deliberate wrecking at St Agnes? The first writer discovered who directly considers the St Agnes story, and who is the main source for the subsequent accounts, is W.J. Hardy. Hardy is credited with writing the first history of lighthouses with his book *Lighthouses: Their History and Romance*, which was published by the Religious Tract Society in 1895.⁴⁴ Hardy utilised what primary sources he could locate, from the British Museum, the Public Record Office, but especially from the records of the Corporation of Trinity House. He was well placed for research, as he was a second generation archivist, trained by his father, the Deputy Keeper of Public Records. Hardy himself became an Inspector of the Historical Manuscript Commission.⁴⁵ However, even with this background, Hardy was very much a man of his time, and his account of St Agnes needs to be placed within that context. It was written at the height of the era of Victorian antiquarianism and the debate of history-as-science versus history-as-art.⁴⁶ Hardy's narrative fits cleanly into the history-as-art camp; his main purpose is to 'tell the story,' using the documents and facts to give substance to his literary narrative. In other words, Hardy utilised the tools of imaginative or speculative thought to bring shape to his story. The title chosen for his work on lighthouses gives an indication as to his outlook: 'History and Romance.' He does not treat these elements as separate entities, but rather sits his St Agnes narrative into what Simon Tresize calls 'a specifically literary and romantic region' of writing that existed from the 1840s to the 1890s, which included the word 'romance' in their titles.⁴⁷ In this way, the speculation that the unnamed Hockin was a deliberate wrecker creeps in:

Trinity House, before the year was ended, had to consider the difficulty in connection with the Scilly lighthouse much more serious than an insufficient or dim light - it had to consider the conduct of an unfaithful servant. It had wisely declined to appoint as keeper anyone born and bred in the islands where it was well-known that the inhabitants preyed on human life and lured mariners to shipwreck; but it unfortunately did not suspect danger from one who had gone out to live there since the lighthouse had been in progress, and this want of suspicion led to the appointment of a man who before three months had elapsed proved himself to have become a wrecker.

On a dark and rainy night, just before Christmas, 1680, the fire on Scilly lighthouse, which home-coming vessels had been told to expect, did not shine forth. On came a richly laden ship, sure of her position and safety, as no light was visible, and only when too late was warned by the sound of the waves as they broke upon the rocks, of her proximity to the reefs that lie around the Scillies. To attract attention and bring help she discharged her cannon, and then, but not till then, the fire on the lighthouse shot up bright and clear. Doubtless the keeper and his accomplices had watched the lights of the approaching vessel, and allowed the fire to slumber till she was actually upon the rocks; then, in the hope, perhaps, of escaping condemnation, should the matter reach the ears of his employers, he fanned his fire into flame. But his ruse did not succeed, nor could it well have done so, since he was found, but a few hours after, in the company with the greedy band of wreckers on the rocks, and much

of his plunder was subsequently discovered hidden in a heap of coal that stood ready for use beside the lighthouse.⁴⁸

It is difficult to tell the sources of Hardy's work, as he gives no citations. However, it is obvious that he began with primary sources from Trinity House, but then fell to fictionalising the account through his speculations of deliberate wrecking. We cannot know exactly what Hockin and Vinton were doing or thinking on the night in question, nor can we ascertain that they were involved in a 'ruse.' It is this which is pure invention, and for which no evidence exists.

The next level of corruption occurred when Michael Oppenheim was assigned to write the maritime history chapter of the Victoria County History in 1905. He was given four months and 30,000 words to write up a review of the entire maritime history of Cornwall, from the beginning to 1816.⁴⁹ The chapter itself is unevenly developed; he shows more expertise in the earlier centuries. Indeed, his specialty area was the administration of the Tudor navy royal. His editor suggested that he contact Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch; Oppenheim's reaction is very surprising:

I have already been in touch with Quiller-Couch and found him useless ... as an antiquarian he does not count. I have found it impossible to make him understand the difference of value of evidence between an original record and what purport to be copies of two hundred and fifty years later date. He thinks them both of equal value.⁵⁰

This is extraordinary, for when it came to including the history of the lighthouses of Cornwall, an area outside his field, Oppenheim turned to the one source recently published which could give him the information he needed: Hardy, which has been shown to be a partially fictionalized history. Oppenheim must also have used an additional, unidentified source since he identifies the ship as 'a Virginia trader,' and the light-keeper as 'Hoskins', neither of which is found in Hardy. Even more damning, Oppenheim adds the 'fact' that the light was not lit on the night in question, and, even though he attributes to Hardy the statement that Trinity House 'ordered that no **Cornishman** [author's emphasis] was to be employed at St Agnes,' no such charge is evident within Hardy's narrative. It is with Oppenheim that the charge that Trinity House would employ no Islanders at the light was conflated to include a ban on all Cornishmen. Thus Oppenheim was guilty of projection, by falling into the same trap for which he accused Quiller-Couch.

Both Hardy and Oppenheim have been the major sources for subsequent narratives of the St Agnes case, from that of Charles Henderson and A.K. Hamilton Jenkin to the most recent work of Richard Larn and BBC producers. Indeed, Henderson is explicit in crediting Oppenheim as the source for most of his material on lighthouses.⁵¹ Therefore, through this 'dynamic of corruption,' we have several stories, with some containing more divergence from the actual events than others. However, rather than discount these fictionalised narratives, they themselves need to be taken for what they are: a powerful myth that has captured the attention of a multitude of writers and readers. As Blackmore claims in his study of Portuguese shipwrecks, it is valuable:

to take the existence of variants as evidence of the vitality of the genre, of its ability to capture the interests of readers and printers over the years who desire, in their own way, to participate in the telling of shipwreck.⁵²

The Paradox

What are the underlying assumptions that caused these writers to divert from the most basic of evidence? In looking at the trend, we can see that the initial divergence came, not only possibly with Hardy's misreading of the sources, and perhaps missing the final correspondence which vindicated Hockin, but in his wish to believe that this was indeed, a sordid story of deliberate wrecking. Hockin is thus demonized through the various tellings. Typical of the story-telling process, he becomes a stock character, a villain, who, although real, has been stripped of his true identity. The story in all its variants also has the characteristic of other forms of popular mythology: it conveys 'moral values through the recounting of events.'⁵³ The villain is caught, and he is punished.

Yet, as Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson argue, myths can be better understood if they are seen in relation to other narratives, rather than 'to some empiricist notion of truth,' important though that may be.⁵⁴ And it is here there is a paradox. In other Cornish and Scillonian tales of deliberate wreckers, such as 'The Pirate and the Death Ship,' 'Dave Carwinnen,' and those told by Reverend Robert Hawker of Morwenstow, such as the tale of 'Cruel' Coppinger, the wreckers are shown as evil, but more importantly, they are not Cornishmen. They are 'foreigners.' The Pirate Wrecker comes from parts unknown, Dave Carwinnen is descended from shipwrecked Armada seamen, and 'Cruel' Coppinger, is an Irishman or a Dane. And yet, with the St Agnes narrative, we have an individual who is not a Cornishman, and not a Scillonian, but in the retellings of the story, he converts into a Scillonian, as much as he retains his wrecker status. What is going on here?

Even if we look at the process of mythopoeia I have just recounted, the paradox remains. The St Agnes story is being told through two levels: by those who are outsiders; and by those who are Cornish. The original tellers of the narrative, Hardy and Oppenheim, were not Cornishman, they were outsiders, nor do they seem to be receptive to the Cornish. Hardy discusses wrecking only in relation to the Cornish, completely ignoring the activity when he discusses the Dorset coast and the Goodwin Sands, both notorious locations for wrecking.⁵⁵ Oppenheim in particular was scathing about the Cornish Nationalist movement that was developing at the time. Thus, their vilification of Hockin could be reflective of their attitudes, he 'became' Cornish in partnership with his villainous behaviour of wrecking. The paradox comes in the second level, led by the Cornish historians. How, and more importantly, why, did Hockin's identity morph from one who 'became a Scillonian,' to one who was a Scillonian or Cornishman? If anything, these writers would be more inclined to maintain Hockin's 'foreignness,' which is more in keeping with the other wrecker tales, and thus which could be utilised as an example of foreign intrusion within their nationalist narratives. And yet, this did not happen. Rather, in the frequent verbal retellings to which I have been witness, the tale of deliberate wrecking at St Agnes is told with relish. It is as if the narrative of the 'Scillonian lighthouse-keeper-cum-wrecker' is now owned by the Cornish and Scillonians, in direct opposition to most other accounts which deny the existence of deliberate wreckers. Consequently, there are more factors at play here. What does this story mean for the tellers? In other words, what is the function of this story for the people of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly?

Conclusion

My investigation of the St Agnes story has shown that it cannot be included as an example of deliberate wrecking. This is not to say that deliberate wrecking did not occur—it did, but through the deliberate cutting of a ship's cables to force her aground.⁵⁶ However, we have no solid evidence in this case of deliberate wrecking through the use, or abuse, of lighthouses. Instead, what we have is a very complex narrative that has entered public consciousness through its telling and retellings, showing us the complexity inherent within the wrecking topos, and illustrating how the misfortune of a relatively minor shipwreck has been converted into mythical status. It is perhaps more an indication of Victorian cultural processes than an actual testimony to the proclivities of a seventeenth-century lighthouse keeper-cum wrecker.



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Notes

- ¹ Blackmore, *Manifest Perdition*.
- ² Oppenheim, 'Maritime History', p.499.
- ³ Henderson, *Essays in Cornish History*, p.178.
- ⁴ Vyvyan, *The Scilly Isles*, p.95; A.K. Hamilton Jenkin, *Cornwall and its People*, p.49.
- ⁵ Larn, *Cornish Shipwrecks*, p.21.
- ⁶ Larn *Shipwreck Index of the British Isles*.
- ⁷ Barrett, *The Trinity House of Deptford Strond*, p.39.
- ⁸ Chaplin, 'The Story of St Agnes Lighthouse', p.10.
- ⁹ Guildhall Library, Corporation of Trinity House [GL, CTH], MS 30004, Court Minutes, Vol. 5, 1676-1681, 'A Light at Scilly considered,' 20 April 1680, p.146.
- ¹⁰ British Library, India Office Records, [BL, IOR], B/36/f.10, 11 June 1680.
- ¹¹ GL, CTH, MS30072 Copy Letters Patent, Vol. 1, 1616-1715, Patent, Scilly, 1681, p.55.
- ¹² GL, CTH, MS 30004, Court Minutes, Vol. 5, 1676-1681, 4 May 1680, pp.148-9; GL, CTH, MS 30051, Correspondence, Select Entries, Vol. 2, 1677-1681, 'Instructions for Scilly Light to Mr. Samuel Hockin, Mariner, appointed to take care of the Lighthouse designed to be built at Scilly,' 15 May 1680, p.104.
- ¹³ GL, CTH, MS 30051, Correspondence, Select Entries, Vol. 2, 1677-1681, Veagleman to Hockin, 28 September 1680, p.126; *London Gazette*, 7 October 1680.
- ¹⁴ GL, CTH, MS 30051, Select Entries, Vol. 2, 20 November, 1680, p. 145.
- ¹⁵ GL, CTH, MS 30004, Court Minutes, Vol. 5, 1676-1681, 16 December 1680, p. 191.
- ¹⁶ GL, CTH, MS 30004, Court Minutes, Vol. 5, 1676-1681, 16 December 1680, p. 191.
- ¹⁷ GL, CTH, MS 30051, Correspondence, Select Entries, Vol. 2, Veagleman to Hockin, 20 November 1680, p. 145.
- ¹⁸ GL, CTH, MS 30051, Correspondence, Select Entries, Vol. 2, 1677-1681; GL, CTH, MS 3004, Court Minutes, Vol. 5, 1676-1681; Vol. 6, 1681-1685; Barrett, *The Trinity House of Deptford Strond*, p.99.
- ¹⁹ GL, CTH, MS 30051, Correspondence, Select Entries, Vol. 2, Veagleman to Hockin, 28 December 1680, p.158.
- ²⁰ GL, CTH, MS 30051, Correspondence, Select Entries, Vol. 2, Veagleman to Hockin, 28 December 1680, p.158.
- ²¹ GL, CTH, MS 30051, Correspondence, Select Entries, Vol. 2, Veagleman to Ekins, 28 December 1680, p.158.
- ²² GL, CTH, MS 30051, Correspondence, Select Entries, Vol. 2, Veagleman to Hockin, 20 January 1680/81, p. 162.
- ²³ GL, CTH, MS 3004, Court Minutes, Vol. 5, 1676-1681, 8 February 1680/81, p.199.

- ²⁴ GL, CTH, MS 3004, Court Minutes, Vol. 5, 1676-1681, 8 February 1680/81, p.199.
- ²⁵ Anon, *Shipwrecks around the Isles of Scilly*, p. 8.
- ²⁶ Fidler & Morrison, *Wrecks, Wreckers, and Rescuers*, p. 18.
- ²⁷ GL, CTH, MS 30051, Correspondence, Select Entries, Vol. 2, 1677-1681, paragraph 2. 'Instructions for Scilly Light to Mr. Samuel Hockin', 15 May 1680, p.104.
- ²⁸ GL, CTH, MS 30051, Correspondence, Select Entries, Vol. 2, 1677-1681, paragraph 5. 'Instructions for Survey Party- Capt. Hugh Till & Capt. Simon Bayly,' 15 May 1680, p.105.
- ²⁹ BL, IOR, Order of Council, 7 May 1680, B/36/f.5.; GL, CTH, MS 30051, Correspondence, Select Entries, Vol. 2, 1677-1681, R. Blackburne, Secretary of East India Company to Elder Brethren of Trinity House, 7 May 1680, p.101.
- ³⁰ GL, CTH, MS 30072, Copy Letters Patent, Vol. 1, 1616-1715, Patent for J. Killigrew and Robert Myrme for Lizard, 11 December 1623, p.10.
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- ³⁵ Chaplin, 'Story of St Agnes,' p.134.
- ³⁶ GL, CTH, MS 30004, Court Minutes, Vol. 4, 1790-1797, 29 May 1794, p.227.
- ³⁷ See Pearce, "'So Barbarous a Practice'"
- ³⁸ Samuel & Thompson, *Myths*, p.5.
- ³⁹ Blackmore, *Manifest Perdition*, p.xiv.
- ⁴⁰ 'List of Marine Records of the Late East India Company'
- ⁴¹ Heath, *The Isles of Scilly*; Troutbeck, *A Survey of the Ancient and Present State of the Scilly Islands*, p. 157; Woodley, *Present State of the Scilly Islands*; Borlase *Observations on the Ancient and Present State of the Isles of Scilly*.
- ⁴² Heath, *Isles of Scilly*, p. 37.
- ⁴³ Woodley, *Present State of the Scilly Islands*, p. 319, 164f.
- ⁴⁴ Hardy, *Lighthouses*.
- ⁴⁵ British Biographical Index, mf 516, p. 101.
- ⁴⁶ Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, pp. 431, 438-443.
- ⁴⁷ Tresize, *The West Country as a Literary Invention*, p.17.
- ⁴⁸ Hardy, *Lighthouses*, pp. 195-96.
- ⁴⁹ Minchinton, 'Michael Oppenheim'.
- ⁵⁰ Minchinton, 'Michael Oppenheim', p.90.
- ⁵¹ Henderson, 'Cornish Wrecks and Lighthouses', p.176.
- ⁵² Blackmore, *Manifest Perdition*, p.xiv.
- ⁵³ Samuel and Thompson, *Myths*, p.10.
- ⁵⁴ Samuel and Thompson, *Myths*, p.10.
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