

12 of the world's most exciting shipwrecks

James Wood picks his favourite wrecks, from warships and ill-fated expeditions to Bronze Age cargo vessels and Spanish treasure troves



Nelson's HMS Victory is still the flagship of the current First Sea Lord

Sibel Tunaz/Alamy



Henry VIII's *Mary Rose* – a must-see time capsule for anyone interested in history and the sea

Stephen Foote/Alamy

The discoveries of Shackleton's *Endurance* and, even more recently, HMS *Gloucester* are a reminder of the rich history and folklore that lurks beneath our keels.

Indeed, according to history.co.uk, there are over 40,000 wrecks in British waters alone, each with its own unique story of the time it sailed in, those who sailed her and the way she met her end. But let's not limit ourselves to our small corner of the globe; here's our pick of the world's most interesting wrecks. What are their stories, and what makes them so interesting? Moreover, what can the wrecks tell us about the mariners of the day who sailed aboard them.

1 *Mary Rose*, sunk 1545, Hampshire, UK

Why so interesting? Probably the most extensively excavated marine archaeology project of all time, the wreck of the *Mary Rose* has yielded over 26,000 artefacts. Each is a unique insight into life aboard a Man'o'War nearly 500 years ago.

History: One of the great ships-of-the-line commissioned by Henry VIII after coming to the throne in 1510, she was also regarded as his favourite. She sank in 1545 after sailing out of Portsmouth to tackle a French fleet under Admiral Claude d'Annebault. Heavily burdened with extra cannon, she fired a broadside at the French before turning and dipping her

open starboard cannon ports below the waterline. The *Mary Rose* sank with the loss of over 450 lives.

Unsuccessful recovery attempts were made in 1836, but the 1982 project met with greater success, and the *Mary Rose* was raised. The ship has become a huge time capsule, with the recovered artefacts offering unique insights into the life of regular seamen in the 16th century, and the belongings of the crew themselves describing the make-up of a Tudor ship's crew in incredible detail, from the tools of the ship's carpenter, to the contents of the doctor's medicine chest.

The *Mary Rose* is now one of the featured exhibitions at the Historic

Endurance is particularly well preserved in the icy waters of the Antarctic



ABOVE Greek Siren Vase shows what Burgas wreck looked like

RIGHT The Burgas wreck
INSET RIGHT Pieces of eight – Spanish gold from *Nuestra Senora de las Mercedes*



3,000m beneath a freezing sea with the risk of floe ice, but for the incredible state of preservation the wreck is in due to the environmental conditions.

The project intends only to 3D scan and film the wreck for research purposes, rather than attempt recovery.

3 Burgas shipwreck, sunk 400BC, Black Sea, Bulgaria

Why so interesting? The Burgas shipwreck was a Greek trading vessel, dating from 400BC, and is currently the oldest intact shipwreck ever discovered.

History: The Black Sea is considered to be one of the world's finest under water laboratories due to the anoxic (un-oxygenated) layer which preserves artefacts better than any other marine environment.

Unfortunately, the original name of the Burgas vessel is long lost to history, but this 23m Greek merchant ship now lies in almost complete condition 1.2 miles below the surface of the Black Sea.

Discovered by two ROV submarines, the wreck is in almost too good a condition; the contents of the hull are still firmly secured within, and the project will require further funding if we're ever to know more about her. Given that the wreck has been carbon dated to 400BC, who knows what tales about it are left to be told?

The Burgas vessel is almost identical to that depicted on the Siren Vase in the British museum; wouldn't it be incredible to learn what more the Burgas wreck can tell us?



Scale model of *Nuestra Senora de las Mercedes*

4 *Nuestra Senora de las Mercedes*, sunk 1804, Cape Santa Maria, Portugal

Why so interesting? Sunk by the British in 1804, the *Nuestra Senora de las Mercedes* was a Spanish treasure ship that would cause legal and political repercussions over 200 years later, when discovered by a commercial diving team.

History: A 36-gun Spanish frigate, the *Nuestra Senora de las Mercedes* was a lot smaller than previous treasure ships plying the Atlantic route. She was controversially sunk off the coast of Portugal by a British warship, at a time when the two countries were officially at peace. A single warning shot from HMS *Amphion* seems to have penetrated the powder magazine, causing an explosion that sent the Spanish ship to the sea bed, along with its treasure.

Fast forward 200 years to 2007 and the wreck was located by Odyssey, a private marine exploration company, and given the codename 'Black Swan'. They managed to recover over half a million gold and silver coins before the Spanish government identified the wreck as *Nuestra Senora de las Mercedes* and issued a legal injunction to prevent

Dockyard Museum in Portsmouth, along with Nelson's HMS *Victory* and HMS *Warrior*, the Royal Navy's first ironclad and the most fearsome warship of her day.

2 *Endurance*, sunk 1915, Weddell Sea, Antarctica

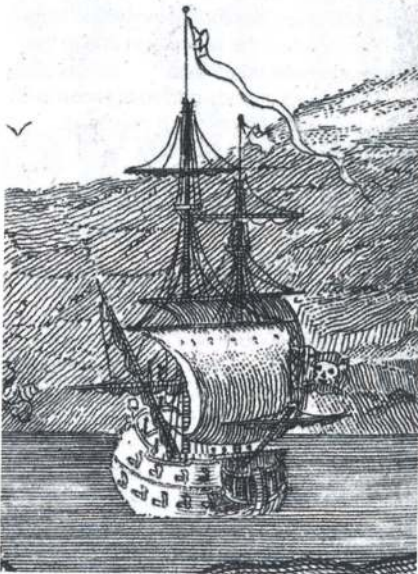
Why so interesting? Discovered at a depth of over 3,000m, *Endurance* was Ernest Shackleton's ship for the ill-fated Trans-Antarctic expedition (1914-1916). The wreck discovery is also regarded as one of the most complex sub-sea projects ever undertaken.

History: *Endurance* was the three-masted barquentine in which Shackleton and 27

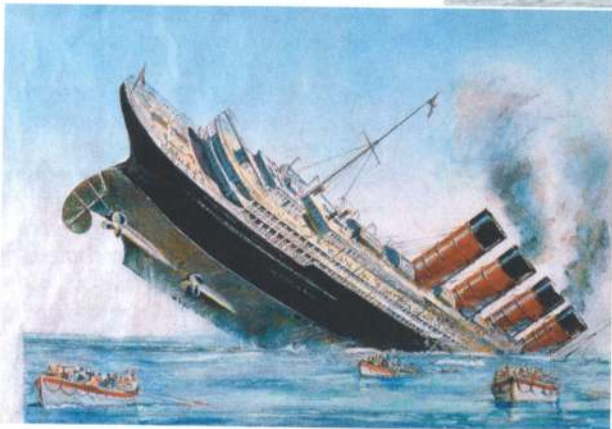
men would be based for their trans-Antarctic expedition. Built in Norway in 1912, and originally named *Polaris*, *Endurance's* voyage to the Antarctic would transpire to be both her first and last. After becoming ice-bound, she eventually sank due to the crushing pressure exerted by the ice on her hull.

Together with a small crew, Shackleton began a remarkable and successful 800-mile open boat voyage to South Georgia, to seek assistance, with the remaining crew relocated to Elephant Island to await rescue.

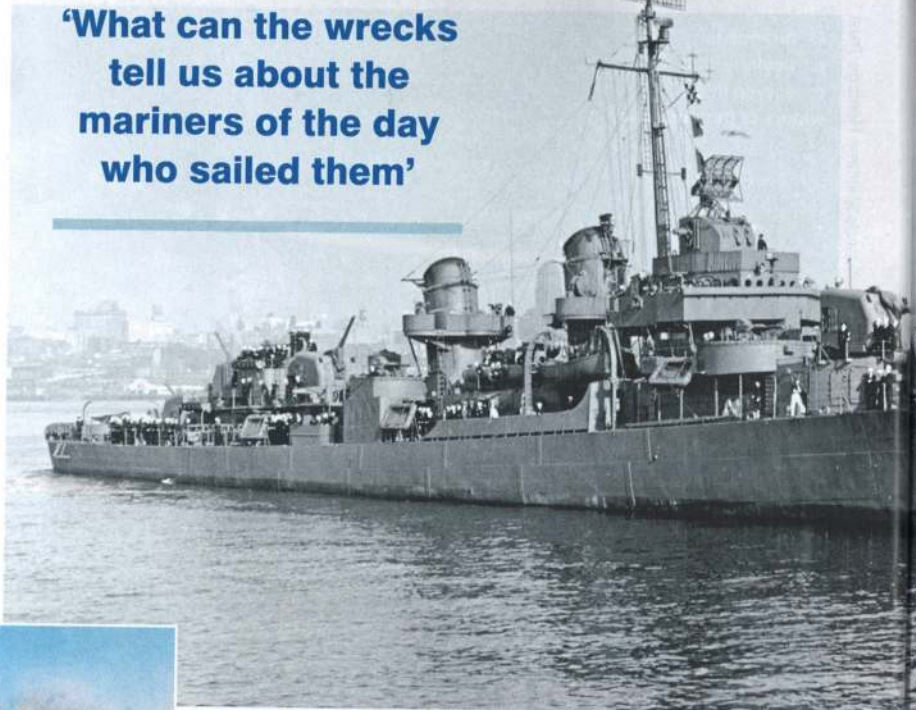
Rediscovered by the *Endurance22* project, the wreck is remarkable not just for the technical achievement of locating it



GL Archive/Alamy



akg-images/Alamy



US Coast Guard Photo/Alamy

'What can the wrecks tell us about the mariners of the day who sailed them'

ABOVE LEFT Blackbeard's *Queen Anne's Revenge*
LEFT Sinking of the *RMS Lusitania*
RIGHT Recovery of cannon from the *Queen Anne's Revenge*



US Coast Guard Photo/Alamy

further recovery work. At this point the Peruvian government also laid claim to the ship, as the country of origin of the voyage.

It wasn't until six years after the discovery that the Spanish government was successful in its legal claim, and *Odyssey* was forced to hand over 14.5 tonnes of gold and silver, which is now on display at National Museum of Subaquatic Archaeology in Murcia.

5 Queen Anne's Revenge, sunk 1718, Beaufort Inlet, North Carolina, USA

Why so interesting? Built in 1710, the *Concord's* brief history as a British merchantman, French warship and slaver might have been enough to make this list in its own right. However, in 1717, she was captured by the infamous pirate Edward Teach or 'Blackbeard' and became the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, his flagship.

History Likely launched in Bristol in 1710, the *Concord* was supposed to lead a relatively mundane existence as an English merchant ship, but fell victim to a French privateer and became '*La Concorde*' under Rene Duguay-Trouin, a one-time privateer who was then a captain in the French navy. *La Concorde* then

took an ignoble turn after being sold as a slave ship to Rene Montaudin in Nantes before being captured off St Vincent, by Edward 'Blackbeard' Teach.

Having renamed the ship *Teach* used her to prey on the trade routes between Europe and the America's before grounding her on a sandbank off Beaufort Inlet and transferring any valuables into another of his ships.

The wreck was discovered in 1996, but wasn't confirmed as that of the *Queen Anne's Revenge* until 2011 when artefacts recovered from the wreck, including 31 cannon, allowed for a reasonable identification to be made.



US newspaper story covering the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915

6 RMS Lusitania, sunk 1915, 11 miles off Old Head of Kinsale, Ireland

Why so interesting? The sinking of *RMS Lusitania* in 1915 holds more significance than the wreck itself in the context of World War I. In torpedoing the cruise liner, the Germans succeeded in casting themselves as the aggressor in the eyes of the American public, contributing to the US joining the war in 1917.

History: Luxury Cunard liner *Lusitania* was launched in 1906 and undertook over 200 transatlantic crossings before being torpedoed by a German U-boat off the coast of Kinsale, Ireland. Nearly 1,200 people were killed.

The sinking was used to full political effect by the British government, as over a hundred American citizens were killed when the *Lusitania* went down, and this helped swing American support behind Britain in World War I.

Although vehemently denied at the time, the *Lusitania* was arguably a legitimate target, as it was revealed in 1980 that she was carrying millions of rounds of ammunition and tonnes of artillery casings and fuses. The wreck has been dived, but the presence of these munitions makes any detailed exploration extremely hazardous.

John Frost Newspapers/Alamy



GL Archive/Alamy

ABOVE Fletcher-class destroyer USS *Johnston*

ABOVE RIGHT Painting of the beached HMS *Gloucester*

RIGHT Brothers Lincoln and Julian Barnwell measuring the *Gloucester's* cannon

LEFT The Barnwells with the ship's bell



Wikimedia Commons



Norfolk Historic Shipwrecks

7 USS *Johnston*, sunk 1944, Samar Island, Philippines

Why so interesting? The USS *Johnston* is the world's deepest ever discovered shipwreck, found by a remote submarine. **History:** The fact that the *Johnston* has been rediscovered at all is incredible, given she lies at a depth of 20,000ft/6,500m under the Philippine Sea – that's over four miles down!

The ship was a US Navy destroyer before meeting her demise at the hands of the Japanese Pacific fleet during the Battle of Samar Island. Outnumbered and outgunned the USS *Johnston* sank about 2½ hours into the battle, taking over half of her 320 crew with her.

Given the circumstances of her sinking, it's perhaps not surprising the wreck is almost completely unrecognisable from its original form, with wreckage strewn across the sea bed.

8 Dokos wreck, sunk 2700-2300BC, Dokos, Greece

Why so interesting? The Dokos wreck is the oldest shipwreck ever found, dating back nearly 5,000 years to 2,700-2,300BC **History:** If, like me, your mind's eye conjures up visions of cavemen and sabre

tooth tigers when someone brings up the term 'pre-history', then it's likely that the details of the Dokos wreck will come as a bit of a shock. Lying in 15m of water and discovered in 1975 on an ancient trading route, the Dokos wreck was

excavated by the Hellenic Institute of Marine Archaeology from 1990-92.

Dating back to the Bronze age, any organic remnants of the original ship were long gone, but the same can't be said of the cargo. A huge array of ceramics, urns and kitchenware were recovered, as well as amphorae for transporting wine and olive oil and two stone anchors. The rich cargo tells us that there was a thriving economy for trade in Mediterranean, very much at odds with how we may think of a time 5,000 years in the past.

9 HMS *Gloucester*, sunk 1682, Norfolk, UK

Why so interesting? Famous not for its inauspicious end on a Norfolk sandbank, but for nearly killing its most famous passenger, James Stuart, the future King of England.

History In 1682, HMS *Gloucester* was



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carrying James Stuart, Duke of York, to Edinburgh to collect his heavily pregnant wife and household, in order to bring them to London for, it was hoped, the birth of a legitimate male heir. The Duke, a former Lord High Admiral, had argued with

the pilot for control of the ship's course and it ran aground 45km off Great Yarmouth. Hundreds of lives were lost but the Duke survived.

The wreck site was actually found in 2007 by diving brothers and archaeologists Lincoln and Julian Barnwell, but only revealed recently. In 2012 the ship's bell was used by the Receiver of Wreck and Ministry of Defence to decisively identify the vessel.

10 Sutton Hoo, 'sunk' 625AD, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk

Why so interesting? Yes, this is more of a ship burial than a wreck, but the Sutton Hoo ship is one of the most spectacular archaeological finds in Britain, lending us huge insight into the Anglo-Saxon seafarer nobility of the 7th century.

History: Discovered in 1939 by Basil 

Wikimedia/Creative Commons by Alex Healing



Tony French/Alamy

ABOVE Longship burial site at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk
LEFT Replica of the Sutton Hoo Saxon helmet
BELOW Wager's Action off Cartagena in May, 1708

Marcin Jamkowski/Adventure Pictures/Alamy



Vasa Museum in Stockholm

Brown, a jobbing archaeologist, the Sutton Hoo ship was a 27m clinker-built oak warship of Saxon design, with a beam of 4.4m. There were benches for up to 40 rowers, and evidence of repairs showed that the ship had been put to active use. The craft was of expert construction, indicating it would have been a high-status vessel.

Widely considered to be the final resting place of Rædwald, an Anglo-Saxon bretwalda, the artefacts recovered were exquisite, and can now be found in the British Museum. In particular, the helmet reconstruction and the garnet adorned sword pommels are breathtaking.

The Sutton Hoo ship also makes this list thanks to the incredible reconstruction of the ship being undertaken by the Sutton Hoo Ships Company. Their intention is to use Anglo-Saxon techniques to build a fully sea-tested replica. Follow their progress at: nationalhistoricships.org.uk/shipshape/sutton-hoo-ships-company

11 Vasa, sunk 1628, Sodermalm, Sweden

Why so interesting? The ill-fated *Vasa* was built as the flagship of the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus, but she foundered on her maiden voyage. Raised in a remarkable state of repair in 1961, the *Vasa* lays claim to being the best-preserved 17th century ship in the world.



Vasa model next to the real thing in Stockholm

History: Much like the *Mary Rose* 100 years later, the *Vasa* is an example of how any vessel can end up in Davy Jones's locker through a combination of untested design and poor seamanship, even the flagship of an eminent naval power. Sweden was embroiled in a war with Poland at the time, and there was a lot of political pressure applied for the *Vasa* to be completed as quickly as possible; the Swedes were outmatched at sea, and the *Vasa* would help address the balance.

The overly heavyweight armament of the *Vasa* served to imbalance an already imperfect ship design; the Swedish Admiral, Fleming, had abandoned the test voyages early, for fear the *Vasa* would capsize. It seems no one was able to communicate this effectively to the Swedish king for the ship foundered as it prepared to fire its first celebratory broadside, with water rushing into the open gunports. Although the valuable cannon were recovered from the wreck a few years later, the *Vasa* would have to wait until 1961 until it was raised.

The wreck is housed in the Vasa Museum, Stockholm, one of the most popular museums in Scandinavia.



National Maritime Museum Collection

12 San Jose treasure galleon, sunk 1708, Cartagena, Colombia

Why so interesting? Not just one of the fabled Spanish treasure galleons of the Americas, but one whose exact location is a national secret. The gold, silver and emeralds discovered have been estimated to be worth an eye watering \$17bn US.

History: Formally discovered by the Colombian navy in 2015, and identified by the engraving on her many cannon, the *San Jose* now lies in 600m of water off Cartagena. Her story is a tragic one.

The *San Jose* was a 64-gun ship-of-the-line, one of the most powerful of her day. Part of an escort for 14 merchantmen carrying treasure back from Bolivia, they were intercepted by a British squadron in a battle that became known as Wager's Action. The British intended to capture the *San Jose*, but after an exchange of cannon fire the powder magazine aboard the Spanish ship exploded, killing all but 11 of the 600 crew and taking the treasure to the bottom.

The discovery of the *San Jose* became a legal wrangle between the Colombian government and a private research company that claimed to have found the ship's resting place in 1981. The Colombian government is now in charge of exploration and recovery, and has promised to open a museum for the wreck in Cartagena.

Tony Miller/Alamy

