

The Discovery of the SS Finchley

Nova Scotia's Premiere 19th Century Wreck
by Pat Young, 11 July, 2000

On a cool crisp evening in November, 1990, I received a phone call from a friend, Jerry Julien, who excitedly informed me that two fishermen had lost their scallop drag in what they believed to be a wreck in 80 feet of water off Harbour Island, near Drumhead, Nova Scotia. They wanted to know if I would check it out and recover the drag. From years of wreck hunting, I envisioned just another rockpile on the bottom, but unless I verified it, I would never know for sure. So without hesitation, I volunteered to investigate.

Within a couple of days (Nov. 18/90), my wife Shelley and I met with Jerry and the two fishermen, John Bingley and Hugh MacDonald at the Fisherman's Harbour wharf. There were only a few hours of sunlight left on this late autumn afternoon, so we wasted little time loading the dive gear into John's thirty-one foot Cape Islander and headed out to the dive site. John located the site using Loran and turned on his color sounder. After a couple of passes over the flat sand bottom, a beautiful electronic image popped up on the screen. We could clearly identify a structure looming 20 feet off the bottom. A marker float was dropped and the dive began. Descending the anchor line, I began to discern an image at a depth of 40 feet. The ghostly upright bow stem of a shipwreck materialized out of the evening gloom. Landing on the deck at 60 feet, I observed the unmistakable riveted hull plates of a 19th Century iron vessel. The foredeck had two layers of beams, enclosing the forward hold. The wooden planks that covered the beams were no longer present. I floated down into the hold to a depth of 80 feet and discovered it empty except for silt and gravel. I noticed the iron butt of a foremast and a long loading beam protruding from the bow area, adorned with brilliant frilled anemones and stalked tunicates. On the starboard hull, adjacent to the mast were a couple of deadeyes. Then looming out of the murk, were two intact boilers sitting abreast of each other inside the hull. Just ahead of the boilers was the deteriorated bridge, accommodations and galley area as evidenced by numerous portholes and broken crockware laying around. Among the pieces was an ornate serving plate with a crest and letters almost covered with pink corraline algae. In the diminishing light, I could make out the letters S.S. Fin..... This could be the artifact to help identify the wreck, so I carefully saved it for further examination.

On the starboard hull was the ship's double helm, laying on its side, still attached to an iron pedestal. It consisted of a large wooden storm wheel about five feet in diameter and a smaller wheel about two feet in diameter. Each wheel was capped with brass. This was definitely the centrepiece of this magnificent wreck.

The engine room was empty except for a tangled mass of pipes. A second mast stem protruded about 15 feet off the deck. The rear hold was also barren except for some spare propeller blades stored beneath the deck on the starboard side. Descending over the fantail of this early steamer, I observed a large debris field on the sand and noticed the propeller was missing.

After the dive, we carefully cleaned the encrusting algae from the plate and discovered that we had found the long forgotten wreck of the S.S. Finchley, registered in London, England.

Archival research revealed that the S.S. Finchley had been built in five months at Sunderland, England under special order by J. Blumer and Company. The construction was completed in May of 1881. The owners were Watt, Ward and Company of London. The Finchley was 271 feet in length, 37.1 feet wide and 24.3 feet in depth. She was an iron steamship with a single screw propeller, powered by a compound inverted two cycle engine with pistons of 35" and 68" diameter which could produce 250 hp to enable the ship to cruise at 10 knots. Her registered tonnage was 1265 T net, 1951 T gross and 1840 T underdeck. She was constructed with seven bulkheads, two decks (one iron and one part iron), and had three tiers of beams (with or without decks on them). Her poopdeck was 30 feet long, bridgedeck 64 feet and forecastle deck was 30 feet long. She was also built with a double bottom to accommodate water ballast for stability.

In 1884, the steamship S.S. Finchley left Coosaw, South Carolina with a cargo of 2350 T of phosphate rock, heading for the United Kingdom. The vessel planned to stop at the Canadian port of Sydney on Cape Breton Island to load her coal bunkers for the trip across the North Atlantic. The Finchley experienced fair weather while travelling up the Atlantic Seaboard but encountered dense fog on the Eastern Shore of Nova Scotia. In the early morning of September 29 1884, the Finchley grounded on what was believed to be the Pollux Rock. The Captain, Jacob Garson managed to back her off but she began to leak so he decided to head back to Halifax for repairs. About an hour later she struck on the middle of the Southeast Breakers off Country Harbour. Once again, Captain Garson managed to get the Finchley off, but she was leaking so badly, he hired a local fisherman to pilot her onto soft bottom in an attempt to save her. The effort was unsuccessful and the Finchley sank off the western side of Harbour Island with the top of her masts marking her location. A nearby shoal was later named after the Finchley, not far from where the Saladin was wrecked in 1844 after an infamous mutiny.

The crew and passengers got off safely and were sheltered by the families in the community of Issac's Harbour. The officers spoke highly of the hospitality they received although three passengers were fined \$2.00 each for drunken behavior. The officers and crew returned to England a week later on the ship S.S. Caspian, but Captain Garson remained at the wreck site to arrange for salvage tenders to raise the Finchley. This proved to be impractical but it appears likely that hardhat divers salvaged the cargo along with the engine, popeller, winches, anchors and chains.

We quickly made plans to carefully document the pristine Finchley before the eventual onslaught of scavengers. An experienced crew consisting of divers Bob Semple, Neil McNair and myself including fishermen John and Hugh topside, photographed and videotaped the S.S. Finchley for the first time since she sank over one hundred years ago. The present state of this iron steamer is very unusual because most vessels of this era have either been smashed by the forces of nature or intentionally blown apart by salvagers. This wreck, sheltered from the elements stands upright on the sandy bottom with its hull and two deck levels virtually intact. The double helm was the highlight of the wreck and afforded many photo opportunities (sadly, the helm was dessicated by a group of irresponsible hoodlums). We have dived the S.S. Finchley many times and she has never failed to amaze us with her Victorian charm, preserved for divers to enjoy. The Finchley is one of Nova Scotia's most intact shipwrecks from the late nineteenth century and can be explored by both intermediate and experienced divers.

Hope you enjoyed this "little" shipwreck tale from the Eastern Shore!