

# SHIPS AND MARITIME LANDSCAPES

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# Ships And Maritime Landscapes

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# 65. The Oakfield (1883-1897). The shipwreck of an Atlantic steamship (Ponta Delgada, Azores, Portugal)

Sónia Bombico

## Introduction

During the archaeological monitoring of the construction work of the new maritime cruise terminal of Ponta Delgada, São Miguel Island, Azores, in December 2007, the iron remains of a shipwreck structure were discovered. During January 2008, a mission to survey and categorise the remains was carried out under the supervision of archaeologists José António Bettencourt and Patrícia Carvalho, whose assessment made it possible to reach a decision regarding the site's future. The remains belonged to a 19th-century British steamship. It was decided to study the underwater archaeological structure in detail so after that it could be totally removed from the site instead of being conserved *in situ*.

The underwater research operation was executed between the 27th of February and the 2nd of July 2008

and included cleaning of the structure, archaeological and archaeographic recording, recovery and preventive conservation of artefacts, dismantling and transportation of the structure and monitoring of the deposit of the dismantled sections on a location away from the construction site. The underwater operations, conducted under the supervision of archaeologist Sónia Bombico, were carried out with the help of archaeologists Vítor Frazão and Ângela Ferreira and with the scientific supervision of Célia Coelho (Archeocélis, Investigações Arqueológicas, Lda.).

## The shipwreck and archaeological material

The archaeological site consisted of the remains of a ship hull, which were located at a distance of 15 m from

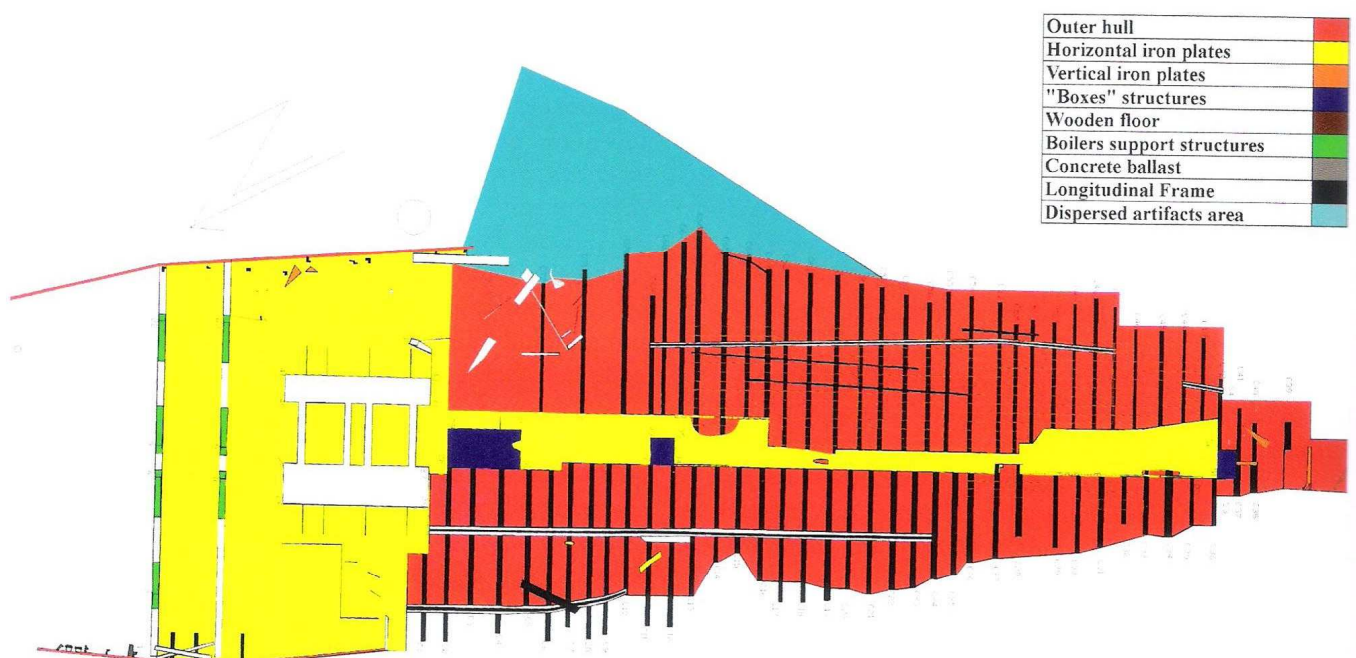


Fig. 1. Planimetry of the archaeological site (Plan: Sónia Bombico and Vítor Frazão).



the current shoreline and at an average depth of 5 m. The main structure was about 11 m wide and 35 m long, orientated in a northeast-southwest direction with the bow facing the sea (southwest). The stern was not identified because the area touching the shore was amidships and the remaining structural body of the vessel disappeared under the slope of the Avenida Marginal of the city. The ship was deposited on a rocky bottom, the relief of which made the ship's structure to form an angle of 15° to port side (east) and of 5° towards the bow (southwest). Due to salvage activities and the marine dynamics over the past two centuries, the ship's structure was only preserved *in situ* at cargo hold level. Prior to being identified, the ship was protected and sealed by a layer of sand that was about 3 m thick.

The lining of the outer hull consisted of iron plates, of varying size, juxtaposed and fastened longitudinally and transversely by iron rivets. The internal structure of the vessel was built with bulkheads that formed multiple watertight compartments. These vertical walls were combined with angle bars acting as assembly pieces. On these pieces we were able to identify the inscriptions 'STOCKTON MI Co.' and 'MIDDLESBRO' which could be related to Northeast England (particularly to the towns of Middlesbrough and Stockton-on-Tees), a region with a long tradition of naval construction.

The commercial port of Ponta Delgada reached its peak in the 19th century. In this context, British steamships operating in the orange and pineapple trade, calling at São Miguel for coal, were the most common victims of storms. Due to the discovery of a plaque containing a reference to the builder of both the vessel and its marine steam engine, we were able to identify the archaeological remains as belonging to the steamship *Oakfield*, sunk on the 21st of January 1897. The cargo remains – bags of sugar from Demerara (British Guiana) and casks of rum – also helped confirm the shipwreck's identity. In addition to the gathering of elements belonging to the ship's cargo, a set of fire-clay bricks and numerous board tools related to the steam engine's operations were identified.

### The steamship *Oakfield*

The *Oakfield* was an iron-hulled, schooner-rigged screw steamship, constructed at Southampton in 1883 by Oswald Mordaunt & Co. 'Engineers & Shipbuilders for Burrell & Son of Glasgow'. With one deck, two masts, and the following dimensions: length 259.5 ft., breadth 36 ft., and depth of hold 18 ft. Her gross tonnage was 1748.19, and she had two compound surface-condensing

engines of 170 horsepower combined. The *Oakfield* left Demerara on the 6th of January 1897, under the command of Mr. M.R.J. Fisher, and carried a crew of 21 people and three passengers. She was bound for London, and the master had orders to call at São Miguel for coal. No lives were lost during the shipwreck. The shipwreck was reported in the local press (*Commercio Michaelense*, Friday, the 22nd of January 1897): "Shipwreck. Yesterday, at around half past six in the evening, the British steamship 'Oakfield' coming from Demerara and bound for London, upon approaching our harbour to load oranges and pineapples, entered the harbour without the service of a pilot and dropped the anchor near São Pedro's downtown, a little bit to the east, in such a way that when she swung round, with the bow turning to the sea and the wind, to southeast, the stern hit the bottom, making a hole. (...) The steamship carried a cargo of 12 thousand bags of sugar and 1000 casks of rum."

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