

Shipwrecked Ingots Return to Original Mould

by Steve Smith

As more shipwrecks and their treasures continue to be salvaged, the collection of mining artifacts finds new grounds: the sea floor.

At 4 AM on 20th July 1885, the steamship "Cheerful" collided with HMS Hecla, a Royal Navy frigate. This happened 18 miles NNW of the Cornish port of St Ives in the Celtic sea. Cheerful was en-route from London to Liverpool with a cargo that included refined tin ingots that had been collected at Plymouth and Falmouth. The ingots had come from four local smelting houses - Treloweth, Carvedras & Trethellan in Cornwall and Tamar in Devon. Cheerful sank in four minutes, carrying her cargo 35 fathoms down to the sea bed. Thirteen drowned.

One hundred and ten years later, a friend of mine who is a local mining entrepreneur acquired the salvage rights to Cheerful. In 1995 he mounted a salvage operation at great expense to recover the tin cargo. This consisted of both 28 and 56lb ingots, as well as tin straws. At thirty five fathoms the divers apparently had only fifteen minutes on the sea bed for one dive each day, so it was quite an expensive business!

Ingots were recovered in various states from barely recognizable to looking like they were made yesterday. The poorer ones were re-melted and cast into small ingots bearing the marks of the smelting works the tin had come from, whilst the good ones found their way to collectors and museums. I have one from Carvedras, bearing the symbol of the lamb and flag, a Christian symbol of purity intended to symbolize the purity of the tin.

Whilst all this was happening in 1995, I took a trip, as I often do, to a local salvage seller. His stock consists mostly of old farm equipment and bits recovered from demolished houses that are re-usable. Lurking in a corner was what I recognized to be an ingot mould with a five pounds price tag on it. Although I knew what it was, at that stage it could have been a mould for any metal from anywhere. Picking it up, I strolled over to the proprietor who uttered words to the effect of "Oh yes! That's a handy little pig-feeder".

I returned home with the item and not yet realizing its true significance filled it with tap water and left it in the garden for the dog to drink from.

Three months later, a friend who has a deep interest in Devon mining paid a visit. As we walked around the garden he seized on the water-filled ingot mould. When I'd bought my Carvedras ingot, he'd bought one of the Tamar Smelting Works ones. I'd never seen a Tamar one as far fewer of these were recovered, but my friend was (almost!) prepared to bet money that my ingot mould was the same shape as the Tamar ingot back home in his lounge.

We put this to the test a couple of months later. We're both members of the Plymouth Mineral & Mining Club (he started it back in 1970) and both attended the 1996 Annual Dinner at the

Plume of Feathers pub at Princetown, a couple of hundred yards from Dartmoor prison. In the car park, I produced my mould and he dug deep in the boot of his car for his ingot. We dropped the 28lb ingot into the mould and it sort of fitted. However, turning it end-for-end allowed it to drop in convincingly with such a snug fit that we had a job getting it out again. It's probably my



over-active imagination, but I would almost say that mine is the very mould that this ingot was cast in all those years ago. Needless to say, the mould has now been promoted from its garden position into somewhere more secure!

I'd be interested to know whether news of the recovered tin cargo reached collectors in the US. I'd be very surprised if it hasn't!

(left) A Tamar Works tin ingot fits snugly in an original mold.