

An Account of the wreck of HMS Dragon
(from a copy of the Court Martial published by the Maritime Archaeology Group)

The Court Martial was held on board Her Majesty's ship the Dreadnought in the Downs on the 8th May 1712 with the President being Sir Edward Whitaker Knt Vice Admiral of the White Squadron of Her Majesty's Fleet.

It was Saturday the 16th March and HMS Dragon with her Captain George Martin was anchored off St Peter Port. She was to escort a convoy to England. At nine in the morning the Captain went ashore to organise the convoy. The First Mate says that the tide was about an hours ebb. At one in the afternoon she raised her anchor when the pilot Peter Cock went on board. The wind was from the south and was described as a moderate gale though it picked up to a fresh gale during the afternoon and backed WSW. A front was coming bringing rain later.

The Captain went on board at about three and after a discussion with the pilot decided to go through the Great Russell. The pilot seems to have favoured going up the Little Russell and in fact half the convoy took this route. By five o'clock they had cleared south of Herm Jethou to go up the Great Russell and they bore away. By half past five they had cleared the Russell and they hardened up to go west of the Casquets. At about the same time they reduced sail to allow the merchant ships to catch up. The First Mate says the pilot was worried about some rocks to the west, presumably the Grand Amfroque at the north end of Herm. He also mentions an east going tide. At about six the Casquets could be seen about seven or eight miles away. The Purser and the Master Gunner chatted with the pilot about the Casquets and as to whether it might be better to go through the Alderney Race. This was discounted, as the Dragon would lose contact with the part of the fleet that had gone through the Little Russell. Being in charge of the safety of the convoy as a whole they must keep the whole fleet together. There was always the danger of meeting the enemy and the Master Gunner states that he went below to get everything ready in case of that happening. By seven the Casquets were five miles off to the North East and the Dragon was on a course of North West by North. The First Mate came back on watch at eight, by which time the weather had deteriorated. The Dragon was doing four knots. The next thing the Gunner mentions is a shout from the deck and when he went up there were breakers under the lee bow. All agree that this was about quarter past eight in the evening. The crew tried to go about but with not much sail up because of the wind she went into irons. The anchors were dropped but it was too late and the ship was forced between two rocks and stuck fast. The Gunner also mentions a mystery bark (a term for any small sailing boat) which got in the way as the Dragon was trying to go about. The Purser also mentions this boat though he calls it a merchantman and says that the Dragon's anchor caught in its mainsail.

The only part of the document to have a different angle on the story is a short letter from BF and SC, which states "how carelessly and inadvisedly Her Majesty's ship Dragon was lost". They say that three minutes before the ship struck the commanding officers were drinking and dancing to excess with several females. There was no officer on deck but the Master's Mate. They say that these happenings were "a great inducement to ye loss". Perhaps a bit of an understatement! The Court Marshal discounted this evidence as the two men did not come forward again and could not be contacted.

The conclusion of the Court was that the ship had been properly sailed and her course would have been enough to clear the Casquets and that the irregular set of the current was the sole cause

of the loss of the ship.

If the First Mate was correct about the time of the tide the flood should have started at about three in the afternoon and the convoy was right to leave at about that time. The important question is why the Dragon decided to go up the Great Russell and not go with the half of the fleet that took the Little Russell. The pilot seems to have been of the opinion that the Little Russell route was the best and only took the other on the insistence of the Captain. This had two far reaching results, which seem to have led to the disaster. Firstly it split the fleet and meant that the Dragon had to slow to allow the convoy to reform. Secondly it meant that the Dragon was less likely to be able to wear the Casquets. Alternatively the Captain could have ordered the whole convoy through the Great Russell from where they could have taken the Alderney Race route. Perhaps he had some stubborn ships that would not have obeyed him. The decision of the Captain seems to have resulted in the wrecking of his ship. The part played by the pilot in the affair is also a problem – a pilot would surely have known the dangers of the Casquets and the vagaries of the tide. One would think that a pilot would have kept his ship well away, especially on a dark and windy March night. Another mystery is the bark or merchantman that is blamed for impeding the Dragon's efforts to go about. One would think that someone would have been able to trace that ship. Who BF and SC were is another mystery – perhaps just malcontents with a grudge against the Captain. The initials do not match any of the crew who signed documents submitted to the Court.

None of the crew seem to have lost their lives in the disaster – though how they were rescued is not detailed.

The wreck of the Dragon has been found off the Casquets though unfortunately some material was removed before proper safe guards could be made. Two bronze cannon seem to have been removed and sold in France. The whole area is now protected by law.

Captain George Martin had been a captain since 1700 and died 22nd Oct 1724.

It was not until 1723 that the first light was put on the Casquets.