

SS Politician



Looking out to Barra from Eriskay, the stretch of water where the SS Politician sank

SS Politician: Whisky galore off Eriskay

DIANE MACLEAN 5 February 1941

On the morning of the 5th of February 1941 a young lad was combing a beach in South Uist. What caught his eye that day was not flotsam but a ship, just out at sea. The SS Politician was in trouble and beginning to list.

The Politician had been a busy cargo ship before the war but now the British navy used her to cross the Atlantic, trading with North America. That February she was on her way to Kingston, Jamaica, and New Orleans, her hold filled with cotton, stoves, cutlery, medicines, baths and biscuits. But that was not all she was carrying. Secured in hold number 5 were nearly three million pounds of Jamaican banknotes and 260,000 bottles of first class whisky. As the whisky was for the American market no duty had been paid. The cargo was expected to sell for nearly half a million pounds.

The Politician had left Liverpool and made her way north, sailing past the Isle of Man, towards the Hebrides. When the wind increased and the sea became rough Captain Beaconsfield Worthington plotted a new course that would take him past the Skerryvore Light, and then onto Barra Head Light before crossing the Minch. It should have been an easy passage.

Dynamiting whisky. You wouldn't think there'd be men in the world so crazy as that!

Just off Rosinish Point on the Isle of Eriskay sand banks hide beneath the water, invisible to the untutored



eye. By 7:40am on the fifth of February the Politician was slightly off course. The lookout watch saw land.

Desperately trying to avert disaster the ship swung round away from the coastline, straight into the hidden sandbanks.

The fuel tanks were ruptured and the ship began to flood. After 20 minutes the engine room gave up its struggle, and the fires went out. In the confusion nobody knew where they were and the wrong location was given to the lifeboat crew from Barra.

At Rosinish Point the locals had begun to gather. They put out a sailing boat and reached the ship, offering what assistance they could. By late afternoon the lifeboat finally found the boat and took the crew to Barra for the night. Once there Captain Worthington reported to the insurers that the ship was salvageable and was lying at the "most easterly point of Eriskay Island, South Uist, Outer Hebrides".

And it is here that the well-known story of the SS Politician really begins. Immortalised in the book Whisky Galore by Compton Mackenzie, and then in the Ealing comedy of the same name, the story was not about what happened to the boat, but what became of the cargo.



1963 Picture of South Uist man John Morrison with an emptied bottle of Highland Nectar whisky from the SS Politician

While the ship waited for the salvage crew, the locals did not.

Individually, in groups, at night or during the day, islanders visited the Politician and few left empty handed. Boats came from as far away as Lewis as news of the whisky travelled across the Hebrides. No islander regarded it as stealing, for them the

rules of salvage meant that once the bounty was in the sea, it was theirs to rescue.

This was not the view of the local customs officer. Charles McColl was incensed at the outright thievery that he saw going on. None of the whisky had paid a penny of duty, and he riled against this loss to the public purse. McColl whipped up a furore and made the police act. Villages were raided and crofts turned upside down. Bottles were hidden, secreted, or simply drunk in order to hide the evidence.

McColl and the police caught plenty of locals red-handed, and they were sent to trial. On 26 April at Lochmaddy Sheriff Court a group of men from Barra pled guilty to theft and were charged between three and five pounds. McColl was beside himself at the leniency of the sentence, but the police were tired of the harassment of the locals who had not, in their minds done such a bad thing.

But McColl continued on his crusade, and more men did appear in court, some of whom were sentenced to up to six weeks imprisonment in Inverness.

At sea, the salvage attempts were not going well, and it was eventually decided to let the Politician remain where she was. McColl, who had already estimated that the islanders had purloined 24,000 bottles of whisky, ensured that there would be no more temptation. He applied for, and was granted, permission to explode her hull.

Further reading

- ***POLLY: The True Story Behind Whisky Galore*, Roger Hutchinson, Mainstream Publishing, 1990**

The islanders watched this extraordinary action their emotions summed up by one man Angus John Campbell who commented: "Dynamiting whisky. You wouldn't think there'd be men in the world so crazy as that!"

After that the SS Politician lay quietly at the bottom of the sea, visited only by divers. But her story was not quite over. In 1987 Donald MacPhee, a local South Uist man found eight bottles of whisky in the wreck. He sold them at auction and walked off with £4,000. It seems that the people of Eriskay can still find "gold" and turn a tidy profit from the sea.



The Legend of Whisky Galore

The famous tale of how a group of Scottish islanders raided a shipwreck for its consignment of 24,000 cases of whisky has grown into a legend.

But the wreck of the ship that became the inspiration for one of Britain's best-loved films was carrying something far more valuable.

Official files released recently by the Public Records Office show that it was not just spirits that disappeared - but a substantial sum of hard cash.

The SS Politician sank off the Scottish Island of Eriskay in 1941 and eight years later the film Whisky Galore recounted the story of how the locals raced to retrieve the ship's liquid cargo, hiding the bottles before the excise men could find them.

But as well as whisky, the Politician was carrying eight cases of currency to the West Indies and the United States.

In all, there were nearly 290,000 ten-shilling notes, which would be worth the equivalent of several million pounds at today's prices.

Although the Crown Agents, who were supplying the notes to the colonial administration in Jamaica, were confident they would not get into circulation, for years they kept turning up at banks around the world.

In April 1941 Captain E. Lauriston, who was in charge of the salvage operation noted that there were reports of banknotes from the wreck turning up on Benbecula.

The Crown Agents were not concerned, noting in a memorandum : "the local police service is in no doubt on a very, very small scale but the nature of the place and its surroundings should tend to reduce the chances of serious loss through the notes being presented and paid."

The following month, however, an empty cash case was found abandoned in the hold of the ship. By June of that year the notes, were turning up in bank branches as far away as Liverpool. By mid July, 168 had been tendered in Jamaica and 141 in Britain.

By 1958, the Crown Agents reported that 211,267 notes had been recovered by the salvage company or Scottish police and had been destroyed.

A further 2,329 had been presented in banks in England, Scotland, Ireland, Switzerland, Malta, Canada, the United States and Jamaica, of which only 1,509 were thought to have been presented in good faith. But that still left 76,404 notes which were never accounted for and whose fate remains unknown.



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