

A shipwreck –and a lot of wine.

There still some people who can remember the strange wreck of a ship on the rocks at Albecq on the first of October, 1937. The result of this wreck was a lot of drinking and a lot of laughter.

The *Briseis*, a French ship of three thousand tons, was carrying a cargo of wine, spirits and other things. She had been built in Germany in 1917 and was en route from Oran to Rouen in Normandy. A fisherman who saw the ship too close to the rocks near there, said later that he was sure that she would not be able to avoid hitting the reef known as Les Grunes.

When the ship struck, the captain stopped the engines and then started them again to take her off the rocks. He wanted to reach as far as Vazon which is a sandy beach and he hoped to save the vessel. Perhaps the steering gear was damaged because he found himself amongst the rocks at the end of the point at Houmet. It was a good thing that the ship sank before hitting a rock and no-one lost his life.

Soon, a great crowd of people arrived to find out what had happened. There were hundreds of them along the coast, attracted by the non-stop noise of the ship's siren. By this time, all could see that the bow was well down in the water and that the stern was beginning to rise into the air. Suddenly the bow slid under water and at the same time the boilers burst and sent water and steam right up into the air. The ship sank completely – there were only the tops of its chimney and masts which showed above the sea.

There was some bother around there later! As soon as the ship began to break up, the barrels of wine and spirits floated along the beach and on to the sand. There were hundreds of them and those who were watching rushed down the beach to "save" the barrels. They thought that Christmas was early that year! When the captain of the *Briseis*, Léon Le Hellidu, realised that the ship was sinking, he had ordered the crew to abandon ship and they all climbed into the small boats. A little later the fishermen arrived in their boats and towed the survivors to Grand Havre. It appears that the vessel sank in about seventy feet of water and that there was only six feet of water over the Grunes when it struck.

When the captain was taken to the scene to assess the situation, he was very distressed because he could not understand how the wreck had happened – he had a great deal of experience of navigating around Guernsey, especially along the west coast. The *Briseis* had been holed under the bow and it was possible that there was damage to the keel as well.

As soon as possible the authorities published an advertisement about the ships cargo. Everything found on the beach or floating in the sea had to be declared to the States' Supervisor. There were almost three hundred barrels of Algerian wine on board and only a few were declared. Some were found near St. Martin's point; others near Sark, to the north of the island and beyond.

All this time, other barrels were tapped on the beach amongst the rocks and people drank the wine there or filled bottles, cans – anything in which could they could carry the wine home, even (it was said later) chamber-pots!

Of course, many people drank far too much and there were many drunkards around. There were even some who fought each other, and for a while there was trouble in some areas. Others who had more sense took their barrels home and hid them where they could and they had some wine for years. Though, it must be said that the wine was not of the best quality.

With time, as the ship broke up, other barrels floated ashore. These were smaller than the others and very strong. When they were tapped, it wasn't wine that was in these little barrels but a strong spirit which really pleased the "boys." There were a lot of people who had headaches for a time after the disaster.

There was a lot of talk about the wreck of the *Briseis*, and as I have mentioned already, it is still remembered to this day.