

Dr. Philippe Max Rouja, who is the Custodian of Historic Wrecks, tells the story of a Coat of Arms for Bermuda.

# The Riddle of the Crest



photo by Philippe Rouja

If one looks closely at Bermuda's coat of arms there is an image of a ship hurling itself against a cliff. (see below)

Most people, if they think about it at all, assume that this is a representation of the wreck of the *Sea Venture*, the accident in 1609 that led to the future colonisation of Bermuda by the British in 1612.

The representation, however attractive, does not fit with historical fact as the *Sea Venture* never made it to shore; she foundered in a storm and came to rest in the reef flats to the east of Town Cut.

The Bermuda coat of arms we currently see on our flag was granted through royal warrant in 1910 through a Bermuda Government request



Bermuda Coat of Arms

to the College of Arms in London. The design is said to be based faithfully on the seal of the Bermuda Company or the Armorial Bearings granted to the merchants of the Somers Isles in 1635 by Sir John Borough, Garter King of Arms of the College of Arms in London.

This depiction of a shipwreck and a cliff could be put down to artistic license on the part of a crest designer representing the wreck of the *Sea Venture*. However, the drawing is in fact thought by some to represent the wreck in 1593 that resulted in the landing of the first reported Englishman on Bermuda, Henry May.

To further complicate the story, Henry May was not aboard a British ship but was, in fact, a passenger riding aboard a Dutch vessel that had been captured by the French that eventually wrecked in Bermuda's waters.

As reported in Purchas' accounts of the wreck published in 1625: "In August of 1593 an English captain (Captain Lancaster) on the vessel *Edward Bonnaventura* transferred one of his crew a Mr. Henry May to a French vessel captained by a Monsieur De La Barbotiere bound for Europe so that he could give news of the *Bonnaventura's* progress to its owners."

Captain De La Barbotiere sailed from

Hispaniola on 30 November 1593.

On December 17 the navigators assured their captain that they were 12 leagues to the south of Bermuda and past all danger. Later, however, the ship found itself 'cast away hard by the shore, being high cliffs seven leagues off the island.'

Henry May's reporting of the event is quite detailed, including not only the reference to drunken French navigators, but also and most significantly to the ship wrecking against high cliffs seven leagues to the west of the Island.

Henry May recounts how the crew took refuge from their wrecked ship on the cliffs onto which they had run hard aground. With just one small boat aboard, the crew built a small raft that could carry only half the people on board.

Henry May was shocked, when he, being the only Englishman on board a French ship, was asked to enter the boat by Captain De La Barbotiere, leaving many of the crew on the rock at sea — though more than likely he left behind his useless, drunken navigators. They then made way to Bermuda, rowing all day until one hour before night.

We then get one of the earlier descriptions of the Islands of Bermuda on which they lived



for four months, building a small ship before heading to Newfoundland in May of 1594, just as the weather was improving and the mulberries were ripe, he comments, from where Henry May took another ship to England and made his report.

This reference to a cliff at sea has long puzzled Bermuda's historians, explorers and archaeologists, as there are no visible remains or other historical references to such a possible site to the west.

## A Coat of Arms at North Rock

In November 2006 while surveying and filming the North Rock dive sites with diving volunteer Gil Nolan we came across an area that contained some random pieces of ballast and what appeared to be a small piece of stoneware pottery heavily encrusted into the reef platform.

In our survey of North Rock we were drawn to the area where the pottery fragment was found near a few cemented pieces of ballast.

Identifying ballast at North Rock is no easy feat as almost all rocks in the vicinity of this ocean frontier site have been rolled and tossed so that even pieces of Bermuda reef or stone have acquired the prerequisite shape of the river rocks that made up the majority of shipwreck ballast of old.

The only way to be sure of the difference is the use of a wooden stick with which one very scientifically and gently knocks pieces of rock. The resulting tone is in fact the perfect way to identify the inner mass of the stone as either ballast, dense granite, marble, chert and so forth, or the softer, less dense Bermuda reef or stone. During this particular survey around the edge of North Rock literally hundreds of rocks presented themselves as candidates only to fail the tonal test. As it was a particularly calm day, we snorkelled

back to the boat across the top of the wide barren platform shelf that is North Rock, only some five to eight feet deep.

In this area the rock has been almost flattened with the occasional small dip offering some protection to corals from the relentless seas.

On this almost flat shelf stood a few pieces of rock defying the elements. With a tap of the stick they revealed themselves to be something other than limestone and, upon closer inspection, the fragment was found embedded like the ballast into the ledge itself.

After measuring and photographing the area and the fragment and precisely noting its location, we returned to shore. Upon close inspection of the photographs it became apparent that what looked like the ubiquitous scratch marks left by parrotfish on an ordinary piece of salt glazed stoneware were in fact evidence of a design of some sort in the glaze.

In December of 2006 we returned to the site and removed the fragments of stoneware taking them for curation to one of Bermuda's experts in ceramic conservation and restoration, Mr. William Gillies.

After stabilising the stoneware and careful cleaning Mr. Gillies was able to reassemble the piece which turned out to represent a full coat of arms or crest from what appeared to be an early Bellarmine or Dutch Frechen jug.

Mr. Gillies conducted a literature survey and located an example of a crest that resembled the crest he had just restored. The similar crest had been recovered from the wreck of the *Batavia* and was featured in a book by German Stoneware scholar Dr. David Gaimster. We contacted Dr. Gaimster at the British Museum and he concurred that the crest did resemble the one from the *Batavia* and fit a typology of stoneware design that would date the shard most probably from between 1590 to 1630.

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Dear Dr Rouja,

Many thanks for showing me this find.

I'm sure you are right that the salt-glazed stoneware medallion corresponds well to the *Batavia* (1629) material or all the wrecks, mainly VOC, of the 1st half of the 17th century.

The medallion comes from a Frechen Bartmann bottle. The arms are most probably spurious and represent a traditional design idiom by this stage.

With best wishes,

David

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The question of how such an ancient piece of pottery found its way to Bermuda offers many imaginative guesses, though it obviously had to have come by ship.

Are the ballast and *Bellarmino* crest associated?

This is, of course, very difficult to answer. They are associated by their proximity, their connection to the platform and their reasonable source, a shipwreck or a ship in distress, but finding further evidence of any ship of this age other than the ballast or other similar small pottery fragments on this weather-beaten underwater bluff seems unlikely. Other Bermuda shipwrecks in similar northern







breaker circumstances like the *Manilla* wreck offer very little in terms of ships' parts and wooden remnants.

In this dynamic rocky environment any wooden part of the ship would be broken away very quickly. Those parts of a ship that could survive, sink or be held down by the ballast would not be covered by permanent sand and saved from the slower destruction brought on by marine wood-boring toredo worms.

Without a full-scale archaeological survey of the area — perhaps dredging some of the rock-holes in the vicinity of the ballast and fragments, we will likely never be able to learn more about the potential wreck or site.

In the meantime, we may have a little fun and take some historical license and put forward that the Dutch crest is in fact from a Dutch ship captured by the French, captained by Barbotiere carrying a lone Englishman Henry May that sank after hurtling itself in a storm against the desolate lonely off-shore cliff in 1593.

But could North Rock have been a cliff?

### Historic Sea Level Rise in Bermuda

As late as 1890 North Rock was still a substantial piece of rock. But how do we quantify what North Rock might have looked like 400 years ago?

Recently Dr. Edward Harris from the Bermuda Maritime Museum provided a plan and painting of North Rock done at 'half tide' in December 1788. The British were considering putting a permanent fort and light at North Rock and from the drawings we can see that the area 220 years ago was considerably larger than it is today with six significant pieces of cliff or rock prominently rising above the shallow shoal versus the two smaller ones we see today, one encapsulated by the new beacon.

While the drawings do make it clear that sea level has risen over the last 220 years it is unfortunately impossible to scientifically consider the

### Cleaning and restoration of North Rock Bellarmine fragment



(Above) North Rock Bellarmine uncleaned pieces  
(Below) North Rock Bellarmine cleaned unassembled pieces



North Rock Bellarmine assembled pieces

photos by William Gillies



North Rock circa 1890



North Rock today



scale of these drawings. To try and make an estimate we need to turn to the experts on sea level rise in Bermuda.

For the last six years an interesting scientific enterprise has been taking advantage of Bermuda's unique geography and geology to establish the rate of sea level rise in the Atlantic during the past 30,000 years.

The Bermuda Underwater Exploration Institute and Canada's Bedford Institute have been studying Bermuda's submerged coastlines and creating unique data sets on sea level change. Teddy Tucker and Professor Steve Blasco have uncovered and dated several coastlines.

These include one that contains the *in situ* roots of a now submerged Bermuda cedar forest 30 feet below the surface and most recently the remnants of a now submerged freshwater pond six feet below the surface in Well Bay at Coopers Island.

With what turns out to be a relatively stable tectonic history Bermuda is effectively being put forward as the tide gauge for the Atlantic, and Bermuda is being used to ground-truth or justify the global sea level rise curve for the last 15,000 years.

In 2005, 2006 and 2007 I worked as the representative for Conservation Services with the Bedford and BUEI team to dig underwater test pits and recover samples for dating.

After working for several weeks on the sea level project during three field seasons and beginning to understand the goals of the project I was asked in my capacity as the Custodian of Historic Wrecks to try and find evidence that could tell us something about sea level rise in Bermuda's historic period, that is the last 400 years or so.

We initially had in mind old docks, coastal features, etcetera, that might remain from the first discovery or settlement of Bermuda and that could provide us with a clue to the sea level at that time. This proved difficult with coastal erosion and development and it wasn't until I began looking at archival documents from the Royal Engineers regarding early building of docks at the Royal Naval Dockyard that some substantial clues emerged.

The Royal Engineers who built the Dockyard were meticulous, as one can see from the construction that still stands today.

Within their notes and drawings are many references to sea level with indicators of mean high water and mean low water marks, but I have been unable to find actual locations on which we can accurately place these scales to make accurate comparisons with today's sea level.

Such an enterprise would be further complicated by the need to measure today's sea level in the same area over an extended period of time to assess comparable mean levels.

Then fortuitously one day I came across an incredible collection of

photos courtesy of the Bermuda Archives; Graphics Dr. Thoad Murdoch



Professor Steve Blasco measures water levels at Dockyard





Detail of face on North Rock Bellarmine crest

photographs in the Bermuda Archives from one of the earliest photograph albums ever made. This album was a collection of pictures taken *circa* 1876 of the Royal Naval Dockyard by Arthur Greene, put together as part of a report to the Admiralty on the state of overseas installations, previously recorded through artists' renditions. One of these photographs gave us some interesting insights into sea level rise in Bermuda.

As one can see from this early photograph of the Dockyard slip (*see page 16*), when we zoom into the area next to the slip we can clearly make out the scum line on the dock. Incredibly we can also see in this very early photograph the lines that represent the courses of block above the scum line. If we count them we can measure five courses.

Today, if we return to the same spot and measure above the scum line we can clearly see only four courses.

Now, we have yet to find a scum-lineologist, but it is fairly safe to assume that the natural forces or biota that create a scum line have not radically changed over the last 132 years. Therefore where the scum line in this relatively sheltered part of the Dockyard ends up forming is the same relative height or average of tidal range today as it was in 1876 and could be called the High Water Mark (HWM). From this we can calculate a general guess of sea level rise in Bermuda over the last 132 years according to the relative change in the height of the scum line or HWM.

This change turns out to be approximately one full course of block or 16 inches.

Professor Blasco then compared this measurement and time frame to the estimates for historic sea level rise arrived at by the Global Panel on Climate Change of which he is a member. The 16 inch rise displayed by the scum line at the Royal Dockyard from 1876 to present equals approximately 406 millimetres in total, or three millimetres per year. The global panel on climate change current estimate of historic sea level rise is two millimetres per year. There may be subsidence of land in Bermuda of .9 millimetres per year, according to the jet propulsion laboratory, giving a total relative change in sea level of 2.9 millimetres per annum or 15 inches over 132 years. We therefore have a pretty good source of visual evidence of sea level rise in Bermuda.

### Henry May's Cliff?

Backlogging this data to guess sea levels 400 years ago is a dangerous practice. The sea level's rise and fall has not been linear and smooth over time either in its progression or rate and is not likely to be in the future. However, if we dare to project this sea level rise of three millimetres per year back to 1593 then sea level in Bermuda was an estimated 49 inches or four feet lower than it is today.

We can all observe today that any approach to Bermuda by sea from the west and northwest puts a ship in direct line with any number of shallow boiler reefs and shoals on the outer edge of the platform.

If one takes into account rising sea levels since 1593 and the potential destruction that hurricanes can cause to possible outlying islands over this period of time then it seems likely that North Rock may very well be the last remaining evidence of what were several small water-washed islets with cliffs on the edge of Bermuda's platform.

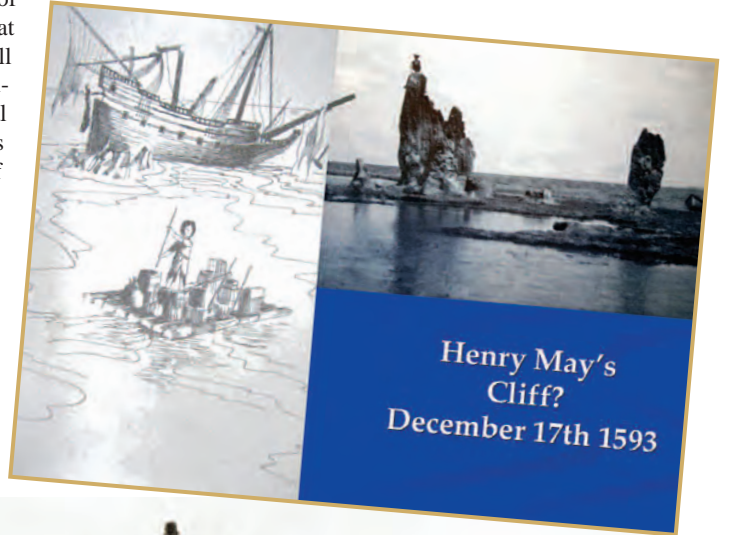
North Rock may not be the cliff Henry May struck. It is not to the west of the Island as historic accounts suggest, but it is close to seven leagues from Bermuda and 400 years ago it most likely was an island with cliffs.



Henry May wrecked at North Rock

Illustration from Robinson Crusoe's Sketch Books. Andre Deutsch, 1974

If we bring all of this evidence together: an early shipwreck at North Rock; historic and quantifiable evidence of sea level rise and historic accounts of Henry May's wrecking, then with the addition of some artistic license we can speculate that the nameless face on our Bellarmine crest can help us identify the nameless cliff on our current coat of arms — in which case we should rename North Rock Henry May's; Barbottiere's — or perhaps Drunken Frenchman's cliffs.





## Bellarmino Jugs

Once upon a time, as nursery story books have it, there was a great personage in the ecclesiastical firmament called Cardinal Bellarmine, who was born in 1542 and died in 1621, and during the latter part of that period his name was remembered not on account of writing three large books on his religious beliefs and issuing several others of his sermons, but because a beer or wine jug was named after him. Cardinal Bellarmine, by his sermons, writings and speeches, made himself extremely unpopular with the Protestants of his day, and they, the supporters of the reformed religion, in turn endeavored to undermine his influence by countering his erudite opinions with ridicule. The method by which they attempted to do it was by flooding the Continent with a beer jug of stoneware (see page 14) for sale, each one bearing a caricature of the Cardinal with his long beard complete; and they certainly succeeded in placing His Eminence on a pinnacle of fame, which all his learned works had failed to accomplish.

— Reproduced from the book *Drinking Vessels of Bygone Days* by G. J. Monson-Fitzjohn

Bartman jugs were made from the 16th to 18th century, from 1550 to 1764, which makes it difficult to imagine that the Cardinal Bellarmine had already established his prohibitive reputation at the age of eight, but like Coca-Cola's transformation of an already existing icon or brand image Saint Nicolas into Santa Claus, it is possible that the Bartman potters took on this ridiculing quest and the jug became forever known as the Bellarmine.

I know of a few examples found in Bermuda, the most notable of these being found by Smokey Wingood's excavation of the *Sea Venture* and the oldest known to me being found in one of Bermuda's harbours. These jugs are fascinating with their almost modern graphic, cartoonist representations of faces, each a small work of art that could have been done by Picasso.



Look Bermuda is producing a film on the story of Henry May and the Bermuda Crest



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