

UK NEWS

# Victory for wreck hunter in battle over £32m bounty of silver

Ross Hyett has been given salvage rights after finding 60 tonnes of bullion on the seabed, David Brown writes

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David Brown

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2022, 12.01am BST,  
The Times

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The SS Tilawa was heading towards the Seychelles when it sank in 1942. Its location was a mystery until Ross Hyett set up a company to find the wreck

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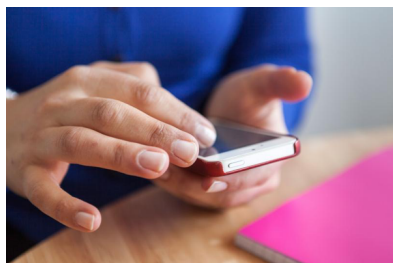
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On a moonlit night almost 80 years ago the SS Tilawa was sunk by a Japanese submarine as it carried its precious cargo across the Indian Ocean.

Now, a British treasure hunter who organised a secret expedition to rescue the 2,364 bars of silver from the seabed has been told he has approval to claim salvage rights.

The British India Steam Navigation Company liner was

attacked 930 miles northeast of the Seychelles while taking 60 tonnes of silver from Bombay, now Mumbai, to the South African Mint.



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The ship's whereabouts remained a mystery until Ross Hyett, 69, a champion racing driver, set up the London-based Argentum Exploration to locate shipwrecks lying at depths that had previously precluded salvage.

The SS Tilawa was found in December 2014 and recovery work began in January 2017. The silver bars, estimated to be worth about £32 million, were shipped to Southampton and declared to the Receiver of Wreck, which oversees salvage law, and are still kept in its secure warehouse.

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The South African government then claimed it had “sovereign” rights over the silver, which meant it was entitled to the bars without having to pay any salvage to Hyett.

Lord Justice Popplewell yesterday dismissed the South African government’s claim at the High Court in London, and ruled that the silver was a normal commercial cargo subject to the rules on salvage.

The judge said the government had probably “forgotten” about the silver.

He added: “The mere passage of time between cargo becoming derelict and the commencement of salvage services does not affect whether it is a recognised subject of salvage. It makes no difference whether it was salvaged within hours of becoming wreck or after 75 years.”

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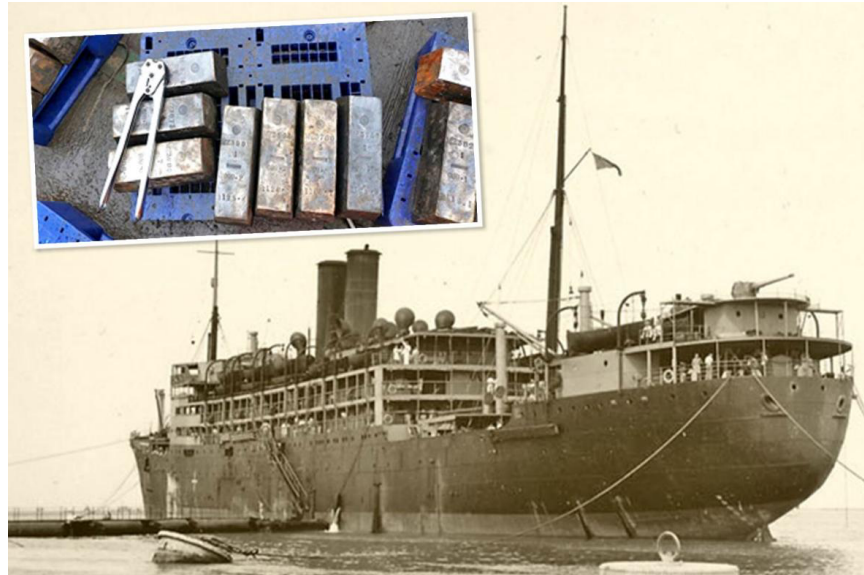


Popplewell referred to a 16th-century law — purported to be based on Roman law — that said if silver or gold is recovered from a depth of eight cubits [about 12 foot] the finder is entitled to a third. If it is recovered from more than 15 cubits the finder is entitled to half.

His judgment was supported by Lady Justice Andrews, but Lady Justice Elisabeth Laing disagreed, paving the way for a possible appeal.

The case had been complicated by a rival American salvage firm striking a deal with the South African authorities to locate the silver, unaware it had already been found by Hyett. An Odyssey Marine Exploration representative approached Cyril Ramaphosa, then the South African deputy president and now president, in September 2016.

Contemporary reports of the SS Tilawa's sinking recorded that when the first torpedo struck there was panic among the 732 passengers, many of whom died in the rush to lifeboats. The ship remained afloat but as survivors attempted to reboard, a second torpedo struck. In all, 281 passengers and crew were lost.



The British India Steam Navigation Company liner was taking 60 tonnes of silver from Bombay, now Mumbai, to the South African Mint

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The final known living survivor is Arvinbhai Jani, 83, from south London, whose mother wrapped him in a sari before jumping into the last lifeboat.

Relatives of victims and survivors of the disaster are arranging a memorial at Royal Bombay Yacht Club in Mumbai on November 23.

Emile Solanki, whose great-grandfather Nichhabhai Chibabhai Solanki was among the victims, said: “Through the years, my grandfather yearned for his father. His final wish before his death in 2013 was for the SS Tilawa and the location of his father’s death to be found. He would have been thrilled with the ship’s discovery.”

Solanki, the founder of the Tilawa 1942 foundation, described the ship as “a unique link between the UK and India and the hopes of many Indians who sought a new life in East Africa and were prepared to make a dangerous crossing in wartime”. Solanki, who was born in Leicester and lived in London before emigrating to Canada, hopes a memorial will be erected in the UK.

Many of the Indian immigrants who travelled to East

Africa later fled to the UK after being expelled by the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin in the 1970s.

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