

De Liefde

A Dutch East Indiaman lost on the Out Skerries, Shetland, in 1711

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Introduction

In recent years a considerable number of shipwrecks belonging to the Dutch United East India Company (*de Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, commonly abbreviated to the VOC) have been discovered throughout the world, particularly on the coasts of the British Isles, South Africa and Western Australia. These coasts are natural hazards on the VOC's great trade route between Holland and Java which was established early in the 17th century and continuously used by the Company until its decline in the late 18th century. The wrecks so far discovered range in date from the *Batavia*, wrecked in 1629 on the Houtman Abrolhos Islands off the coast of Western Australia, to the *Middelburg*, scuttled north of Cape Town during a British attack in 1781. Between these chronological termini—which span the greater part of the VOC's history^[1]—almost every decade is represented by one or more shipwreck deposits, and yet others will certainly come to light in future. The value of this unique related sequence of varied and often well-preserved groups of closed finds, whether to students of post-medieval archaeology, of the history of economics and trade, or of maritime affairs in general, cannot be overstressed. It follows that the fullest recording and publication of such discoveries is essential. Unfortunately a good deal of the material so

far found has, for various reasons, become dispersed before an adequate record of it could be made, although encouraging signs of a more protective attitude are at present becoming manifest, particularly in Western Australia.

At the time of writing, six VOC wrecks have been found and positively identified in British waters (Fig. 1). Much of the material recovered from these wrecks, and the context

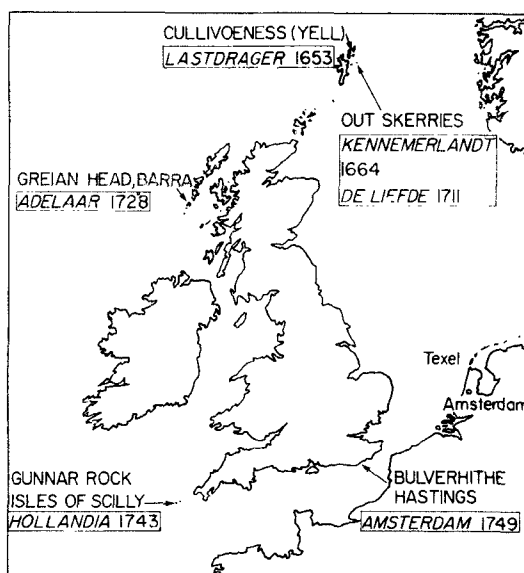


Figure 1. Map of VOC wreck sites in British waters.

in which it was found, has been well recorded, although this reflects on the responsible attitudes of some individual excavators rather than on sound official policy: but the Protection of Wrecks Act (1973) will doubtless improve matters. The situation merits no complacency if irreplaceable information of this kind is not to be lost in future.

De Liefde was the first VOC wreck to be found off the British Isles. Since that time, the summer of 1964, substantial recoveries have been made from the site. The work was carried out, for the most part, under the archaeological direction of the first-named writer, who supervised the survey of the site and kept a record of the recovery operations. However, time did not permit the finds, which were lodged with the County Museum at Lerwick, to be drawn, and the difficulties of returning to Shetland in order to complete this task delayed the appearance of a published report. In early 1972 the second-named writer, during a visit to Shetland, was able to examine and record a selection of the *de Liefde* material, and this selection is presented below, along with a general account of the excavation.

The ship

De Liefde (The Love) was the third ship of that name to be owned by the VOC. She was laid down in the Company's Amsterdam yard in 1698, and between 1701 and 1710 she made three return voyages (*retours*) to the East Indies. The ship was built according to standard VOC specifications for her class, with a length over the verticals of 150 ft and a beam of 40 ft (these units were Amsterdam feet of 283 mm; in English feet the approximate measurements would be: length 166 ft (50 m), beam 44 ft (13 m)). Her cargo capacity was registered as 250 *lasten*: the *last* being approximately equal to 2 tons or 2000 kg. The ship carried an armament of 40 guns, made up of 10 iron 12-pounders, 2 bronze 8-pounders, 18 iron 8-pounders, and 10 smaller guns (the latter including *bassen*, small breech-loading swivel guns)^[2]. The two bronze 8-pounders were probably the pair of guns mounted under the half-deck nearest

the compasses—common VOC practice to reduce deviation.

For her fourth voyage *de Liefde* was commanded by 38-year-old Barent Muijkens, and manned by a 300-strong crew of which about 100 were Company soldiers. The ship left Amsterdam in late October 1711 and negotiated the shoal waters of the Zuider Zee to Texel, where—as was customary—she took on the bulk of her heavy cargo and stores. On 3 November, in company with two smaller VOC ships *Mossell* and *Kockenge*^[3], she set out on the first leg of her voyage to the Cape, Ceylon and Batavia by heading into the North Sea intent on a 'north-about' course around the British Isles and so into the Atlantic. In winter this route was often easier and less hazardous than beating against the prevailing winds in the narrows of the Channel^[4]. The northern seas, despite their own formidable hazards, at least provided more room in which to tack and manoeuvre. The route also avoided a dangerous contact with the French coast, for in 1711 the United Provinces, allied with Great Britain, were engaged against France in the War of the Spanish Succession.

Little is known of the circumstances of *de Liefde*'s wrecking on Mio Ness, near the southern tip of the Out Skerries in Shetland, for the catastrophe happened at night and there was only one survivor. Faulty navigation—perhaps overcast skies had prevented good latitude fixes during the preceding days—was undoubtedly to blame, since normal practice was to clear Shetland well to the north. News of the disaster reached the VOC's Court of Directors (Heeren XVII) in a dispatch from Lerwick, presumably sent by the masters of *Mossell* and *Kockenge* who had no doubt witnessed the aftermath of the wrecking when they attempted to re-establish contact with *de Liefde* at dawn. The melancholy record in the Resolution Book of the Amsterdam Chamber of the VOC runs as follows:

'From letters we received from Laarwijk (Lerwick) in Hitland (Shetland) on the 17th and 29th December last, we learned that the Company's ships which sailed from Texel on 3rd November ran into a

bad storm off Hitland, as a result of which one of them, *de Liefde*, was wrecked by sailing on to a reef named Mioni (Mio Ness) off Utscheren (Out Skerries). There was only one survivor, the shipwreck was not far from the shore, and the bow of the ship under water.'

The VOC later sent two small salvage craft, the *Arent* and the *Otter*, in an attempt to salvage the considerable quantity of specie which had gone down with *de Liefde*. These operations were not successful, and the Company officer in charge was able to report that he found only the remains of some rigging. Local tradition suggests that much was recovered by the inhabitants of the island at the time. In the 1720s^[5], underwater salvage was carried out by a Captain Jacob Row of London, who worked with a primitive but effective closed diving chamber; and a few years later^[6] a Shetland man, William Irvine, used a similar engine with some success.

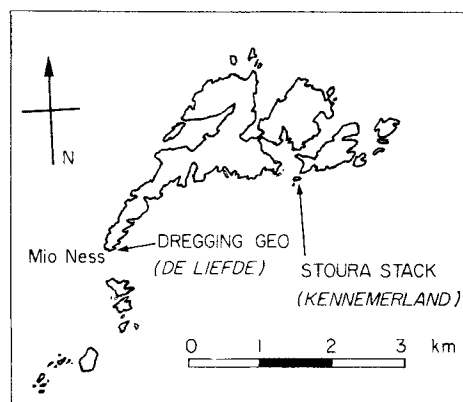


Figure 2. Out Skerries, showing wreck sites of *de Liefde* (1711) and *Kennemerland* (1664).

The wreck site

Mio Ness is the headland at the southern tip of the Out Skerries (Fig. 2). Dregging Geo, the traditional site of *de Liefde*'s wreck, lies just round the corner to the east. The name

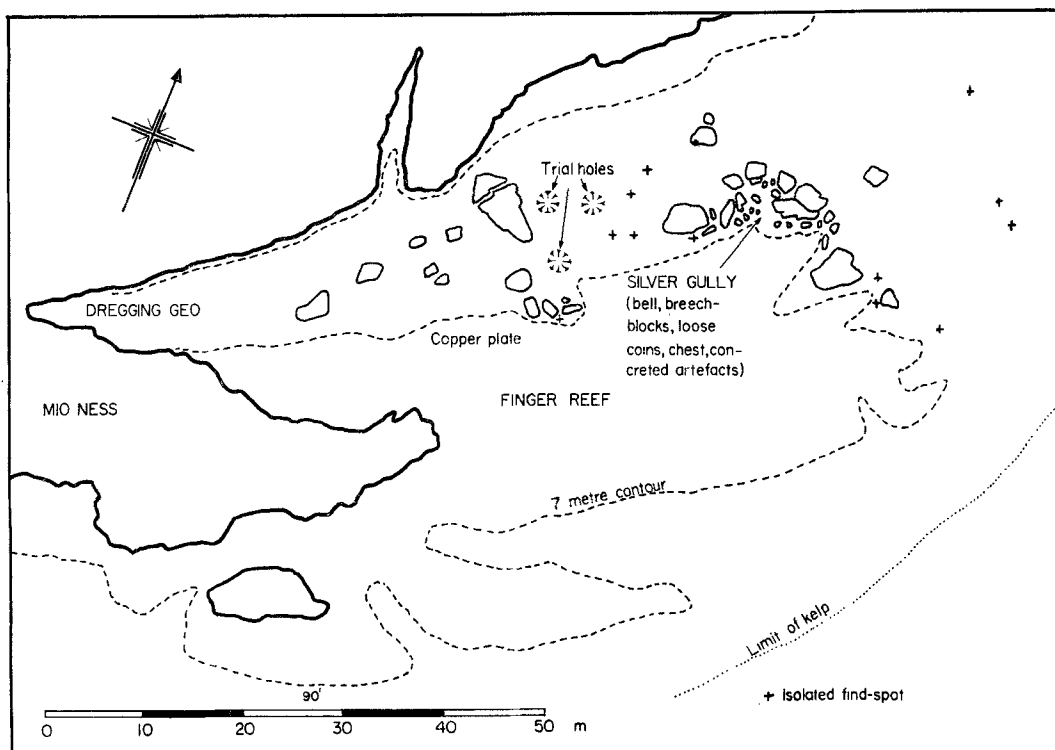


Figure 3. *De Liefde*: general plan of wreck site.

'Dregging' undoubtedly reflects the operations by which objects were at one time recovered by dragging the sea-bed with a special kind of grappling hook, known in Shetland as a 'clam'. In more recent times items from the wreck have occasionally been washed ashore in storms, particularly during the great gale of 1900 when a number of coins were found on the rocks.

The *geo* itself is a narrowing gully which penetrates the solid gneiss of which the Skerries are composed. The rock slopes steeply down to a confused sea-bed of shingle and boulders which, within the *geo* itself, ranges in depth from 7 to 14 m. Outside the *geo* depth increases sharply, reaching a featureless shingle bottom around the 25 m mark. Down to this depth the rocks are covered with a heavy kelp growth (Fig. 3).

The 1964-68 expeditions

In 1964 divers from the RN minesweeper HMS *Shoulton* visited the site and found an iron gun and two silver ducats. During the same summer Eric Giles, aided by the local fishing vessel, *Snowdrop*, raised the gun. All these recoveries were turned over to the County Museum at Lerwick. The following year an expedition was arranged by John and Peter Bannon of Ealing, with the first-named writer acting as organizer and archaeologist. The wreck was located and securely identified as that of *de Liefde* by the discovery of freshly-minted coin dated 1711, and plans were accordingly laid for a large-scale excavation to take place in 1966. In the course of that year, and over the two summers following, a substantial amount of excavation and survey work was carried out. The work was financed by Scientific Surveys Ltd, a company formed by the Bannon brothers, with on-site operations being directed for some of the time by the first-named writer.

Material from the wreck was lodged with the County Museum for cleaning and conservation by the curator, Tom Henderson, and was later studied and drawn there by the second-named writer.

The excavation

It was clear from the outset that the wreck was exceedingly broken up and scattered, and that the chance of any coherent hull structure having survived was remote. The main purpose of the excavation was therefore to recover artefacts for whatever information they might yield in themselves, although care was taken to ensure that their find-spots were adequately mapped. Survey control points were established above and below the water, and from these a general map of the site was constructed by tape triangulation. The main area of interest, nicknamed 'Silver Gully', was surveyed photogrammetrically by Dr Ian Morrison in 1966. A photomosaic of this gully was also made.

Most of the excavation between 1966 and 1968 was concentrated in 'Silver Gully'. Almost all the artefacts in this gully were found to be encased in a thick black matrix composed of sulphides which had formed a binding adhesive and had cemented together sand, stones, and wreck objects in a solidly fused concretion. The matrix gave the impression of having been poured into the gully in such a way as to form a level seam immediately below a top layer of shingle, twisting and turning among the cracks and boulders. The matrix was only about 0.03 m thick on the higher north side of the gully—little more than a crust—increasing in depth as the gully sloped southwards to reach

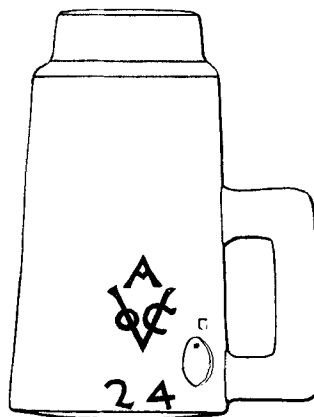


Figure 4. Bronze breech-block. Scale 1:4.

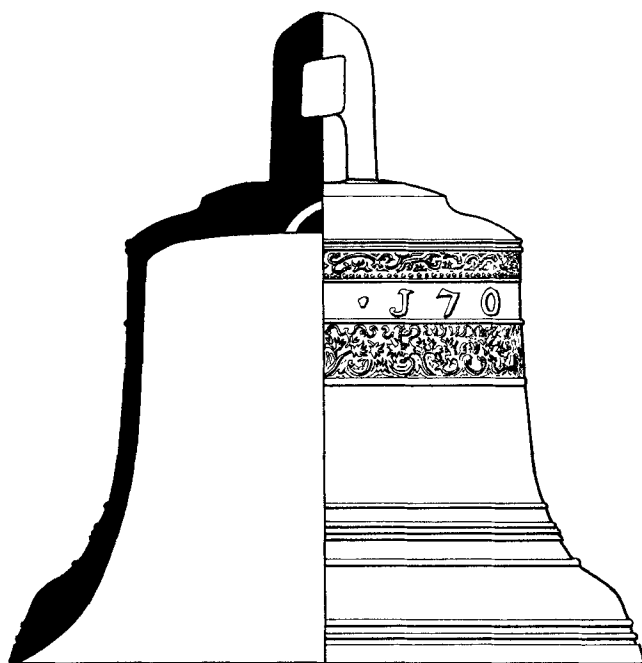


Figure 5. Bronze bell, restored from fragments. Scale 1:4.

0.35–0.45 m. Some of the large boulders now lying above the matrix may possibly be later intrusions, though it is impossible to be categorical about this until more is known of the physics and chemistry involved in the formation of a wreck deposit of this kind.

Excavation involved the removal of large boulders by flotation bag or lifting tackle, and the clearing of shingle by hand tools or air-lift. Some of the larger rocks were split into manageable masses by the careful use of explosives. The matrix, once exposed, was broken into as large lumps as practicable and brought ashore for dismantling.

Many objects within the matrix were found to be extremely well preserved, though often in an unstable condition. They ranged from the masses of iron (mostly roundshot) which had largely been responsible for the formation of the binding sulphides to small and perishable objects including organic matter. Though very little was discovered in the shingle above the matrix (which was up to 0.45 m in depth), a few objects were found in the grey, muddy conglomerate below the concretion, but these were generally in poorer condition than the embedded material.

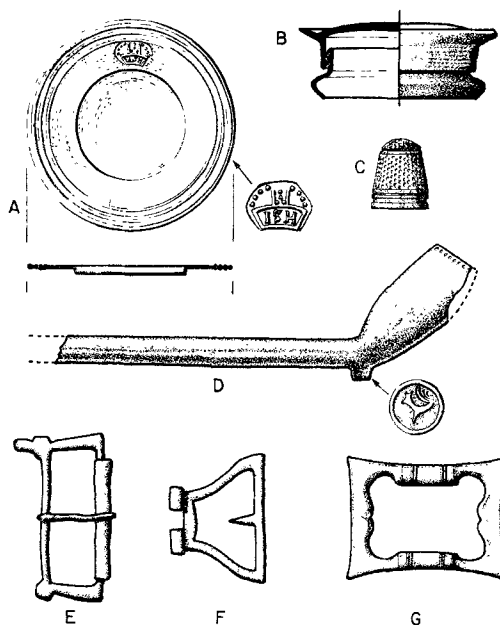


Figure 6. A, Small pewter dish; B, pewter screw cap; C, brass thimble; D, clay pipe with maker's stamp (enlarged); E, brass buckle from cartridge-case belt; F, brass buckle; G, brass shoe buckle. Scale 1:2.

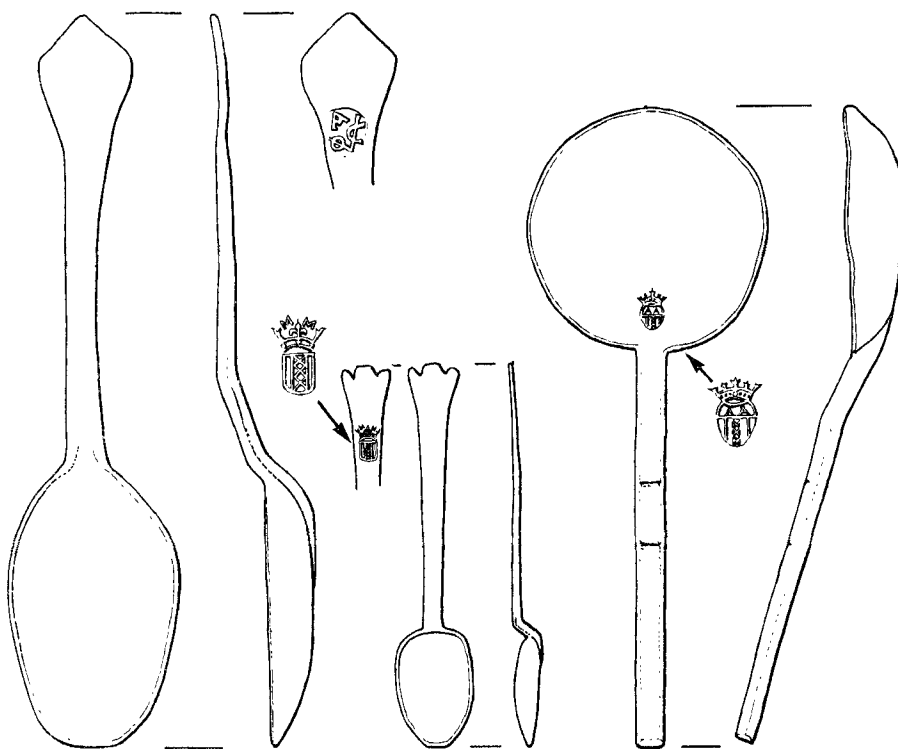


Figure 7. Pewter spoons. Scale 1:2.

Elsewhere on the site, visual searches and trial holes yielded scattered artefacts, though no other deposits comparable to Silver Gully were found. Except where otherwise noted, the artefacts described below came from this gully.

The finds

This is not intended to be a complete record of all the artefacts recovered by the various expeditions; the material is now too dispersed for such an exercise to be possible. However, the objects described and illustrated in this paper constitute a fair cross-section of the collection as a whole, and as such they are presented.

As Marsden (1972) has pointed out, objects associated with VOC shipwrecks fall into five distinct categories: 1, parts of the ship

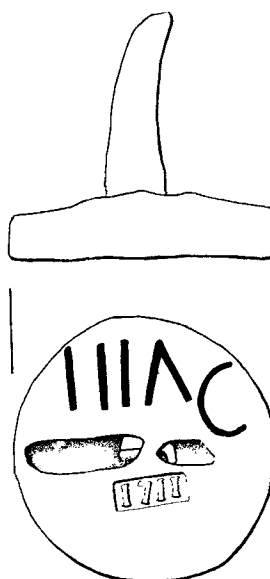


Figure 8. Lead weight dated 1711. Scale 1:2.

and her armament; 2, the ship's stores; 3, equipment officially issued by the VOC for use on board; 4, the personal belongings of individuals on board; and, 5, the cargo. This sensible classification is, as far as possible, followed below.

1. *Parts of the ship and her armament*

Apart from the iron gun found in 1964, which cannot now be located, none of the ship's main armament has been found although roundshot and bar-shot suitable for the 8- and 12-pounders which *de Liefde* is known to have carried was present in some quantity. 4-pounder roundshot indicates the nature of the smaller calibre pieces, which were probably the guns carried on the half-deck

(normal VOC practice was to carry the 12-pounders in the gun-room and on the main deck abaft the mainmast; the 8-pounders under the half-deck, in the waist, and under the forecastle; and the 4-pounders, as suggested, on the half-deck). The ship also carried a number of small bronze breech-loading swivel guns (*bassen*), as the recovery of four bronze breech-blocks associated with such guns shows. These breech-blocks (Fig. 4) bear serial numbers as well as the A-VOC cipher of the Amsterdam Chamber of the Company and the stamped proof-mark of that city. *Bassen* were invariably mounted on the bulwarks of the poop deck and forecastle, and were essentially anti-boarder pieces.

Enough fragments of the ship's bell were found to allow a reconstruction of its form



Figure 9. Silver sword hilt with Amsterdam hall-mark. Knuckle bow of sword hilt 0.12 m long; lower guard 0.08 m across.

and inscription (Fig. 5). The inscription reads 'SOLI * DEO * GLORIA * 170 .' The last digit of the date is missing, though it seems likely that the year was either 1700 or 1701, for in the latter year *de Liefde* sailed on her maiden voyage.

A copper sheet, $1.05 \times 0.6 \times 0.005$ m thick, found some 20 m west of Silver Gully, may perhaps be the remains of the galley hotplate. Minute scraps of wood, some small pieces of canvas, and a number of wrought iron nails are all that apparently remain of the ship herself.

2. The ship's stores

This category is represented only by a 5-pound sounding lead, of standard form.

3. Equipment officially issued by the VOC for use on board

It is not always easy, as Marsden stresses, to judge which items should be classed 'official' and which 'personal' when separating these categories. There are a number of objects, however, from *de Liefde* which fit, without doubt, into the former. Soldiers' equipment is clearly 'VOC issue', and this is represented among the finds by part of a musket stock and a brass buckle (Fig. 6E) of a kind associated with a musketeer's cartridge-case belt. At least some domestic items, too, will have been issued by the Company for use during the voyage, and to this category must belong the A-VOC-ciphered table spoons (Fig. 7). A significant find in the same class is a numbered and dated weight (Fig. 8). Originally this weight will have been of iron with the keyed lead base, which is all that now survives, added by weights-and-measures officials to bring it up to the precise standard which was then confirmed with a stamp and date. The OVIII probably means eight pound units (presumably the Amsterdam pound), while the 1711 date of certification—the same year in which the ship set out on her last voyage—emphasizes how important it was for a great trading concern such as the VOC to keep an up-to-date check on its units of measurement.

4. Personal possessions

Objects definitely falling into this category were scarce, although items listed in the cargo section—clay pipes, thimbles, pins, beads, buckles, coins and the like—may in some cases have belonged to individuals on board. But the only objects which may be categorized with reasonable certainty in this section are a brass shoe buckle (Fig. 6G) of typical early 18th century form, and a fine silver sword hilt (Fig. 9) bearing an Amsterdam hall-mark.

5. The cargo

The aspect of *de Liefde's* cargo to excite most interest, both in the past and in modern times, is that of the specie carried on board. Though the exact amount is not known for certain—it has been variously estimated at

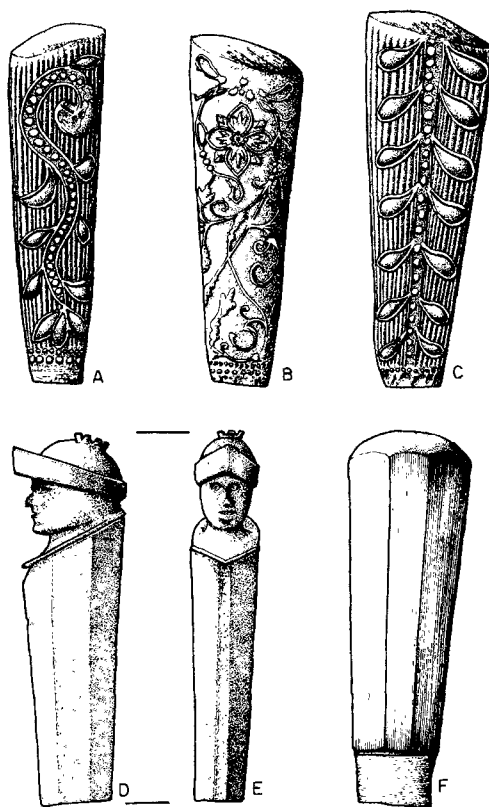


Figure 10. Knife handles: A–C, moulded horn; D and E, ivory; F, ebony with brass ferrule. Scale 1:2.

between 227,000 and 700,000 guilders—the ship was undoubtedly carrying a great deal of money, mostly in the form of silver ducats. She was also carrying a consignment of new-minted gold ducats and copper *dubbele stuivers*. It is probable, in addition, that there was some bullion in gold and silver bars. Much of the treasure was recovered during the early salvage operations, although the recent expedition found upwards of 4000 coins. Most of these were contained in a chest found among the matrix in Silver Gully, which held 3300 newly-minted ducats of Utrecht. The remaining ducats and half-ducats constitute a good representative sample of mintings from the various provinces of the Spanish Netherlands and the United Provinces from 1619 onwards, while a few examples of the 1711-minted ducats and

dubbele stuivers were also found. An assessment of the numismatic significance of the *de Liefde* hoard has been published in the Sale Catalogue issued by Glendining and Co. in 1969, but a full description may be published in a later issue of *Int. J. Naut. Archaeol.*

Much of *de Liefde's* cargo, however, was of a more commonplace nature, and what remains of it thus provides an invaluable glimpse of everyday artefacts and commodities consigned aboard a ship of Holland's great seaborne empire in the early 18th century. Evocative of agricultural innovations taking place in the colonies at this time is the find of considerable quantities of cherry stones, no doubt carried as seed for the developing fruit farms of the Cape. Clay pipes (of a form very similar to those recently recovered from the *Adelaar*, a VOC ship



Figure 11. Stoneware crucibles, probably from *de Liefde*. The large vessel 0.14 m high; the smaller one 0.1 m high.

wrecked in 1728 off Barra in the Outer Hebrides) were found as scattered fragments all over the site. Numerous pieces of square-bottomed green glass bottles, with their characteristic pewter screw tops (Fig. 6B), were also found. Other pewter objects included spoons of various kinds (Fig. 7) and several small shallow dishes (Fig. 6A) the use of which is obscure. A great many knife handles of wood, horn and pressed bone were recovered, and a selection of these is illustrated in Fig. 10. The wide range of small objects, including thimbles, buttons, pins, buckles, beads, potsherds (salt-glazed stoneware and fine white and blue Delft china), furniture fittings, nails and padlocks, further stress the varied nature of a typical East

Indiaman's cargo. It is indeed this wide variety of contemporary everyday things which makes wrecks such as *de Liefde* so especially worthy of full archaeological recording and study.

A final group of objects should be mentioned. In recent years scallop fishermen have dredged up a number of graphite and stoneware crucibles from deep water close to the site (Fig. 11). They are now in the Zetland County Museum. While they cannot with absolute certainty be associated with *de Liefde* the probability that they are is extremely strong, and their form is quite appropriate to an early 18th century date^[7]. They would doubtless have been intended for assaying or other fine metallurgical work.

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Notes

- [1] The VOC was formed on 20 March 1602 and was dissolved, bankrupt, on 31 December 1799.
 [2] The unit used to express these shot weights is, of course, the Amsterdam pound (0.494 kg or about 1.09 lb avdp.).
 [3] *Kockenge* eventually completed the voyage to Batavia, arriving there on 4 July 1712. She had sailed from the Cape in company with the *Zuytdorp*, a ship belonging to the Zeeland Chamber of the Company, which was lost on the Western Australian coast. The *Zuytdorp's* wreck site was located in 1927 on the cliffs south of Dirk Hartog Island, and the considerable amount of unstudied material from it which now exists in Western Australia will provide a useful parallel with the *de Liefde* collection.
 [4] cf. the fate of the *Amsterdam* (Marsden, 1972).
 [5] For a description of Captain Row's diving equipment see J. T. Desaguliers, 1744, *A course in experimental philosophy*, II: 215 and plate XX opp. 252. London.
 [6] For much of the information regarding the history of *de Liefde*, including the circumstances of her wrecking and the early salvage attempts, we have relied on the unpublished researches of the late Robert Stuart Bruce of Symbister, Whalsay, whose papers are now in the hands of Tom Henderson of Lerwick. We are deeply indebted to Mr Henderson for his co-operation in allowing us to make free use of this voluminous and authoritative source.
 [7] Agricola, Georgius, 1556, *De Re Metallica*. Trans. by H. C. & L. H. Hoover, 1912, 1950: 229B. New York.