

The Arniston Shipwreck

Courtesy of Cape Agulhas Tourism

The Arniston, a 53.8 meters long, 13.2 meters wide, 3 decked and 3 masted English East Indiaman of 1498 tons was built by Barnard in the bottom of the Neptune, on the River Thames, in 1794. When she sank she was carrying 22 iron cannon, two 12 –pounder cannons and twenty 18 pounder carronades.

Between November 1794 and June 1813 the Arniston had already made eight successful voyages to India and China and on her return journey from the east she was carrying some 100 wounded soldiers and sailors. Aboard were also some wealthy passengers which included women and children. On the 30 May 1815, the ship was embayed in Marcus Bay. After the anchor cable was cut – seen as the only means to save the people’s lives – the ship struck a reef 900m offshore, keeling over to windward. Out of a crew of near 350 persons only six men reach the shore alive. At daybreak the next morning, the beach was covered with wreckage, stores, etc. and littered with dead bodies (which were buried by the survivors).

The wreck of the Arniston, lies 6 kilometres to the East of Waenhuiskrans slipway in a dept of 4-5 meters of water and a distance of 900 meters from the shore. The remains of the ship were located in January 1982 by Tubby Gericke and Brian Clark and declared a National Monument. Her salvage was the first attempt at Marine Archaeology in South African waters. A total of 25 diving days resulted in over 300 hours of underwater excavation and recording as well as the recovery of a few hundred silver One and Two Rupee coins – mostly in bad state of preservation.