

# Wreck of historic royal ship discovered off the English coast

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The ship's bell. Credit: University of East Anglia

The wreck of one of the most famous ships of the 17th century—which sank 340 years ago while carrying the future King of England James Stuart—has been discovered off the coast of Norfolk in the UK, it can

be revealed today.

Since running aground on a sandbank on May 6, 1682, the wreck of the [warship](#) the Gloucester has lain half-buried on the seabed, its exact whereabouts unknown until brothers Julian and Lincoln Barnwell, with their friend James Little, found it after a four-year search.

Due to the age and prestige of the ship, the condition of the wreck, the finds already rescued, and the accident's political context, the discovery is described by maritime history expert Prof, Claire Jowitt, of the University of East Anglia (UEA), as the most important maritime discovery since the Mary Rose.

The Gloucester represents an important "almost" moment in British political history: a royal [shipwreck](#) causing the very near-death of the Catholic heir to the Protestant throne at a time of great political and religious tension.

Now a major exhibition is planned for spring 2023, the result of a partnership between the Barnwell brothers, Norfolk Museums Service, and academic partner UEA. Running from February to July at Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery, the exhibition will display finds from the wreck—including the bell that confirmed the ship's identity—and share ongoing historical, scientific and archaeological research.

Prof. Jowitt, a world-leading authority on maritime cultural history, is a co-curator of the exhibition. "Because of the circumstances of its sinking, this can be claimed as the single most significant historic maritime discovery since the raising of the Mary Rose in 1982," she said. "The discovery promises to fundamentally change understanding of 17th-century social, maritime and political history.

"It is an outstanding example of underwater cultural heritage of national

and international importance. A tragedy of considerable proportions in terms of loss of life, both privileged and ordinary, the full story of the Gloucester's last voyage and the impact of its aftermath needs re-telling, including its cultural and political importance, and legacy. We will also try to establish who else died and tell their stories, as the identities of a fraction of the victims are currently known."



The Barnwell brothers with the ship's bell. Credit: Norfolk Historic Shipwrecks

The Barnwell brothers are Norfolk-based printers, licensed divers and Honorary Fellows in the School of History at UEA. Lincoln said he was partly inspired to search for the wreck after watching the lifting of the Mary Rose on television as a child.

"It was our fourth dive season looking for Gloucester," he said. "We were starting to believe that we were not going to find her, we'd dived so much and just found sand. On my descent to the seabed the first thing I spotted were large cannon laying on white sand, it was awe- inspiring and really beautiful.

"It instantly felt like a privilege to be there, it was so exciting. We were the only people in the world at that moment in time who knew where the wreck lay. That was special and I'll never forget it. Our next job was to identify the site as the Gloucester."

Julian added, "When we decided to search for the Gloucester we had no idea how significant she was in history. We had read that the Duke of York was onboard but that was it. We were confident it was the Gloucester, but there are other wreck sites out there with cannons, so it still needed to be confirmed.

"There is still a huge amount of knowledge to be gained from the wreck, which will benefit Norfolk and the nation. We hope this discovery and the stories that are uncovered will inform and inspire future generations."

Lord Dannatt, Norfolk Deputy Lieutenant and longstanding resident of the county, is lending his skills and support to the historic rescue project. As former head of the British Army, he works with charities and organizations that have links to the armed services.

"This is going to be Norfolk's Mary Rose," said Lord Dannatt. "Julian and Lincoln have touched history, history that could have changed the course of this nation. It's such an amazing story to tell. Our aim is to bring that story to life and to share it with as many people as possible."

The Gloucester was commissioned in 1652, built at Limehouse in

London, and launched in 1654. In 1682 it was selected to carry James Stuart, Duke of York, to Edinburgh to collect his heavily pregnant wife and their households. The aim was to bring them back to King Charles II's court in London in time, it was hoped, for the birth of a legitimate male heir.

The ship had set sail from Portsmouth with the Duke and his entourage joining it off Margate, having traveled by yacht from London. At 5.30am on May 6, the Gloucester ran aground some 45km off Great Yarmouth following a dispute about navigating the treacherous Norfolk sandbanks. The Duke, a former Lord High Admiral, had argued with the pilot for control over the ship's course.

Within an hour the vessel sank with the loss of hundreds of the crew and passengers. The Duke barely survived, having delayed abandoning ship until the last minute.

As well as the Duke of York, the Gloucester carried a number of prominent English and Scottish courtiers including John Churchill, later the 1st Duke of Marlborough.

Diarist and naval administrator Samuel Pepys, who witnessed events from another ship in the fleet, wrote his own account—describing the harrowing experience for victims and survivors, with some picked up "half dead" from the water.

Together with their late father Michael, and two friends including James Little, a former Royal Navy submariner and diver, the Barnwell brothers found the wreck site in 2007, with the Gloucester split down the keel and remains of the hull submerged in sand.

The ship's bell, manufactured in 1681, was later recovered, and in 2012 it was used by the Receiver of Wreck and Ministry of Defence to

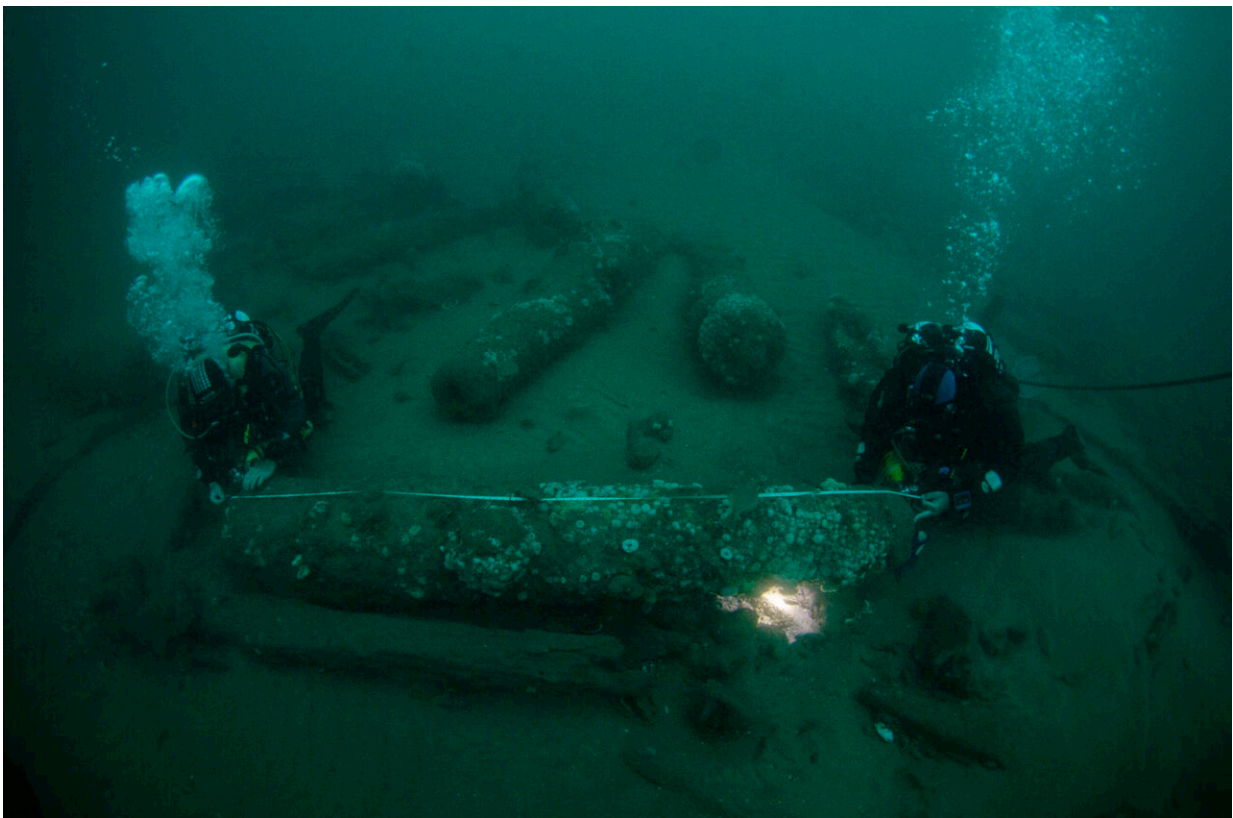


decisively identify the vessel.

Due to the time taken to confirm the identity of the ship and the need to protect an "at risk" site, which lies in international waters, it is only now that its discovery can be made public. As well as the Receiver of Wreck and Ministry of Defence, the wreck has been declared to Historic England.

Following the discovery, the brothers completed an underwater archaeology course with the Nautical Archaeology Society.

Artifacts rescued and conserved include clothes and shoes, navigational and other professional naval equipment, personal possessions, and many wine bottles.



The Barnwell brothers measuring one of the ship's cannons. Credit: Norfolk Historic Shipwrecks



A pair of glasses found in their original case. Credit: University of East Anglia



(L-R) Lincoln Barnwell, Prof Claire Jowitt, Dr Ben Redding and Julian Barnwell with some of the finds. Credit: University of East Anglia

One of the bottles bears a glass seal with the crest of the Legge family—ancestors of George Washington, the first US President. The crest was a forerunner to the Stars and Stripes flag. Uniquely, in addition there were also some unopened bottles, with wine still inside—offering exciting opportunities for future research.

The accompanying historical research project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust and led by Prof. Jowitt, will explore not only the failures of command at sea before the Gloucester sank, but conspiracy theories about the tragedy's causes and its political consequences.



It is also hoped that UEA's scientific expertise and facilities will be used to analyze some of the finds from the wreck.

The Ministry of Defence's position is that all [artifacts](#) remain the property of the Ministry of Defence; however, where items are positively identified as personal property, ownership will then default to the Crown.

Partners already involved in the landmark project alongside the Barnwells, UEA and Norfolk Museums Service include the Ministry of Defence, the National Museum of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth, York Archaeology, the Leverhulme Trust and Maritime Archaeology Trust. The project is also being generously supported by Alan Boswell Group and Birketts LLP.

A new paper titled "The Last Voyage of the Gloucester (1682): The Politics of a Royal Shipwreck" by Prof. Claire Jowitt offers a comprehensive academic analysis of the disaster and its political implications and legacies. It is published in the journal *English Historical Review* on Friday, June 10.

**More information:** The Last Voyage of the Gloucester (1682): The Politics of a Royal Shipwreck, *English Historical Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.1093/ehr/ceac127](https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/ceac127)

Provided by University of East Anglia

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