

News story: First world war shipwreck bell is returned to South Africa

The SS Mendi sank off the Isle of Wight in 1917 while carrying more than 800 men of the South African native labour corps to support the war effort on the Western Front.

It was the worst maritime disaster in South Africa's history, and the Mendi bell – which has become a symbol of the country's First World War remembrance – was found and restored last year after being originally salvaged from the shipwreck in the 1980s.

The Mendi bell was given to BBC reporter Steve Humphrey in 2017 in a plastic bag at Swanage Pier, Dorset, after an anonymous phone call.

He in turn gave it to the Maritime & Coastguard Agency's receiver of wreck, Alison Kentuck, who then had to determine legal ownership of the bell and make the decision about a permanent home for the bell. For a year it has been on display in the Sea City museum in Southampton while ownership research was undertaken and a permanent home was found.

Alison said: 'In these cases I have to consider the merits of each application to have the bell. But in the end, because this bell is such a poignant part of South Africa's history, it seemed only right to return it.

'607 black troops from the South African native labour corps who set sail from Cape Town just over a century ago, like so many others, never returned home to their families.

'It's good to know that the Mendi bell is back in South Africa where it will be able to provide a focal point of remembrance for the people of South Africa and in particular the families of those who died.'

The SS Mendi sank on 21 February 1917 and 646 men drowned.

On 28 August the bell was presented to the President of South Africa by the Prime Minister Theresa May at a ceremony in Cape Town.