

News story: Master and owner charged for illegal salvage of sunken vessel

Dutch company Friendship Offshore BV has been convicted of conducting an unlicensed salvaging operation on a sunken merchant vessel named the SS Harrovian in 2016. The case was heard at Newcastle Crown Court on the 26 July 2018, in a prosecution brought by the MMO.

The court heard how in August 2016 MMO officers, acting on information relating to a vessel operating an illegal salvage of a wreck 70 miles south west of the Isles of Scilly, were deployed to intercept and inspect the vessel.

This inspection resulted in the discovery of approx. £90,000 worth of copper and steel. The vessel's master, Walter Bakker, admitted that he did not have the relevant marine licence and demonstrated how he had dimmed the vessel's Automatic Identification System (AIS) in order to avoid detection. The vessel was subsequently detained to Falmouth for further inspection.

Analysis revealed that the vessel had conducted three unlicensed salvage operations on the wreck of the SS Harrovian. The SS Harrovian was built by Bartram & Sons, Ltd, Sunderland in 1914 and was sunk on a voyage from New York to Le Havre by the German submarine U-69 in the English Channel in 1916.

During the sentencing, the judge referred to the fact that the SS Harrovian was an important heritage asset and despite being at sea, was still of considerable heritage value.

At the initial hearing in February 2018, the defendants pleaded guilty to charges reflecting the three unlicensed salvaging operations they conducted. The MMO also made application for a confiscation order under the Proceeds of Crime Confiscation Order (POCA) with the assistance of the North East Regional Asset Recovery Team.

Walter Bakker was fined £2,000. Friendship Offshore BV was fined £6,000 and £44,930 costs. The confiscation order against the company was agreed at £609,086 with an actual realisable amount assessed at £190,643, to be paid within three months.

An MMO spokesperson said:

This positive outcome was made possible by strong team working between the MMO, Historic England and the North East Regional Asset Recovery Team.

This case is very important and shows that we will take action against those deliberately avoiding the required consents in order to make a profit. The SS Harrovian is an important heritage asset and this result sends out a clear message that vessels of this

nature should not be exploited.