

# Odyssey Marine

— Interview with Marine Archaeologist  
Neil Cunningham Dobson

Text by Millis Keegan  
Photos courtesy of  
Odyssey Marine

Millis Keegan interviews Odyssey Marine Exploration's Principal Marine Archaeologist Neil Cunningham Dobson — April 2009

**MK:** What do you do? I ran into some confusion trying to set this interview up, so lets take a closer look at what you are trying to do. Obviously you are not treasure hunters, so what are you doing? What is your main reason to be out on the oceans, if it is not to find and salvage treasures?

**NCD:** I am the Principal Marine Archaeologist for Odyssey Marine Exploration. Odyssey has given me a unique opportunity. No other company or academic institution has the equipment and time to conduct archaeology the way Odyssey has the ability to do.

Odyssey is the world-leader in deep-ocean shipwreck exploration. We differentiate ourselves from salvage companies and treasure hunters because we conduct "best practice" archaeology on all the sites we work on. The term "treasure hunter" is negative within the deep-ocean world because it typically refers to a group or person who tears apart a shipwreck with no regard for the historic value, information or artifacts a shipwreck has to offer. They are simply interested in just getting to the treasure.

Conversely, salvage is the recovery of shipwrecks for money, and salvagers do not write reports or publish their findings, and given that we do do that, calling us salvagers would not be correct either.

Odyssey's business model is simple: there are billions of dollars worth of cargo and priceless artifacts lying on the ocean floor and the technology exists to locate and recover these treasures. We have the capabilities to conduct commercial marine archaeology where good business and sound archaeology can co-exist.

One common misconception people have about Odyssey is that we sell everything we recover, and this is not true. Artifacts that we recover that are deemed culturally or historically significant, are kept in Odyssey's permanent collection for study, education, and research by museums, cultural institutions or other qualified academics.

On most shipwrecks, there is cargo that we classify as "trade goods" and, these are items found in large repetitive quantities... a good example would be coins. After undergoing conservation and thorough documentation, these duplicate items will be offered to private collectors. Our decision to sell artifacts is made using criteria similar to those used by museums when they de-accession artifacts or collections.



ABOVE: The *Odyssey Explorer*. INSET RIGHT: Neil Cunningham Dobson

We also share the artifacts, treasures and knowledge we recover with a broader audience by displaying them at museums and interactive exhibits, and producing books, DVDs and television features. The adventure and excitement in our field motivates young students to get interested in archaeology, and we support that interest by creating educational curricula.

And finally, we produce high quality archaeological reports to share our findings with the archaeological community and the general public.

**MK:** Do you search for wrecks that do not carry significant valuables, and if so,

what are the reasons for that?

**NCD:** There are certain criteria that shipwrecks must meet to become one of our targets, and one of those is that the ship must have documented proof of carrying highly valuable cargo. However, in our exploration of the oceans, we do come across interesting and significant shipwrecks that do not carry high value cargo. For example, we have discovered a few amphora wrecks, submarines, aircraft and so on. Whist the cargo has no real monetary value, we may conduct



an archaeological investigation that can include a photomosaic.

It is a possibility that we will return and recover artifacts from some these sites at some point in order to share the

historical knowledge that can be gained from these wrecks. Discovery Channel's Treasure Quest series did a great job to showcase some of the historically significant wrecks that we came across and investigated but did not excavate during our last search season.





ROV Zeus

logical interests should be salvaged by museum curator rather than commercial businesses and so on. How do you handle that?

NCD: To our knowledge, there aren't any museum curators that salvage shipwrecks. The word "curator" itself comes from the Latin word curatus, which means "care." A curator is someone who is responsible for a collection and some of their duties can include researching the history of the artifacts in the collection and

publishing information about the collection. Odyssey has a Curator of Collections, Ellen Gerth, on staff because this is an integral step in the archaeology process. You can see some of her publications here: [www.shipwreck.net/featuresarticles.php](http://www.shipwreck.net/featuresarticles.php). Apart from that, Odyssey is proud to have the world's best marine archaeologists and conservator working for Odyssey.

A lot of the criticism about what we do stems from misconceptions about our operations by people

who have never been on board our ships during an expedition nor have taken the opportunity to visit our conservation lab or our museum exhibits.

The fact is that deep-ocean shipwreck exploration and archaeological excavation is an expensive endeavor, and operations can cost more than US\$35,000 per day. The equipment and technology used costs millions of dollars in acquisition and maintenance costs. Governments and academic insti-

MK: How did you get started? What was your motivation?  
NCD: Well, my career has been a bit unconventional. I started out at age 17 when I joined the British Merchant Navy where I was a deck officer. I then went to the oil industry and spent 11 years working on oil rigs in the North Sea as a ballast control room operator and barge engineer. After that, I worked as a marine survival instructor/examiner. I was one of the UK's first freefall lifeboat instructors. During my leave from oil rigs, I took up sport diving, became an instructor and ran a UK dive club. So really, diving wrecks sparked of my interest to combine history and my maritime career.

Through my work, I gained

commercial diving qualifications, joined the Nautical Archaeology Society and became a tutor. I was approached by Dr Colin Martin of St Andrews University to join him in the investigation and excavation of a 1653 Cromwellian warship lost off Duart Castle on the Isle of Mull, West Coast of Scotland. I spent five years on this project. Later, I pursued a master's degree at St. Andrews University and began my career as a marine archaeologist.

My marine background along with my archaeology put me in a unique position. I have spent 30 years in the marine industry; I have worked on all sorts of vessels, rigs and sailing ships. I decided that deep water was the area I wanted to work on and

the challenge to see if a robot could do archaeology. I gained commercial Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) qualifications and eventually came to Odyssey.

My motivation is to bring marine history and archaeology to the general public. I am privileged to be one of the first people to discover a shipwreck since it was lost and to handle and study the artifacts from it. I get to tell the story of the ship and its crew and bring them alive. I am passionate about sharing my knowledge with the world gaining me the nickname "The People's Arch".

MK: Being a salvage company, you meet a lot of harsh opinions about what you do. Opinions about how shipwrecks of archeo-



A 42-pound bronze cannon from the wreck of the HMS Victory being hoisted onto the deck of the Odyssey Explorer



Artifacts recovered from the 1622 "Tortugas" shipwreck site  
BELOW CENTER: Ceramic cargo from the "Blue China" wreck at a depth of nearly 1,200 feet

factors. It is fast becoming a race against time, and it is really crucial at this juncture to address this issue.

*MK: What is your biggest achievement?*

NCD: This is a hard one. Being a father to my two sons, Luthais and Harris, is my personal biggest achievement. Professionally, the moment of the discovery of *HMS Victory* ranks as one of the

years later in 2003 with the *SS Republic*. Our second major discovery came three years later in 2007 when we discovered the "Black Swan" deep-ocean site, which is believed to constitute the largest collection of coins excavated from the deep ocean to date. The next year, 2008, we discovered *HMS Victory*.

I think what you can see is a trend; we're getting better and more efficient in our ability to research and follow



ABOVE: Gold bars recovered from the 1622 "Tortugas" shipwreck site

tutions can't afford to fund archaeologically-sensitive shipwreck exploration on the scale we're doing it.

As a publicly traded company, we are funded through private investors. With our business model, we can also generate revenue through the sale of duplicate artifacts, also known as "trade goods" (i.e. artifacts or coins found in large duplicate quantities). This is a new model for shipwreck exploration companies, and we are fortunate to see that a lot forward-thinking academics and archaeologists are starting to be interested and supportive of what we are doing.

Personally, I do not get bothered by what other people say about us. I am a qualified, experienced marine archaeologist and have seen more shipwrecks than most marine archaeologists. I do my archaeology to the best of my profession. I am privileged to be a part of

the Odyssey team that includes the top shipwreck project managers, conservators, researchers, scientists and other shipwreck specialists.

*MK: What is the challenge in seeking for lost ships and their cargos?*

NCD: There are many challenges from the efficient use of resources to safety and security aspects. One of the biggest ones is finding an interesting wreck that you have no identity for and using all my skills to try and solve the mystery. I see my work as underwater CSI because a shipwreck is like that of a crime scene; I have a pile of clues and have to try and work out the last moments of the ship and the crew.

One of the major threats to shipwrecks at this time is the extensive damage through trawl nets and other manmade

greatest moments in my career. But with my passion for marine archaeology, all of the shipwreck projects I have taken part in are exciting and fascinating.

*MK: How has your company evolved over the years?*

NCD: Odyssey was founded in 1994 and made its first major recovery almost ten

through to the discovery of wreck sites. We're solidifying our position as the world leader in shipwreck exploration with our proven track record.

*MK: You have been up against some legal palaver, did that affect the passion for what you are doing? How do you cope? I imagine with all the effort and the money invested in the search, it must*

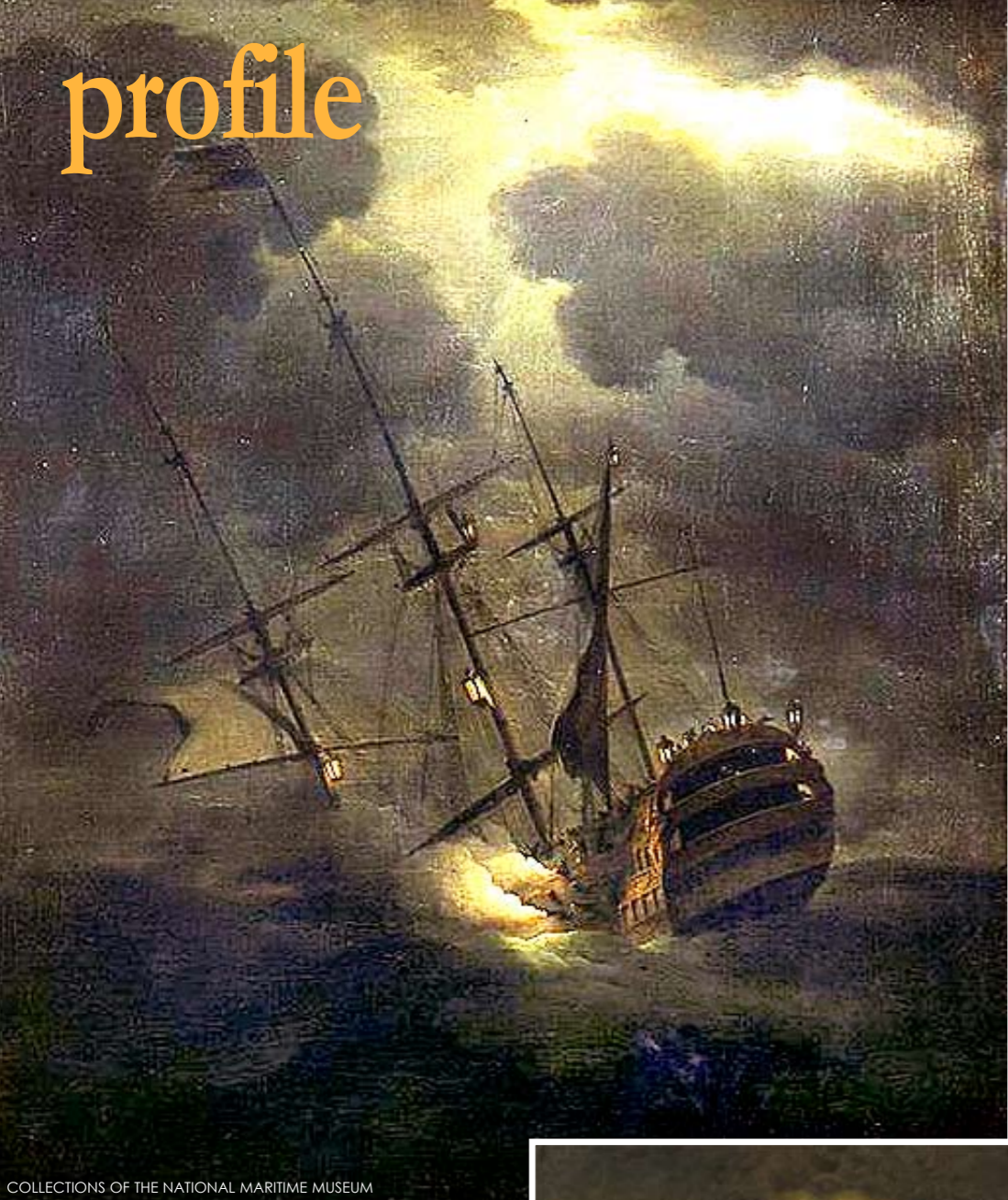
*be pretty frustrating when something like that happens?*

NCD: The legal issues do not affect my passion. It is frustrating at times, not just for me, but obviously for our company. But being pioneers in our industry also comes with pioneering a whole new legislature and regulations. We are setting historical and legal precedents and helping to write and clarify maritime law. It does not deter us, instead I think it has made us a stronger team as we bond together to support our company, goals and mission.

*MK: Is there a competition out there, and if so how do you handle it?*

NCD: There are other shipwreck explorers (or in many cases salvage companies or treasure hunters), but we are the only ones with the technology and knowledge necessary to successfully conduct operations in the deep-ocean. We are pioneers in the field of deep-water shipwreck archaeology.





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Portrait of Admiral Sir John Balchin, commander of *HMS Victory* during her last voyage in October 1744

*Loss of HMS Victory, 4 Oct 1744; 18th c. painting by Peter Monamy, England*

standards as those employed in terrestrial and shallow water sites. The significant difference, however, is the requirement for specialized equipment. The Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) is the eyes, hands and tool box for the archaeologist.

More information about the technology Odyssey utilizes can be found here: [www.shipwreck.net/ourapproach.php](http://www.shipwreck.net/ourapproach.php).

*MK: Your latest disclosed discovery, HMS Victory, is more than just another find, you quite possibly will be able to solve a long time mystery, and might even exonerate the admiral, if I understood it correctly, those kind of achievements must be gratifying. Can you tell us a bit about that?*

NCD: As a matter of fact, we have already done all of these things—solved the long-time mystery of the location of Balchin's *Victory*, thereby exonerating the Admiral and the lighthouse keeper. Discovering the *Victory* was very gratifying for me personally. She was the mightiest vessel of her time and her final resting place has eluded explorers and historians for centuries. We found her over 100km from where people have concentrated their search.

With our discovery, we can tell the story of the people who lost their lives and correct the historical record on how she was lost. It was a long-held belief that she wrecked off the Casquets, when in fact, our research seems to point more to the fact that she went down due to a violent storm far from there. This is particularly

important because initially people theorized that poor navigation was the reason for her demise and placed blame on Sir John Balchin, his crew and the lighthouse keeper.

The cannon assemblage is just a wonderful window into the military weaponry of the day. So far, we have recovered two cannon—a 12-pounder bearing the Royal crest of George II and a 42-pounder bearing the Royal crest of George I—this is also the only known example of a 42-pounder cannon on dry

land. These cannon were the key pieces of evidence in identifying the shipwreck as Balchin's *Victory*. I look forward to the challenge of recovering them all some day.

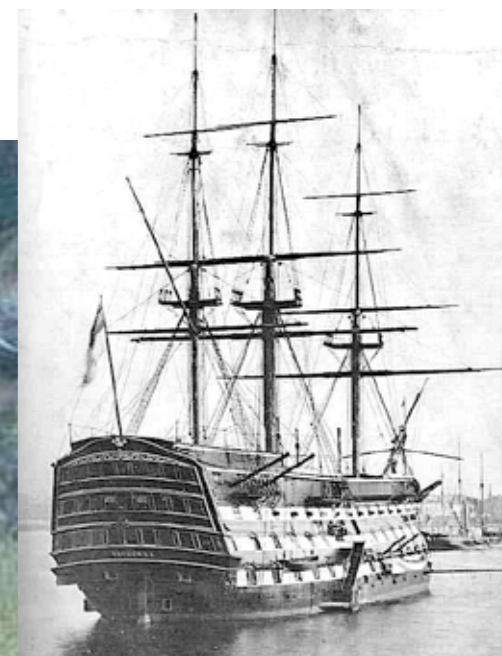
*MK: Where do you guys see yourselves ten years from now?*

NCD: We believe Odyssey will continue being the leaders in the field of deep-water exploration and archaeology. Certainly, technology will continue to evolve, and there will be advances that we could only now dream about,

which will become a reality. The ocean is deemed the 'last uncharted frontier', and it is also a very real possibility that we will have been able to map the entire ocean floor by then. ■

For more information, visit: [www.shipwreck.net](http://www.shipwreck.net)

*HMS Victory, a first-rate Royal Navy warship wrecked in the English Channel, 1744*



Bronze cannon protruding from the seabed at the wreck site of *HMS Victory*, bears the royal crest of King George I (inset)