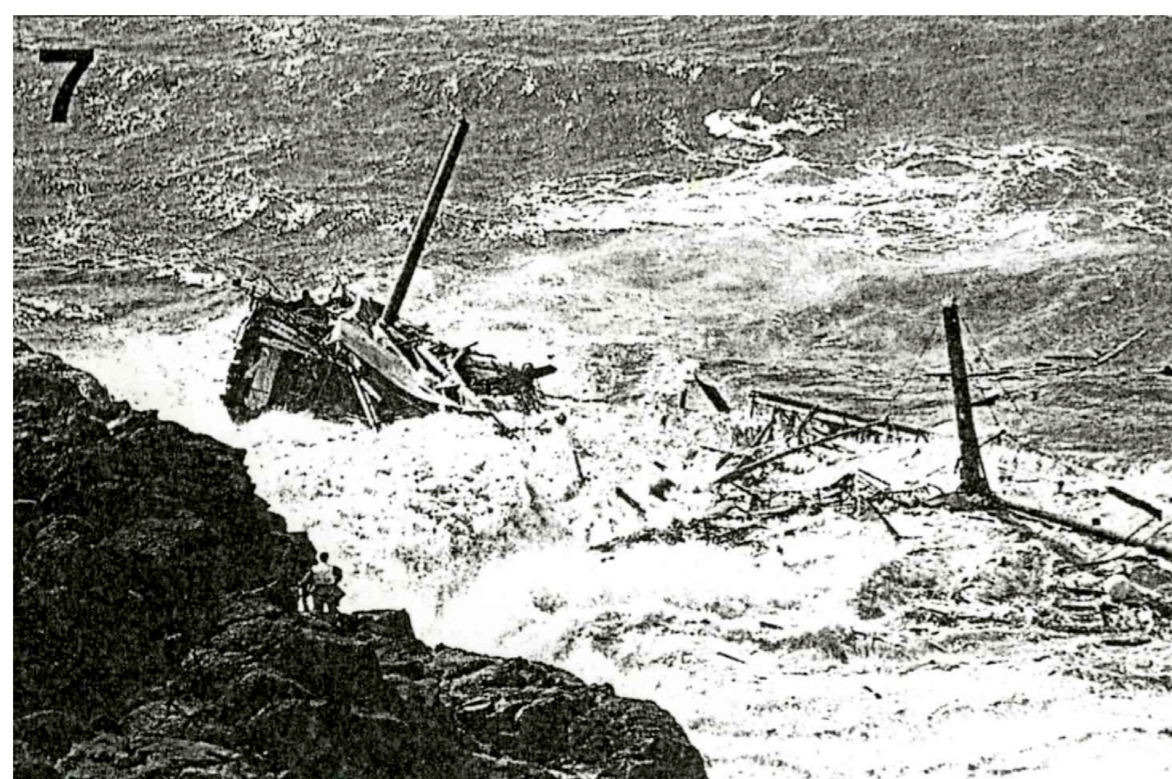
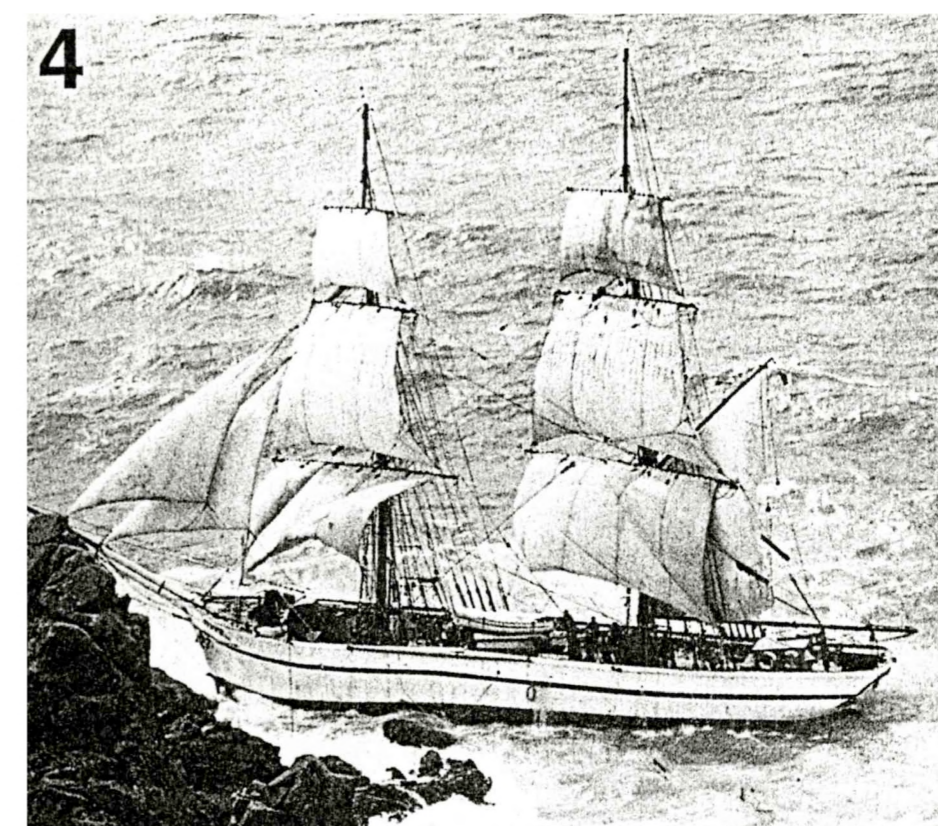
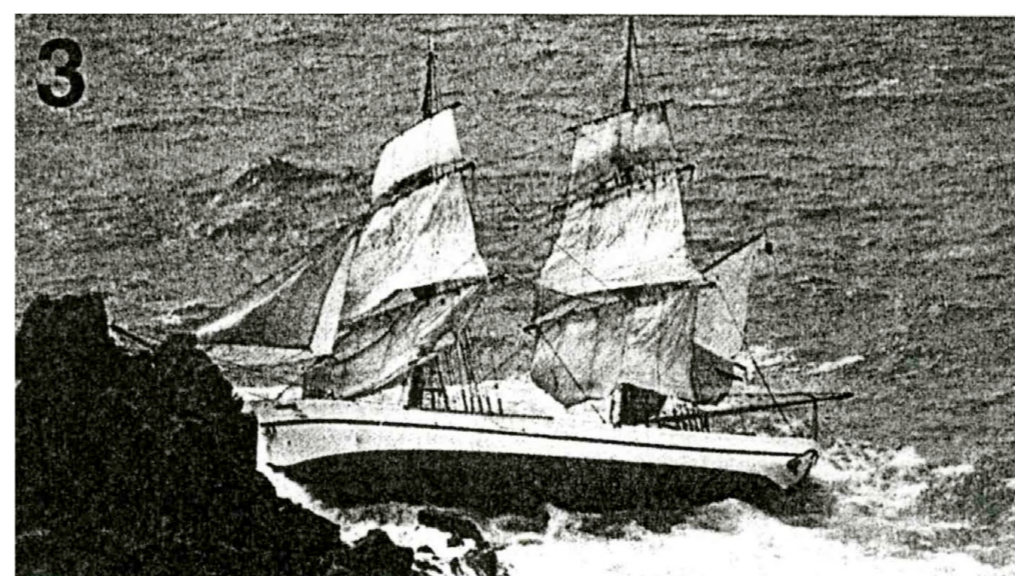
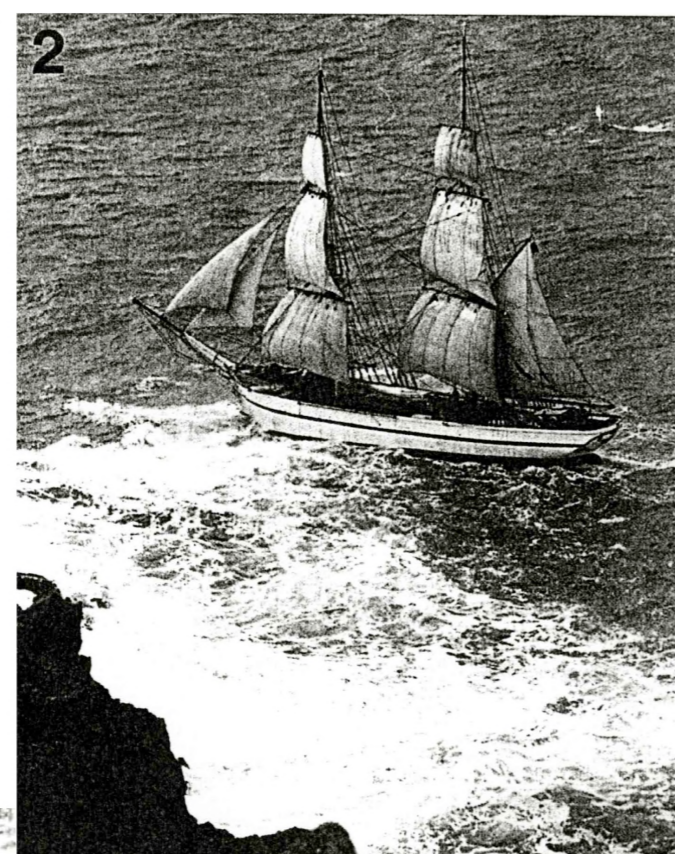
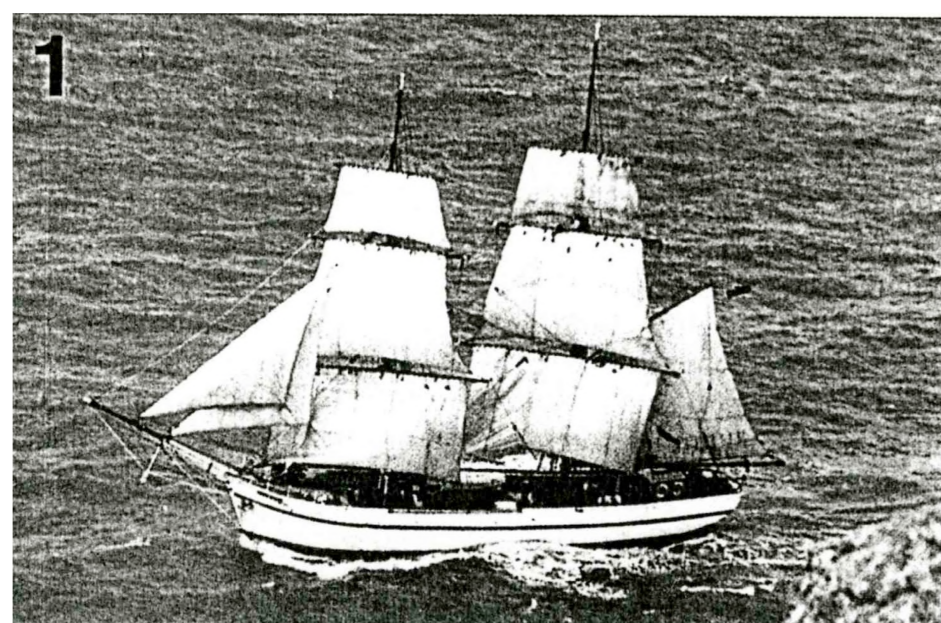


The loss of the *Maria Assumpta*

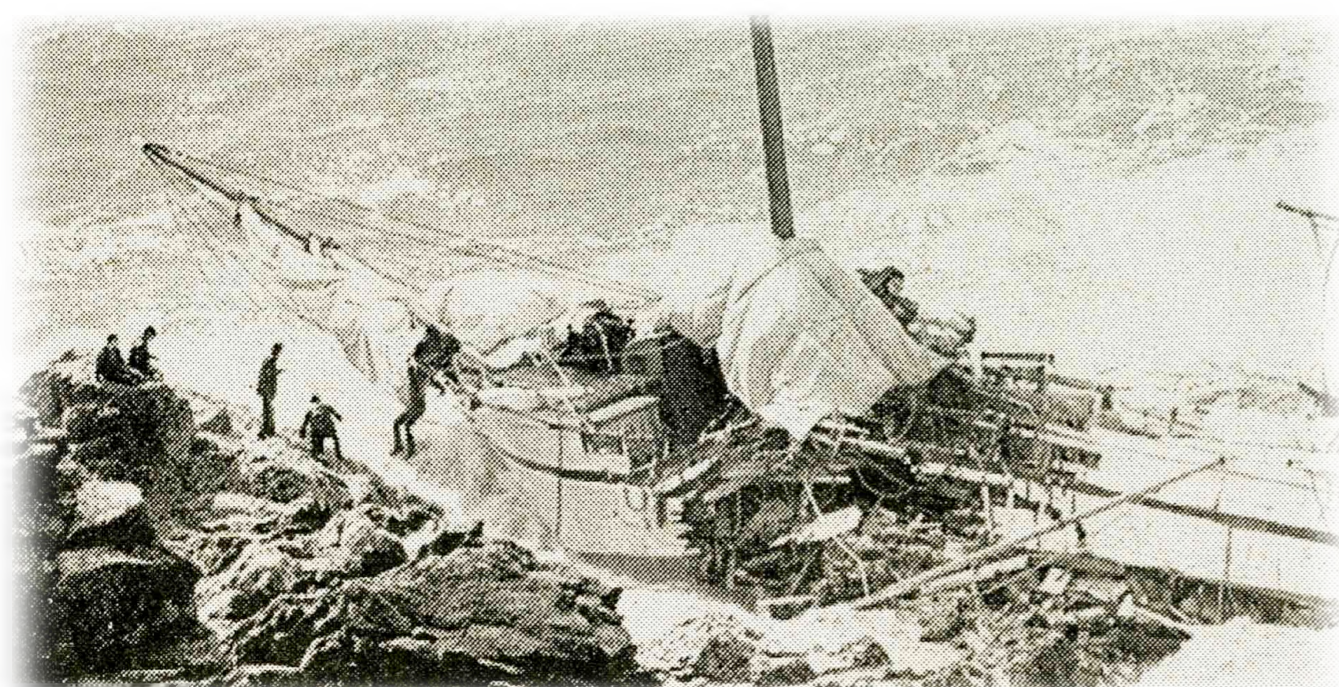
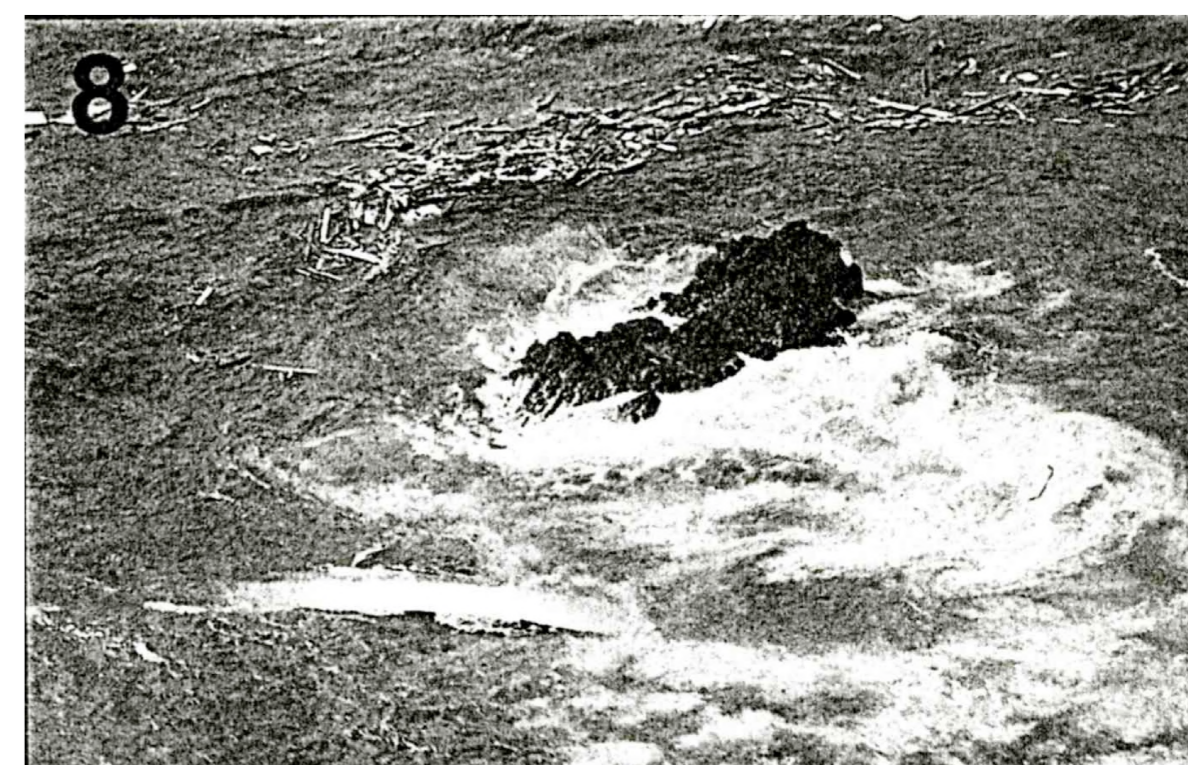
On May 30th 1995, the *Maria Assumpta*, the world's oldest remaining square rigged sailing ship was smashed to pieces on rocks off Rumps Point, near Padstow. Locals and tourists lined the cliff tops to watch her passage into the bay and they could only look on helplessly as she silently drifted towards the shore, grounded on submerged rocks and began to break up. They could only watch in horror as the crew jumped from the deck on to the rocks or were swept away by the currents.

The *Maria Assumpta*'s final voyage had begun four days earlier on May 27th when it motored out of Gloucester Docks and down the Bristol Channel after a major refit and survey. The vessel had a crew of 14 and the first days of their trip were hampered by bad weather. However, Tuesday May 30th dawned fine and with good sailing conditions. There was a force 4 onshore wind but the sea was calm and the ship made good progress towards its rendezvous with the Padstow pilot. Skipper Mark Lichfield plotted a course close to the coastline. He was later to tell police, "I thought everybody else would like to look at it". Crew man and watch leader, perhaps the most experienced crew member, had doubts about his captain's navigation and he suggested tacking out to sea away from the hazards of the rocks. The Skipper disagreed and insisted on plotting a course that contradicted the accepted wisdom on navigating the local waters. He ignored a mobile phone call from the Padstow Harbourmaster who advised taking his ship further out to sea before trying to enter the bay. As the ship approached Mouls Rock it was being set in towards shore by a combination of wind and tide. The Skipper ordered the engines to be started and the *Maria Assumpta* skirted round the Mouls. But as it did, the engines faltered and then died. The sails were set to full to try to gain speed and steer the ship clear of the next rocks. The engineers were sent below to attempt to restart the engines. Although there were plenty of lifejackets on board no order was given to put them on.

Ten minutes after the engines failed the *Maria Assumpta* struck a rock and heeled dramatically to starboard, then swung again to port. Immediately her hull began to splinter and crack. At 4.15pm the Skipper's distress call was taken by Falmouth Coastguard. As Lifeboats and rescue helicopters were scrambled, crew members began to jump from the bow on to the rocks. Three of the crew drowned in the churning seas. Survivors were picked up by local fishing boats including the *Helen Clare* of Port Isaac and lifeboats from Port Isaac and Padstow, which had quickly arrived on the scene. Within a matter of minutes the ship was totally wrecked; at the cost of the lives of Emily MacFarlane, 19, John Shannon, 30 and ship's cook Anne Taylor, 51.



**Caught on camera -
the sad demise of
the *Maria Assumpta***



In the subsequent trial, Captain Mark Lichfield was jailed for 18 months for manslaughter of his three crew members who had died when the vessel floundered. It transpired that not only had he ignored the advice of the Padstow Harbourmaster but he had relied on engines that he knew to be fuelled by contaminated diesel. The jury found him "grossly negligent ... and [he had] shown a profound disregard for the lives of his crew."