

BEDWELL BAY WRECK — WESTERN DISPATCHER

Official Number: 190573

Registry: Canada

CONSTRUCTION

This vessel was built as a submarine-chaser by the *Quincy Adams Yacht Yard* in Quincy, Massachusetts. The keel was laid in December 1942 and she was launched on April 19, 1943.

The yard turned out 28 subchasers, sometimes at the rate of one every two weeks. They were all much the same design. The wooden 110-footers looked sleek, thanks to their minimal superstructures. They were fast, too, with twin diesels and two screws producing 20 knots. Armaments typically included a single 40 mm gun forward, three 20 mm machine guns amidships, depth charges, and Mousetrap rocket launchers. Twenty-eight crewmen served aboard. In all, some 438 SC-class subchasers were built for the U.S. Navy in World War II.

She was converted into a fishpacker after the war. Her registry reveals major structural alterations. She emerged measuring 99.8 feet long, 18.3 feet in beam, and 9.4 feet deep. Her displacement was 133.36 tons gross, 90.68 net. She had one deck, two masts, a raked stem, a transom stern, carvel planking, and six bulkheads.

Her first diesels were from *General Motors*. By 1956 she had eight-cylinder twins built by the *Cooper-Bessemer Corporation* in 1944. They totalled 600 brake horsepower, moving her at 12 knots. Both were removed before she sank.

OPERATIONAL HISTORY

The new subchaser was commissioned into the *U.S. Navy* as SC-1272 on June 30, 1943. No operational records are available but evidently she served in the Pacific theatre. On August 20, 1945, she was redesignated as SCC-1272, an amphibious control vessel. These were essentially floating radio posts which directed landing craft traffic. The forward gun was usually removed to make room for electronics but SCC-1272 retained a 20 mm machine gun on the bow. The fighting was over by then anyway. The Navy sold her in September 1947.

The nominal buyer was Alice Ashton of North Vancouver, B.C. However, when first registered at Vancouver on November 19, 1948, Richard and Norman Nelson were listed as the joint owners. Initially she was named the *Norman Nelson* but that was changed to *Western Dispatcher* before the year was out. She was a fishpacker with *Nelson Bros. Fisheries Ltd.* for the rest of her career.

LOSS

On April 5, 1978, her registry was closed with the note: "Vessel demolished at Bedwell Bay, B.C." Her engines and everything valuable were removed. Apparently the remains were then scuttled. Bedwell Bay had long been used as a ship boneyard.

SALVAGE

No salvage is known or likely.

SEARCH / DISCOVERY

The wreck has been dived since it was new. Early visitors could still read the name on the hull. Now most divers know it by the misnomers, *Despatch* or *Dispatch*. Access is by water only, precluding many sport divers, but some charter operators visit the spot regularly.

Source: Vancouver's Undersea Heritage – Shipwrecks and Submerged Cultural Sites in Burrard Inlet and Howe Sound, David Stone, *Underwater Archaeological Society of British Columbia*, 1994, pages 65-67.

STATUS

The wreck lies close to shore on the northwest side of Bedwell Bay in Indian Arm. Latitude and longitude are 49° 19.63' N. by 122° 54.75' W. She points north on a slight mud slope, her bow in 46 feet of water and the stern down 56 feet. The hull lists more than 20° to starboard. Just a short swim beyond the port bow is the *Bedwell Bay Mystery Wreck*, described in an earlier chapter.

UASBC divers surveyed the wreck in five expeditions between 1991 and 1993. She was initially quite intact and teams started to map her.

When we returned on April 17, 1993, we found that the *Western Dispatcher* had broken apart. This had just occurred since she was in one piece when a charter boat had visited a few weeks before. We suspended mapping. Instead, the wreck was videotaped to record her condition and features before she deteriorated further. A special trip was made at the end of the survey to monitor her progress. This report summarizes observations recorded before and since the break-up.

Initial dives confirmed that the sunken hull matched the lines of the *Western Dispatcher*. The profile also implied a small warship, which archival research confirmed. She had a slightly raked bow, square stern, prominent rubbing strake down each side, and carvel planking. Biological degradation had eaten many gaps in the planks, revealing the wooden frames inside.

The forward hull was visibly deteriorated. There is evidence that part of the foredeck collapsed in 1991. Most of the rest had dropped into the hull by the following year. There seem to have been two holds. The forward one was small. A larger one stretched virtually the width of the ship just ahead of the superstructure. It continued aft under the deckhouse to form the engine room. This area was of composite construction: planks over metal frames and bulkheads. The powerplants had been pulled out, only the mounts and some piping remaining.

The wooden two-storey superstructure which stood amidships had largely collapsed. The wheelhouse and upstairs level were completely gone. The downstairs front and starboard walls were fairly intact; the others were mere skeletons.

The stern section was relatively sound despite some holes in the deck. A hold just behind the superstructure had been widened by pulling up the port-side decking. Protruding beams showed its original size. A bigger hole further back was where more decking was torn up when the vessel was stripped. The steering quadrant showed through yet another gap. A rudder and a shaft, sans propeller, were visible underneath the stern; the other shaft was buried. The square transom still had dark green paint and Roman numeral draught marks on it.

Then came the break-up. The hull split in two just ahead of the superstructure. The bow now lies on its starboard side. The foredeck is a jumble on the sand. Only the hull bottom and one or two timbers on the port side span the break. Many other timbers, pipes, and planks protrude haphazardly from the gap. Aft of the break, the wreck remains much as it was before. There is no additional damage and it is still at the same list. Even the remnants of the superstructure still stand — for now.

The ship did not actually roll. The forward topsides fell over. Divers found a tear in the hull which runs forward from the break along the port side. Above it, the sides have fallen to starboard. Below it, the hull remains attached to the rest of the ship. The break occurred at the main hold for good reason. That enormous cavern was inherently weak, probably exacerbated by the transition from steel frames under the engines to wooden ones forward.

Eight months after she broke-up, the last dive of the survey checked on the *Western Dispatcher's* stability. No further collapse or movement was evident. It may be that the wreck has stabilized. However, there are some potentially hazardous areas. The rickety superstructure leans over the starboard side and surely will fall soon. The area of the break is a chaos of protruding wreckage. Penetration into the hull, especially the engine room, is hazardous. As a general rule, divers should avoid swimming under or inside any parts of the wreck. Otherwise, our dive teams did not consider this shipwreck any more dangerous than most others.

Source: Vancouver's Undersea Heritage – Shipwrecks and Submerged Cultural Sites in Burrard Inlet and Howe Sound, David Stone, *Underwater Archaeological Society of British Columbia*, 1994, pages 65-67.



Courtesy of Vancouver City Archives (Neg. #594)

***Western Dispatcher* as a Fishpacker in 1953**

CONCLUSIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

Site notes and videotape record the *Western Dispatcher's* current condition and features. UASBC proposes periodic monitoring of the wreck until it is established that she has achieved equilibrium.

The *Western Dispatcher* is not historic but she is a nice recreational resource. If the shipwreck proves to be stable and safe, she will likely remain a popular boat dive.

The fishpacker is just a short underwater swim from the *Bedwell Bay Mystery Wreck*. This makes them uniquely suitable for a sign-posted, selfguiding, underwater trail. The route would start at a marked entry point on shore, thus both guiding divers and prompting skippers to drop anchor well away from the sites. The tour through the wrecks would combine old and new, sail and motor. Underwater plaques along the way could point out structural features and history, as well as promoting conservation ethics. A diving safety message would be particularly appropriate for the *Western Dispatcher*.

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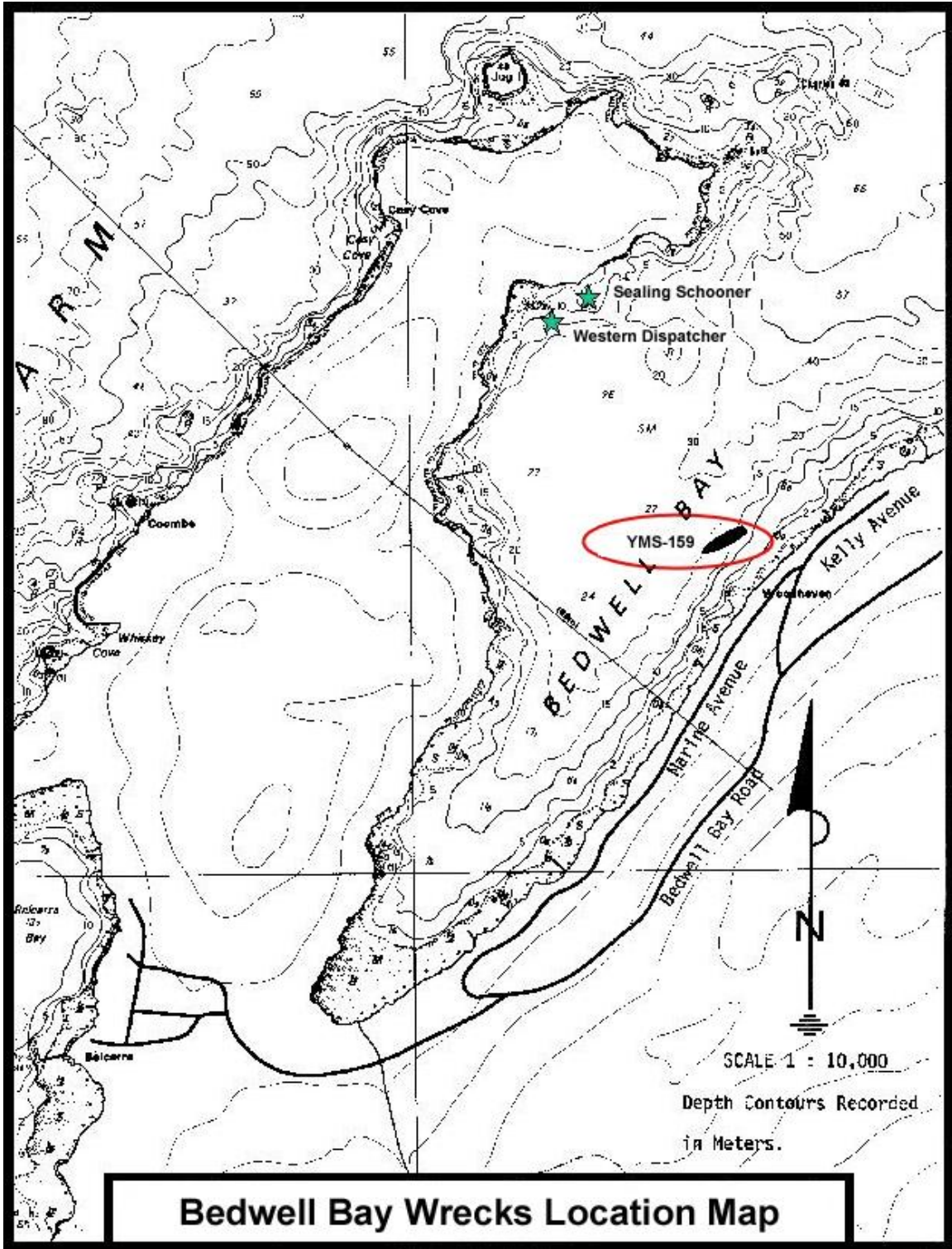
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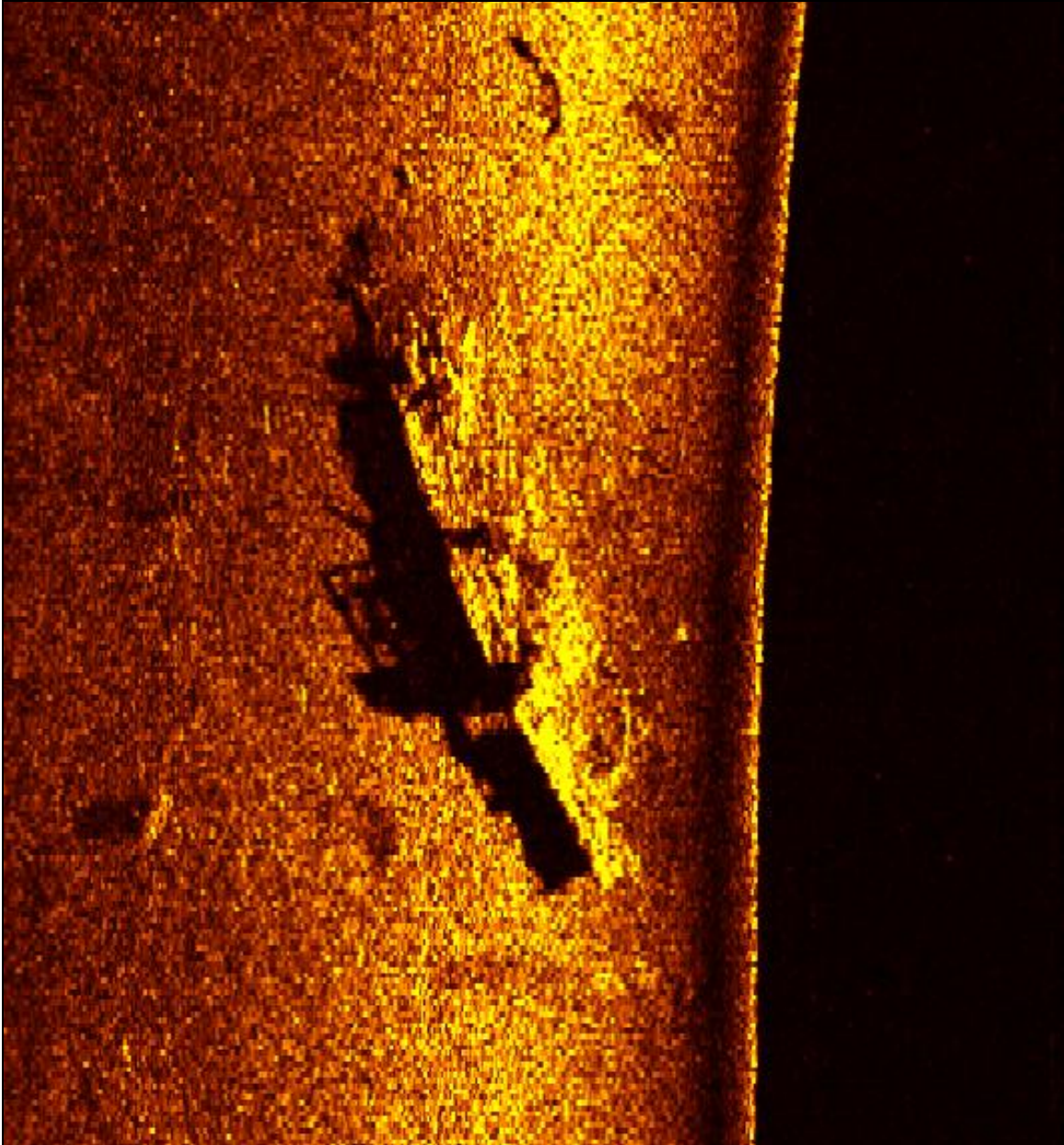
Source: Vancouver's Undersea Heritage – Shipwrecks and Submerged Cultural Sites in Burrard Inlet and Howe Sound, David Stone, *Underwater Archaeological Society of British Columbia*, 1994, pages 65-67.



Bedwell Bay Wrecks Location Map

Source: Jacques Marc, UASBC

Source: Vancouver's Undersea Heritage – Shipwrecks and Submerged Cultural Sites in Burrard Inlet and Howe Sound, David Stone, *Underwater Archaeological Society of British Columbia*, 1994, pages 65-67.



Source: Sidescan sonar image courtesy of Imagenex Technology Corp.

Sidescan sonar image of the shipwreck *Western Dispatcher* in Bedwell Bay
(Image from an Imagenex YellowFin 540kHz Sidescan Sonar)

Source: Vancouver's Undersea Heritage – Shipwrecks and Submerged Cultural Sites in Burrard Inlet and Howe Sound, David Stone, *Underwater Archaeological Society of British Columbia*, 1994, pages 65-67.