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## **The secret treasure of Captain Morgan**

### **Could this be from the wreck of HMS Oxford?**

IT WAS the world's most disastrous dinner party. Legendary 17th-century buccaneer Sir Henry Morgan had captured two French warships off the coast of Haiti and was lavishly toasting his success with guests from neighbouring ships. With rum flowing, he was sitting with his war council on the quarter-deck of his Royal Navy grand frigate, HMS Oxford, when a spark from their celebratory pig roast ignited tons of gunpowder. The front third of the ship was blown off and its mast fell on to the dining table, killing several. Captain Morgan was catapulted over the side and survived but 350 sailors drowned. Tantalisingly, it is said that the Oxford went down with a vast haul of riches that the Welsh-born captain had secreted for his personal benefit. Now, 335 years later, divers are poised to find whether the rumours are true. After five years searching for the wreck, they are convinced they have found the rusted remains of HMS Oxford, which was under royal orders to plunder Spain's ships and territories. Archaeologists will be invited this week to carbon-date the find and confirm the identity of the wreck. German diver Rick Haupt, who believes he has identified the wreck, says: "Captain Morgan is the kind of figure who attracts legend. One story is that a cannon on the Oxford was never fired because Morgan had stashed his gold and jewels – his private purse – inside and sealed it.

King Charles II had ordered him to attack any Spanish ship but, although he was working for the British government, he appears to have kept a lot of the plunder for himself.” So far, the divers have not been able to investigate the wreck for treasure. The remains of what they believe to be HMS Oxford lie on a dangerous reef. “Under the circumstances, it will take a long time,” says Haupt. “Although we are only working in shallow water, surges roll in and push you into the corals. It would be a deadly undertaking for a novice diver.” He recalls vividly the moment on March 6 when he first set eyes on the wreck he had sought for so long. “Imagine seeing a coral mound crowned by two old cannon with the muzzles facing each other and having to hold on to them to stop yourself being torn to shreds,” he says. “For me, this was the highlight of my career, a dream come true. Since I was a little boy reading Jules Vernes adventures, I have dreamed of finding a wreck such as this.” Haupt, now lobbying Unesco to designate the area a World Heritage Site, regards the ship as the real treasure. “Finding a wreck from the 17th century is a haul in itself,” he says. “There are so many thousands of artefacts, including 60 cannon, 11 anchors and countless handblown wine bottles that we believe we have found at least three wrecks very close together.” It seems that the blast that sank Captain Morgan’s ship capsized two other boats. The discovery of the wreck was filmed for a documentary to be shown on the Welsh language channel S4C, with an ITV1 screening to follow later this year. Like Sir Francis Drake before him, Morgan operated in the Caribbean with government permission. Such licensed pirates were known by the preferred term “buccaneer”, a word derived from a local method of cooking meat, or boucan, over a slow fire. Mariners who adopted the method became known as “boucaniers” and it was a spark from such a feast that proved fatal for the Oxford. Morgan – the most successful buccaneer of them all – served his apprenticeship as part of the expedition that captured Jamaica from the Spanish; it was a bloody business but one he clearly savoured. He went on to lead countless raids on Spanish ports in Cuba, Venezuela and Panama, often with crews of more than 500. His brutality caused Spain’s ambassador to protest continually to Charles II until Morgan was called to London to stand trial. Far from being punished, he was acquitted, knighted and appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Jamaica. “By 1669 when HMS Oxford sank, Morgan was already a feared figure but he was also a remarkable and complex character who had a vision of Jamaica’s future and helped to bring prosperity through his investment in plantations,” says Haupt. Legends persist that Morgan hid some of his rumoured personal fortune at his home in Wales but searches of various locations, including a cottage near Newport, have unearthed no treasure. Perhaps that is why Morgan never quite got over the loss of HMS Oxford. Six years after she sank and 13 years before he drank himself to death, he returned to Haiti to search for her but his vessel was devastated by a hurricane. So maybe there really is a wealth of treasure on the reef.