



Surprising depths: Parts of traction engines found on the sea bed off Whitby, from left, a group of wheels, and a loose wheel. But how, and when, did they get there?

Pictures: Andrew Jackson

# Uncovering the riddle of the seas

Mystery surrounds a pair of huge traction engines found in the depths of the North Sea. **Alexandra Wood** reports.

THEY were once familiar sights on fields newly shorn of their harvest: traction engines with great big wheels, 20 spokes in all, a huge cylinder and firebox, chugging out steam.

They would be attached to a fellow engine on the other side of the field by a wire, with a man perched on a plough shunting effortlessly backwards and forth.

In their heyday in the Victorian era, these powerhouse of energy could plough 20 times faster than a horse-drawn ploughman and his team and were transported from farm to farm.

But their use died out with the Second World War and the tractor revolution.

So how did two mighty traction engines end up at the bottom of the North Sea

in a wreck of a ship which was way past its sell-by date when it finally sank, possibly at some time around 1900?

Two divers from Scarborough, well known for their underwater investigations, are doing their best to sort out the mystery which began at a firm in Leeds called John Fowler & Co.

The divers, Carl Racey and Andy Jackson, discovered the engines while exploring virgin wrecks in an expedition off Whitby.

The visibility was good although the dive was deep and as usual they videotaped what they found, although at

first they were not quite sure what to make of the jumble of wheels and boilers in the rotted out wreck of a very early steam ship.

Mr Racey said the engines appeared to have been carted on deck, and had rolled over as the ship sank to lie on the seabed with some of the wreckage around them. He said: "We know they were made by Fowlers, and knowing they had a branch at Magdeburg, Germany, we thought they may have been heading there to be distributed on."

However, when they spoke to steam-ship expert Charles

Wayne he said it was a very early steam ship with a very simple engine and could not have been going to Magdeburg, because it could not have carried enough coal.

Magdeburg, capital of Saxony-Anhalt, lies on the River Elbe south-east of Hamburg.

The world of traction engine aficionados is excited about the discovery - the engines could be worth up to £100,000, if restored. But chances of that happening are slight because of the huge cost of salvage in a depth of 65 metres and 20 miles offshore.

For now the divers are just

keen to find out as much as they can to identify the ship or the engines.

One theory is that the ship, which only had a simple one-cylinder engine, dating it to around 1850, was actually coasting and was blown off course before coming to grief. Maybe the weight of the 10-tonne engines toppled her over.

Charles Roads, the president of the Steam Plough Club, used to use ploughing engines when he was farming. He said: "The incredible thing is that all the original Fowler order books for all the engines are still in exist-

ence. We have checked and rechecked and there is no mention of these engines being lost and nothing was ever said about it.

"We do however know from a chap called Alf Pepper, one of Fowlers' top men, that a boat was sunk halfway across to Magdeburg, between Hull and Hamburg, in the First World War.

"This one isn't halfway across, but it's an intriguing possibility." Next year the divers will be heading back hoping to find more vital clues - the engines' manufacturer's plates or the ship's bell.

Mr Jackson, a catchment manager with Yorkshire Water, believes the vessel was en route to the Continent. He said: "None of this stacks up and unfortunately the wreck has not revealed a lot of clues."

Mr Racey said: "It's a fascinating story and we'd love to get to the bottom of it. This may just jog someone's memory and produce that scrap of information we need to get us on the right trail.

"Without a name or date getting more information is like finding a needle in a haystack." alex.wood@ypn.co.uk