

Wrecks may get war grave status

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THOUSANDS of merchant shipwrecks from the two world wars could be afforded war grave status after the Ministry of Defence dropped a landmark court action.

The Government has decided not to appeal against a court victory last month by two sisters whose father died on a merchant ship in the Second World War, The Times has learnt.

Rosemary Fogg and Valerie Ledgard's successful court battle to have the wreck of the SS Storaa designated a war grave has brought hope to the Merchant Navy Association, which now plans to help other people to make similar submissions.

More than 5,000 merchant shipping vessels were sunk in the First and Second World Wars by enemy action, with the loss of 45,000 merchant seamen.

Among them was the SS Anglo-Saxon, which was hit by a German surface raider in the mid-Atlantic in August 1940. Only two merchant seamen survived the attack. Now it is hoped that the resting place of their 39 crewmen, about 800 miles (1,285km) west of the Canary Islands, can be afforded war grave protection.

Captain John Sail, national chairman of the Merchant Navy Association, said: "I am absolutely delighted with this result. It was horrendous that we couldn't have the war graves properly protected.

Peter Marsden, director of the Shipwreck and Coastal Heritage Centre in Hastings, East Sussex, and an expert on the Storaa, which was torpedoed in 1943, said that he now planned to seek war grave status for a First World War vessel. "It's so important that this happens. As a historian, I appreciate very much what the Merchant Navy did during the two world wars. The fact that there has been this lack of recognition by the Government is appalling."

Mrs Fogg and Mrs Ledgard feared the worst when, in 1985, the Ministry of Defence sold the salvage rights to the Storaa to a member of a Hastings diving club for £150. They wanted the grave of their father, Petty Officer James Varndell, to be free from interference.

Diving clubs insist that they adhere to a "look, don't touch" approach when diving on wrecks. However, the Government's decision to allow the Storaa protected status could have profound implications for divers and owners of wrecks.

According to a Freedom of Information request submitted by The Times to the Department for Transport, a total of 309 merchant vessels lost during the two world wars have been sold, netting the Government about £53,000.