

Wreck cargo is plundered



Plunder ahoy, m'hearties ... women carry away bags of salvaged goods

By JOHN COLES
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HUNDREDS of looters yesterday rushed to cash in on Britain's biggest giveaway — grabbing cargo washed up from the stricken MSC Napoli.

Cops tried in vain to prevent bargain hunters swarming over the wreckage washed up from the giant container ship which is aground off South Devon.

And it's all legally OK

PEOPLE can legally salvage from wrecks — as long as they stick to strict rules.

Under the Merchant Shipping Act all items recovered still belong to their original owner.



Car booty sale ... motor parts found on beach

The public, known as "salvers" in these cases, can help themselves to goods off the beach.

But they must notify the official Receiver of Wreck — an employee of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency.



On my patch ... a local

Police have been handing out special forms to salvers on the beach near Sidmouth. If the owner of the plundered items — often an insurance company — wants them back they must give the salver a cash award



Booty ... nappies, right, and barrels are carried off

People took days off work and skipped school to treasure-hunt as pretty Branscombe beach was turned into the National Lootery.

Among the biggest prizes were 15 new BMW K1200 GT motorbikes, worth around £10,000 each.

They were hauled away under cover of darkness still with their keys, paperwork and tanks full to their new owners' delight.

Gareth Topping, 32, a builder from nearby Sidmouth who got one, said: "It's incredible.

"I got here at 8pm on Sunday and stayed all night. Police gave us the go-ahead and we just started to search through things.

"There were cars, car parts, tractors, barrels, books, all sorts. I filled out a form and was told if the shipping firm don't claim it back within a year it's mine."



Boxing clever ... one man grabs piles of packed loot, left, while youths find lights work on BMW bike

for their efforts.

The amount of cash will depend on how much risk was taken by the salver in the recovery.

The Receiver of Wreck normally acts as a go-between in negotiations.

But if hundreds of different people have items the owner will often waive their rights.

This means people are allowed to keep the proceeds of their looting. Last night Alison Kentuck, Deputy Receiver of Wreck, said: "The law is designed to treat both the salver and the owner of the property fairly.

"The agents for the ship have asked that there are no more recoveries from the beach as they have appointed a salvage contractor."

She added: "It is worth considering that some of these items could be owned by individual people moving property to another country by container."

Hector Bird, 33, and his Royal Marine pal Tom Stapley, 21, also got a bike each. Tom said: "It's like an Aladdin's cave."

Yesterday The Sun joined the crowds on Branscombe beach, a world heritage site which looked more like a rubbish dump.

Devon & Cornwall police drafted in extra officers in a vain attempt to halt the mobs but by midday people were driving away with cars full of stuff unchecked.



Roll out the barrel ... man pushes wine cask on beach. Right, mangled car and container

Cops blocked off access to the beach but people simply parked up to two miles away and trekked down. At one point half a dozen burly men stood guard over 20 BMW gearboxes.

One said: "We'll probably get a tractor down here to shift them."

Three women struggled along with carrier bags stuffed with L'Oreal cosmetics. One said: "I'm supposed to be at work but this was too good an opportunity."

About 40 containers have so far been washed up from the 60,000-tonne ship, which is lying in shallow water a mile offshore with most of its 2,394 containers still aboard.



Stuck fast ... Napoli yesterday

Its owner, the Mediterranean Shipping Company, claimed to have hired a private security firm to guard the beach but they were nowhere in sight. Debris was also washed up further east of Branscombe, threatening the protected and world-famous Jurassic Coast.



Local ... Billy Bragg

Picture: **WENN**

Singer-songwriter Billy Bragg reported the beach below his home in Burton Bradstock, Dorset, was littered with thousands of oil-soaked chocolate bars.

Billy said: "Everything is covered in sticky, black oil and you can see it floating on the surface 200metres out. It is dreadful."

One smashed-up container had been packed with disposable nappies and was steadily emptied during the day. Another was stripped of huge bags of cat food and the sands were left strewn with a consignment of Bibles.

Two new cars — a VW and a Toyota — were beyond repair and two tractors had been wrecked by the sea.

Teenagers piled up unbroken BMW rear windows they

reckoned were worth £200 each. Scores of brand-new French oak wine casks were rolled away even though they were empty.

The ship's cargo also included 1,000 tons of nickel, domestic appliances such as washing machines, thousands of pairs of shoes and hazardous materials such as pesticides and acids.

Salvage experts are trying to drain 3,500 tonnes of fuel oil from the ship to avert a major environmental disaster.

The RSPCA is already dealing with up to 200 guillemots

— Advertisement —

and other birds affected by oil.

Beachcombers last night continued to search for booty in a spectacle described as "like a scene from Mad Max".

The candlelight scavengers included mums with babes in arms. Personal belongings, including furniture and clothes which families moving abroad had put in transit, also lay among the wreckage.



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And a woman in Sweden saw looters rifling through her £7,000 shipment in TV reports.

Anita Bokdal, who was sending family items to decorate her winery in South Africa, said: "I thought, 'Oh my God now they are taking my things'.

"There was furniture, china and paintings from our late parents. It has hurt our hearts to see this happen. Much of it is irreplaceable — it is stealing."

Plunder was last night beginning to appear on eBay. Ten steering wheel airbags brazenly advertised as coming from the MSC Napoli were up for grabs.

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