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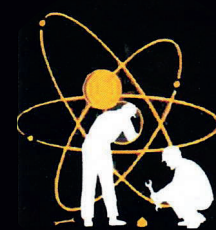


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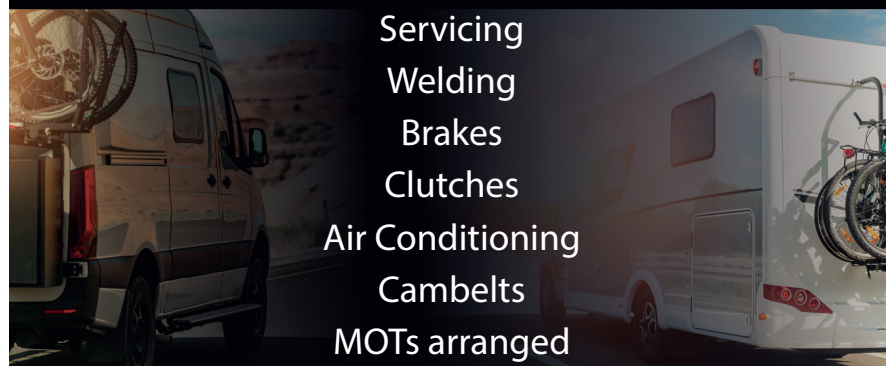
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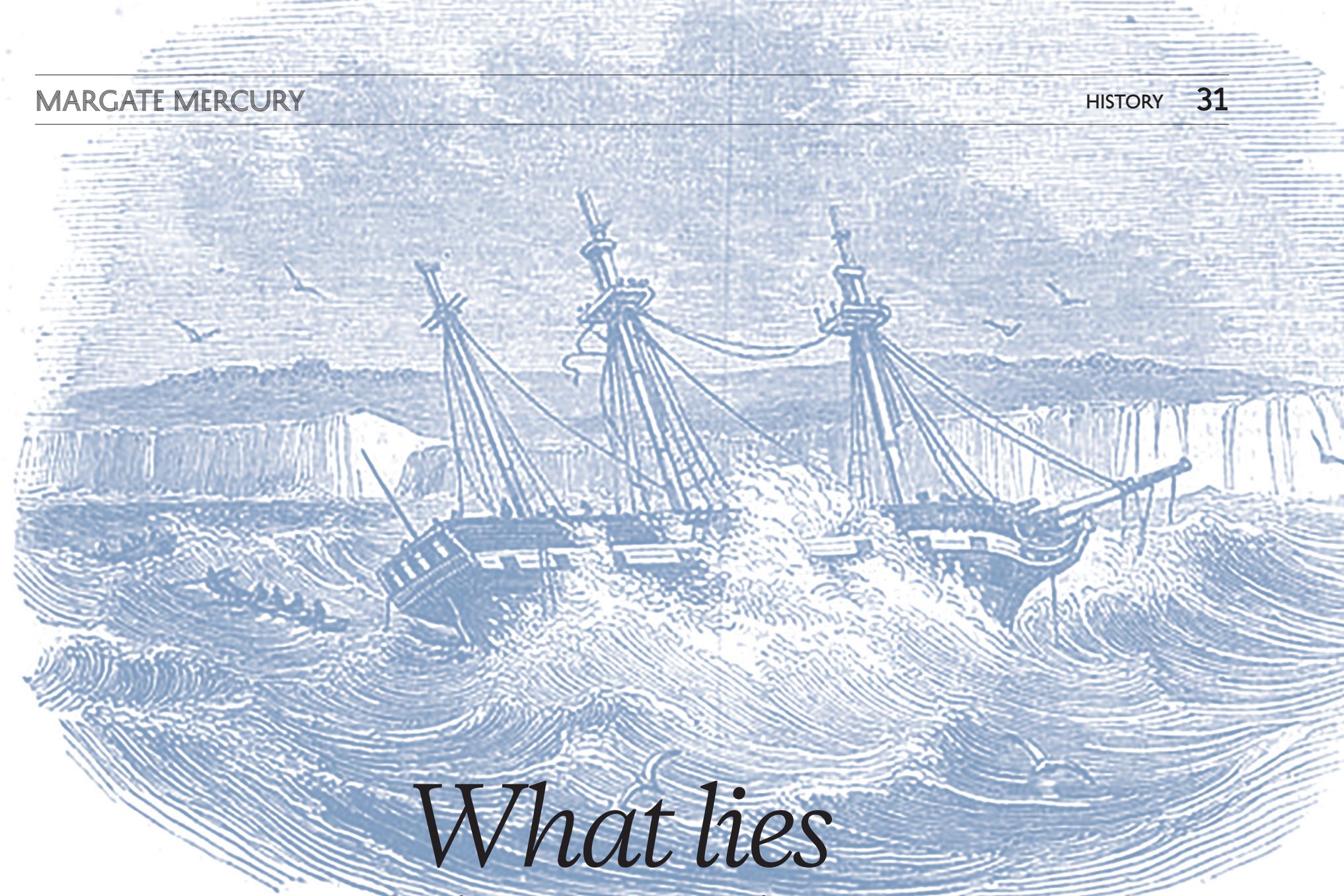
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What lies beneath

Writer
Emilia Ong

Images courtesy of
Peter Nicholls

When historian Peter Nicholls began researching slave trade routes, the last thing he expected was to discover sunken ships buried off his home town's coastline. We speak to him about uncovering these forgotten stories

It's often said that the sea holds lots of secrets - but just how close those secrets are came as a surprise, even to Peter Nicholls. "Honestly, it blew my mind," he says, casting his mind back to the early days of his research. "Sunken slave ships exist globally - everywhere the slave trade did - but I don't think anyone had any idea how many had met their end just off the coast of Margate."

Peter, whose own heritage is a mix of British and Seychellois - and who has, he laughs, "managed to live in just about every town in Thanet over the years" - describes how knowledge of the ships came to exert a strong grip on his imagination. "I basically spent my whole childhood on the beach, so like



most Margate people, I have a close relationship with the sea. I remember thinking as a kid that when I touched the water, it could carry me across the world, touching the Seychelles. Now, as an adult and historian, I feel that when I touch the water, I am travelling back in time too."

To date, he has discovered records of twelve slave ships submerged locally. "The Thames Estuary was something of a hotspot for sinkings," he says. "London was the UK's first major hub for slave trading voyages, and on more than 3,000 known occasions ships left the city in order to traffic enslaved people - approaching a million of them - to the colonies."

Many of those ships sank as they left or returned, however, because of the sandbanks that surround the waterways. "You can actually see them if you look out at the sea from Margate beaches," Peter explains. "They're about a mile or two out, and look like a brownish strip on the horizon. When the tide is in they're covered, but only with shallow water. If you're on a boat, they're invisible."

So many ships were wrecked on the Margate sandbanks, Peter says, that the town became notorious for it and an industry sprang up in response. "Take the Cobbs family: they owned a lot of businesses, one of which was a salvaging company. When a ship wrecked, it wouldn't sink straight away. So they would go out and rescue people - for a ▶

price. They'd also charge for salvaging cargo, and if the owners couldn't pay, the Cobbs would auction it off."

While it's a stretch to say that when we go for a dip we're swimming around the sunken ships - they are wrecked further out than most people swim - simply being aware of them has huge potential to transform our relationship with history. "To me finding records of the ships made it all instantly feel so real and so close," Peter says, "so though I'd already published some of the 'bare' information online, what subsequentlv

"Left to themselves, historical records tend to reduce people to objects, to numbers on inventories. They leave people's actual stories as a question-mark"

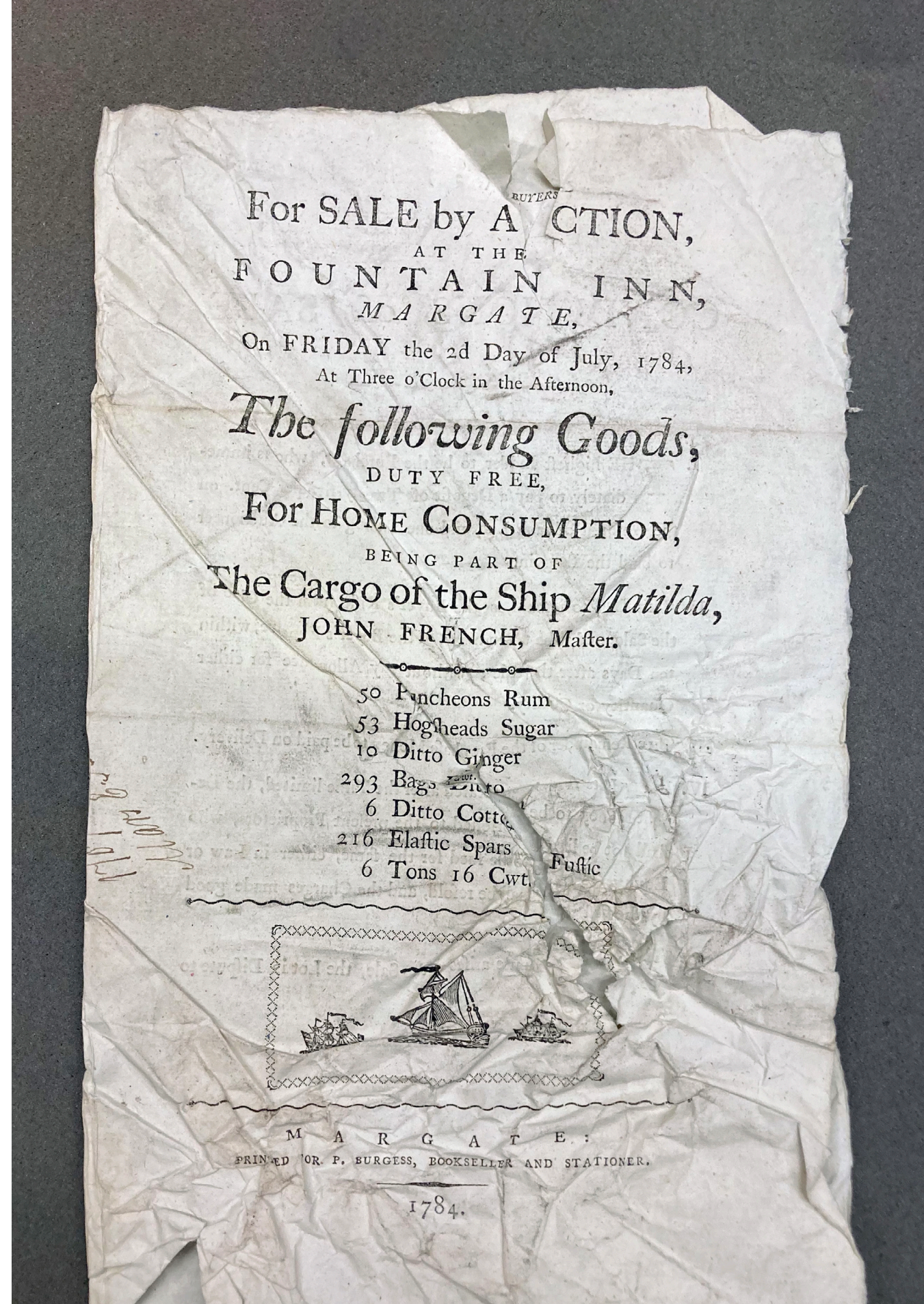
became important was to find other ways of communicating it - ways which would keep that living energy alive.

"After all, left to themselves, historical records tend to reduce people to objects, to numbers on inventories. They leave people's actual stories as a question mark."

Following a series of conversations with Victoria Barrow-Williams, one of the directors of People Dem Collective, Peter collaborated with artists Christina Peake and James Johnson on a People Dem Collective residency held at Crate Space near the end of 2022. "Victoria was wonderful - so full of creative ideas as to how we might move beyond the limitations of documentation, opening up the conversation so people could engage more actively," says Peter.

In the ensuing exhibition, visitors were able to see artworks and installations developed in response to Peter's research. One of these artworks, created by Christina, comprised tiny sculptures referencing artefacts pulled up from a slave ship that sank near Norway in the 1750s.

"Of the handful of slave ship wrecks that have been excavated globally," Peter explains, "the artefacts Christina responded to are among the only things likely to have once belonged to an African person. We believe they belonged to an African person because they've been carved out of the bones of an African animal, and fashioned into what could have been talismans. When Christina



and I discussed them, we started to think about how these objects could silently carry information. Perhaps a mother smuggled them on board, perhaps she wanted to give them to her child. We don't know, but by moving into the realm of imagination, it seemed more possible to honour a memory that should never have been lost.

"The fact is, people died on every single one of those ships during ocean crossings. That makes them sacred places of ancestral energy - energy which might be better accessed through more communal, and creative, forms of remembering."

One surprising result of the show was that it laid bare the intimate connection

Margate's present-day community continues to hold with this history. "For one of the installations we asked people to bring a shell - one they'd picked up in Margate perhaps, or found in their parents' houses or while visiting their places of origin - to help form a 'memory archive'," says Peter. Incredibly, all the destinations that people were sent to on the sunken slave ships were represented among the shells donated - meaning that those people who were trafficked on the ships "may very well have living descendants in Margate now".

There is a deep sadness which arises from knowing all of this, of course. "What does it mean that people died in the

holds of ships," Peter asks, "without the proper rituals and ceremonies, denied the burial grounds that many believed would ensure their proper crossing? Have their spirits become attached to the ships they died on? Have they left and become mermaids? Do they have their own ancestral places in the sea?"

"Another reason for opening these conversations," he adds, "is so that we can find ways of celebrating ancestors, and reconnecting with them."

In a way, the fact that all of this is happening in Margate is made even more significant because of JMW Turner's painting "The Slave Ship", a painting which is, Peter says, "the most famous



◀ Marine Salvage Divination Set by Christina Peake

depiction of a slave ship in art". Created while Turner was staying in Margate, at first glance it seems like a pretty innocuous image of a ship sailing away into one of the town's golden sunsets. Look more closely however, and gory details reveal themselves: faceless bodies are shown floating in the water, having been thrown overboard and abandoned to the fish.

"Turner's painting was intended to be a condemnation of cruelty," Peter explains, "but to me, it's a detached snapshot of violence: it ends up actually obscuring the people who lived and died this history. If we want to learn about who those people actually were, we can't limit ourselves to Turner's view: it's just a partial perspective."

"The point is," he concludes, "that there's so much more to be told! Margate's connection with this history goes much deeper than this painting alone. In a way, the full extent of it is only just beginning to surface."

You can find out more about Peter's research into Margate's sunken slave ships at panicholls.com

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