



ABOVE: The postcard which Cyril Crawford bought in Durban in 1940 showing the entrance to the Amphitheatre on the back of which he jotted his memories of the city  
ABOVE, RIGHT: A picture of the Amphitheatre shot this week by photographer Marilyn Bernard. The stone baskets in the foreground are still there and the trees have grown considerably  
BELOW: This picture, from the Independent Newspapers archives, shows the Ovington Court stuck in the sand off South Beach and was taken in the early to mid-1940s  
BELOW, RIGHT: This picture of the Ovington Court wreck was taken in 2004 by the chairman of the Durban Paddle Ski Club, Johnny Vassilaros, during a Spring low tide



**TRAVELLER** Cyril Crawford, a British soldier who visited Durban in 1940 en route to Egypt and Greece where he was later captured by German forces

## Uncovering the deep secrets of the Ovington Court

By TREVOR BRUCE

THE hobby and curiosity of a local journalist, combined with the power of the internet, has revealed a fascinating relationship between a shipwreck, a postcard and a British soldier who spent a few days in Durban during World War 2 on his way to North Africa.

Jonathan Oberholster, a freelance sub-editor for Independent Newspapers, is a local scuba diver who lives in South Beach, Durban. Nearby, offshore opposite Addington Hos-

pital, lies a famous shipwreck, the Ovington Court, which ran aground on November 26 1940, during heavy seas.

According to Allan Jackson's "Facts about Durban" webpage on the Ovington Court, the 6 000-ton cargo freighter's anchor dragged at about 6pm and the ship drifted toward shore, which it struck about four hours later. The captain made the decision to abandon ship and an attempt was made to rescue the crew using two lifeboats. The first reached shore safely, but the second cap-

sized, pitching 12 crew members into the sea. All 12 were rescued, but four of them died later in Addington Hospital.

They were cabin boy Gordon Hunter, 15, and crewmen Michael Kennedy, Mahomed Abdo Shaaali and Said Ben Said. The following morning the remaining crew were brought to shore by pulley. The last off the ship was Captain George Linsell - with the ship's monkey in his arms.

The wreck was a tourist attraction for many years. However, holes were made in the

hull to hasten its breakup as authorities viewed it as potentially dangerous because people were swimming out to it and clambering all over the rusting superstructure.

Today, many Durbanites are completely unaware of the wreck because the sea has now reduced it to an underwater skeleton. Only at Spring low tides does part of the wreck, thought to be the engine block, still stick out of the water.

Oberholster has dived and snorkelled among the wreck a number of times and has be-

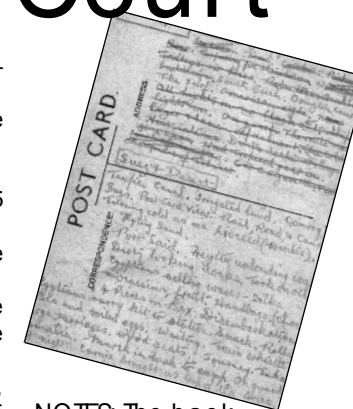
come fascinated by the ship's history and is compiling a dossier on the Ovington Court and its untimely end. On one of his searches he came across a family website created by Sue Lawrance, who lives in England, which has a section in it which is devoted to her grandfather, Cyril Crawford.

Oberholster wondered whether Lawrance knew about the shipwreck and e-mailed her (sue@amieandsue.co.uk). She e-mailed him pictures of the front and back of a postcard Crawford had written while in

South Africa, and more information about Crawford.

Crawford, 32, joined the British army and embarked on a ship, the Andes, which set sail from the UK on November 15 1940. The ship stopped over in Durban just days before the Ovington Court ran aground.

Anyone who can contribute to Oberholster's dossier on the Ovington Court can e-mail [jonathan.oberholster@nl.co.za](mailto:jonathan.oberholster@nl.co.za), and for a vivid explanation of the demise of the Ovington Court, visit [www.fad.co.za/Resources/ovi/ovington.htm](http://www.fad.co.za/Resources/ovi/ovington.htm)



NOTES: The back of the postcard on which Crawford jotted his memories of the city

### Postcard impressions of a visitor to Durban

BRITISH soldier Cyril Crawford arrived in South Africa on the warship, the Andes, bound for North Africa in 1940.

While in Durban he bought a postcard showing the entrance to the Amphitheatre and excitedly jotted down his impressions of the city, including a mention of the wreck of the Ovington Court.

His cryptic notes sharply paint a word picture of the city at that time: "Jellyfish, rail, tractor, ice cream, teas, crickets, rikshas, beer, preparing for Christmas. War effort, trolleys no buses, palm trees, modern buildings, South Beach, Ovington Court. Surf American style. All lights on, no blackout now. Ships lights on. On guard. The route march, lager and salmon refreshments (ice cold). Heat intense. Double decker trolleys, fine cars. Had tropical gear on. South African flag. Cigarettes and cards - cheapness of tobacco."

He did not get to post the card to his pregnant wife, Florrie, who gave birth to a daughter, Cecilia, in January 1941, by which time Crawford was in Egypt. He was captured months later and the postcard remained with him for the duration of the war, ending up in a suitcase of letters, photographs and postcards.

Sue Lawrance, Cecilia's daughter, has been able to piece together Crawford's service history and four years as a prisoner of war after being captured at Kalamata in Greece on April 29, 1941.

It was only in July 1941 that Florrie was informed by the Red Cross that Crawford had been captured. He was sent to Stalag 18a in Austria and from there went to a number of other camps, where they were forced to work on road construction and other harsh manual labour until the end of the war when he arrived back in the UK on June 11 1945.