THE WRECK OF THE QUEEN OF NATIONS

Notes on an address to the Society 5/7/1951 by Edgar Beale Esq., Senior Vice-President, Illawarra Historical Society.

Nothing caused such excitement and appeal to the people of Illawarra late last century as the wreck of the barque Queen of Nations in 1881. She was an old ship of the White Star Line, built in 1861 and of 827 tons; she was posted missing in 1875, but was found again. An old apprentice told how, on finding her overloaded to such an extent that the Plimsoll line was below water, the carpenter moved the line
up judiciously, and the good ship was thereupon considered safe. On
the voyage, which concerns us, she left London on 23rd January, 1881,
a cargo representative of an extraordinary variety of commodities;
and amongst tin plate, whiting, sardines, cement, pictures, pills, rails,
cakum, boiler tubes, candles, and so on, particular note must be made
from the manifest of casks of rum, beer, wine and some thousands of
cases of brandy.

The course lay south to Tristan da Cunha, and then east along
the roaring 'forties until, far south of the east coast of Australia,
she steered north, making the coast of N.S.W. well below Wollongong.
There had been much dissension amongst the crew. The skipper, Capt.
Bache, was reported as having been eccentric, and so was the mate,
Mr. Anderson. The cause was undoubtedly either an over-generously
supplied locker, or illegal tampering with some of the more expendable
items of cargo—in any event, alcoholism.

Now in these years slack coal used to be burned in large heaps on
the mountain sides in this district, so that at daybreak on 1st June,
the heaps above Corrimal glowed far out to sea. The Queen of Nations
was blowing up the coast, all sails set, and the Captain's watch, when
the skipper saw these lights. Assuming them to be the lights of Sydney
Heads, he gave the order to steer hard aport, and soon found his ship
going aground on Corrimal Beach, about 400 yards north of the Black
Rocks at Towradgi, and over 40 miles south of where he thought he
was. He tried to steer her clear of the beach, but it was too late: she
was firmly aground. In his defence it may be said that the morning
was rather foggy, and that other captains of coastal vessels had on
occasions nearly made similar mistakes, but this defence was not con­sidered sufficient by the subsequent Court of Marine Inquiry. The
fact was, Capt. Bache was drunk.

Two or three of the crew landed, one man being drowned in the
attempt. A local resident saw the barque aground, still intact, for the
most part, and gave the alarm. Telegrams went to Sydney, and the
steamer "Commodore" was chartered to go to the wreck but of
course the usual delays of coaling and so forth meant that it was
3 p.m. before she left. She made good time to Wollongong, but
experienced delay in getting a pilot, because the rockets lit to give
warning of her standing by were lit at the wrong end, and went
spluttering and fizzing round the decks instead of through the air.
The others, lit at the right end, were no good because they were wet.
Eventually, however, the ship made land and belatedly commenced
rendering aid, when it was no longer necessary.

In the meantime, in fact by midday, all the crew were off the
wreck except the skipper and the mate, and the "Commodore" found
the crew in Wollongong, drowning their sorrows—as well they might,
because apart from all their trials they had had great difficulty in
getting off the ship, not only because of the surf, but also because
the skipper threatened to shoot any one who left the wreck. Once
escaped, however, four of the crew invoked the law on the skipper
and mate for assault and battery, but the warrants remained
unexecuted because the defendants were still on board. Above the
pounding of the surf the old skipper could be heard on the wreck
bellowing and roaring, so that a volunteer crew at great personal
risk put off from the shore, under the Police Magistrate, A. A. Turner,
and Sgt. Ford, to rescue them. Yet on arrival alongside, the two
officers promptly went below, and did not even answer calls. So they
were left where they were. Once back on shore, the cries for help
were renewed, the volunteers again went out, and again the drunks
disappeared. It was now 5 p.m., and in half an hour more signals
for help were seen; this time they were disregarded. The absence
of any rescuers made one of the wrecked men shin up one of the re-
mainling masts and tear the ensign down from the speaker-head, but, understandably, there were still no volunteers for a rescue party.

The following morning the mate was in fact rescued, nearly overturning the boat as he hauled himself aboard. The Captain and his dog remained aboard still, but ultimately the former was brought ashore; the dogs' fate is unknown. The Captain himself was reported as looking haggard and unwell, and diagnosis is not difficult. A court of inquiry convened a fortnight later, had to be adjourned because of his illness; when finally held, the skipper was found to have been negligent, and his ticket was suspended.

All this time, the excitement had been intense. The Sydney Morning Herald reported that there were no instances of pilfering from the wreck or wreckage washed ashore, which was an extremely bad mistake in reporting, duly corrected the following day. The remark was then made that, with such quantities of spirits washed ashore, the local inhabitants would be "particularly jolly for some time to come". The Customs officials did their level best to prevent theft, but still some very respectable citizens were found yielding to temptation, and were duly fined. There is every indication that only the least experienced pilferers were caught.

One cannot wonder at the excitement; since 3rd June, salvage had been proceeding and opportunities were not great. For weeks the wreck held together, and the cargo could be fairly adequately protected. The wreck was quite close inshore now, with her stern to the mainland; wire ropes could be run off to the land from the masts, so that cargo was landed by a sort of bosun's chair hauled by horses. However, by 25th June, the wreck was beginning to break up, and then, at long last, a kind sea could break open the holds and wash prizes to assiduous beachcombers. Indefatigable as they were, the police and customs officers were helpless. Although much of the sea-wreck was useless—bales of papers, drugs, gas meters, broken furniture and the like—there were fine rewards for the assiduous searcher. It is reported that for decades one large family wore rag hats, of a pre-1881 fashion, landed ex Queen of Nations with doubtful legality. And undoubtedly because, at 5 p.m. on 26th June, the hull of the battered barque broke in two, and the cargo was abandoned.

The coast for miles became littered with wreckage, stove-in casks of rum, armchairs, tins of fish, an odd piano, bits of billiards tables, stationery, and currants, leaving iron rails, cement and coils of wire at the bottom of the sea, and, so it is reported, thousands of boxes of Cockle's Pills outlining high water mark. But to the patient and circumspect there was always a chance of treasure: bottles of brandy were washed up by the hundred, more and more; many of them empty, as the papers said, with a nasty inference as to how that came to be so; for, it was said, great numbers of spectators could be seen who, "judging from their condition, had been sampling the contents of the bottles." It was all very discreditable, said the paper, but historians need not moralise, and in fairness it may be said that the wrongdoers used great discrimination, for although an odd bottle of brandy may have been sampled, there is no evidence that as much as a single pill was taken.

Part of the keel and ribs of the hulk are understood to have been long since washed high up to the beach, and when very heavy seas wash the sandbanks out, the scoured and bleached timbers can still be seen. But nothing else; anything worth while disappeared long ago.

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