

BHS P3-1976

THE WRECK OF THE «ABEONA TRANSPORT»

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In October 1820 the «Abeona Transport» sailed from Greenock in Scotland carrying settlers to the Cape of Good Hope. There were 161 persons on board, of whom 126 were emigrants, mostly from Glasgow and neighbourhood.

On 25 November, when the ship was nearing the equator, fire broke out with disastrous consequences. There were only 49 survivors who were picked up by the Portuguese merchantman «Condessa da Ponte» and brought to Lisbon. One of these, the orphaned Charles Coverley, was to stay in Portugal and became a well known member of the British Community in Oporto⁽¹⁾.

The narrative of the ship's surgeon, Mr. Fisher R. N., is preserved in the Glasgow Municipal Library.

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Letter from the Navy Office to the Lord Provost of Glasgow:

Navy Office, 11 January 1821

My Lord,

It is with the utmost regret that we have to acquaint your lordship with the melancholy loss of the «Abeona Transport», under the charge of Lieut. Mudge R. N., which sailed from Greenock with Emigrants for the Cape of Good Hope, in October last.

It appears by letter we have this morning received from our agent Lieut. Mudge, who is arrived at Lisbon with 48 other persons, (all that have been saved out of 161, the number of persons on board when she sailed). That when in lat. 4.30N., long. 25.30W.,

⁽¹⁾ V. *Oporto Old & New* by Charles Sellers (1899), pp. 245-6, and *Oporto Older & Newer* by Gerald Cobb (1966), p. 68.

a fire broke out in the after store-room about noon on the 25th November; and such was the rapid progress of the flames, that only three small boats could be got into the water, the yard, tackles, etc. necessary for hoisting out the long boat, having been destroyed by the flames, which also ran up the main rigging in the most awful manner.

In the three small boats 49 persons were received, and happily picked up the next morning at day-light by a Portuguese ship from Bahia, in which they were humanely conveyed to Lisbon, after cruising about the fatal spot till noon, in hopes of descrying any of the miserable sufferers who might have remained on any part of the wreck; but without success.

We send lists enclosed to your Lordship containing the names of all the emigrants and passengers on board when she sailed, also the names of those saved and of the sufferers, in order to your adopting such means as may best occur to you for apprising the friends of the respective parties.

It further appears by Lieut. Mudge's letter that the whole of the emigrants and passengers saved had embarked at Lisbon in the «ROYAL CHARLOTTE» merchant brig bound to Greenock on the 28th ult, with the exception of 10 orphans, a list of whose names we also enclose, and whom the Gentlemen of the British Factory at Lisbon had generously taken under their kind protection.

We are, My Lord,
Your Lordship's Very humble Servants,
T. B. MARTIN. J. B. THOMSON. J. BOWEN.

The Right Hon.
Lord Provost of Glasgow.

A list of the children who remain in Lisbon, under the charge of various English Gentlemen:

JAMES M'LUCKY & GEORGE BARRIE	with Mr. M'KEAN
CHARLES COVERLY (sic)	with Mr. MUNROE
THOMAS COVERLY	with Mr. GARLAND
WM. M'ISAAC & MARY M'ISAAC	with Mr. JEFFREY, Consul-General
THOMAS BARRIE	with Sir DUDLEY HILL
ISABELLA FREELAND	with Mr. BAILLY
JOHN BAIN & LINDSAY PATERSON	with Major WM. HENRY THORNTON

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*Letter from the British Consul-General at Lisbon
to the Chief Magistrate of Greenock:*

Lisbon, 24th December, 1820

Sir,

I have the honour to inform you that the ABEONA TRANSPORT, Having been destroyed by fire at sea, on her voyage from Greenock to the Cape of Good Hope, with 161 persons on board, including the crew, passengers, emigrants etc the individuals named in the enclosed list, who were saved, arrived here in a Portuguese vessel on the 21st instant. The «ROYAL CHARLOTTE», merchant ship, being about to leave this port for Greenock, I have agreed for and paid their passage on board the same, and they are sufficiently supplied with clothing, comforts and necessaries for the voyage, & I have to request that you will be pleased to grant them that aid & protection which you may consider their unfortunate & peculiar situation entitles them to.

I have the honour to be, Sir, Your most obedient humble Servant

JAS. JEFFREY (1)

H. B. M. Consul-General.

To the Chief Magistrate
at the Port of Greenock.

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Narrative of Mr. Fisher, Surgeon of the «Abeona»:

It is with the utmost painful feelings that I undertake the melancholy duty of giving an account of the destruction of the Abeona Transport No. 36 by fire, in lat. 4,30,N long. 25,30,W bound to the Cape of Good Hope, with settlers.

About a quarter past twelve o'clock, on the 25th November, when Mr. DUFF, the first mate, was serving the rum, in the lazarette, or store room, the flame of the candle, it is supposed, communicated accidentally with the spirits or other combustible stores. The catastrophe was sudden and awful in the extreme. Every possible exertion was made in handing the water along, by the sailors and settlers, whom I joined & encouraged, until the flames came up in such fury and quantity, that the chance

(1) This should read «John Jeffery»; v. note p.

of saving the vessel was irrecoverably lost. Our only alternative now was to get the boats out, to which our attention was directed, and happily for us, we got the two gigs, which were on the quarters, and skiff, lowered down; the latter of which was stowed on the booms in the long boat. The long boat was the only one remaining on board; it was started from the booms to the gangway & and we had her almost clear of the bulwarks; the tackle falls were taken to the windlass & I continued heaving round, with Mr. Mudge & some of the sailors and settlers, until the case was hopeless — when Mr. Mudge got into his boat & I followed him; it happened to be under the larboard bow at the time. We were only a minute or two in the boat, when the main and mizen masts fell overboard, to the larboard side. The foremast was now in a blaze, & the scene of horror rapidly increasing — some leaping overboard, & others going out on the boltsprit (bowsprit?), who were either knocked off or killed by the fall of the foremast, which went directly forward. We saved as many as we prudently thought the boats could swim with, considering the immense distance the nearest land was from us, and the innumerable difficulties we had to contend against; even those in the boats who beheld their relatives perishing before their eyes, felt constrained to acknowledge that the attempt to save more would only be involving the whole in one common calamity; this, along with the number of women and children that were saved, is a convincing proof of our impartial behaviour. The sight was now the most awful & distressing that ever was beheld by mortal eye. Without being able to render them any succour, we beheld some of our fellow-creatures throwing themselves from the consuming fire, into the unfathomable deep; while others were hanging by ropes, & eagerly clinging to life, which we all so dearly value, though inevitable destruction stared them in the face, whichever way they turned. Being unable to withstand this sad spectacle of human misery, we rowed to some distance from it. We picked up some hammocks, spars & a cask, that were floating by. There were some bacon hams accidentally in one of the boats & three pigs that were saved, one of which I threw overboard myself, it being handed to me by the cook; we had also about ten pounds of biscuit, and some water that we collected by wringing our drenched clothes. We contemplated making for the coast of South America, but thus provided & without a compass, for a voyage of nearly 600 miles, full of hope, indeed, must that mind have been, which would fancy to itself success from the dreary prospect before us; but it pleased God, in his omnipotence, that we should be left living monuments, to tell of the dismal fate of those who perished. We resolved to remain within sight of the dreadful conflagration, in hopes that some vessel might

see it in the night & make for it in the morning. The burning continued until between 3 & 4 o'clock a.m. — making fifteen hours from the period of its commencement. When the accident happened, the weather was calm, and continued so during the night, with occasional puffs of wind & heavy falls of rain. At day-light on the 26th, about two miles distant, was descried a vessel, with all sail set, before the wind & coming towards us our sensation at the time can be more easily imagined than described. We hailed her, rowed alongside & asked to be taken on board; which was done with the utmost alacrity. We had then been in the boats about seventeen hours. The captain cruized about the spot where we thought the wreck had been, from six in the morning until twelve o'clock noon, in hopes that we might see some poor sufferers floating about on spars; but not even a single vestige of any thing was discovered.

The ship which saved us was a merchant vessel, called the «CONDESSA DA PONTE», Captain Joaquim Almeida, from Bahia, bound to Lisbon, and, with the exception of one vessel which passed us about five days before, was the first sail we had seen for 20 days previously. The flames of our ship were not observed from the «CONDESSA DA PONTE» during the night. The humanity and kindness that we met with on board this ship, redounds very much to the honour of the Portuguese nation. We arrived at Lisbon on the 21st December.

Various instances of parental affection and of the most devoted attachment, were exhibited in the dreadful calamity, of which I shall only mention one or two; — Mr. and Mrs. Barrie, from Provan Hill, near Glasgow, appeared to be insensible to their imminent danger, or were wholly engrossed in saving their helpless offspring. Having thrown their eight youngest into the boat, Mrs Barrie was desired to go in it herself, but she refused, and went in search of her eldest daughter; unfortunately, before she could return, the boat was obliged to put off, and both parents were lost with their eldest daughter and son, leaving eight orphans — the youngest a boy, only fifteen months old, and whom, one of the girls, who is an ornament to human nature, has cherished with all the tenderness of a mother. I beg leave to recommend strongly this orphan family to the protection of the humane & charitable. A person of the name of M'FARLANE who had been married but a few days before sailing, plunged overboard, with his wife lashed to his back, and endeavoured to swim towards the boats but his strength failing him, he turned about & made for the vessel again, but, unable to catch hold of any thing to which he might cling for support, the unfortunate young couple sank together.

It is with regret I have to announce the loss of Mr. Duff, the first mate, who was a meritorious young man, although the unfortunate cause of the calamity; and I understand he was the support of an aged mother.

Our good treatment at Lisbon, by Mr. Jeffery (the British Consul-General) and the gentlemen of the British Factory, cannot be spoken of in too high terms; and also the friendship shewn us by the Rev. J. H. Siely and Mrs. Siely.