

Basic Detail Report



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Title

James Johnson, sole survivor of the DUNBAR wrecked on 20 August 1857

Date

1898-1915

Primary Maker

Tesla Studio

Medium

Black and white photographic print on paper

Dimensions

275 x 215 mm

Name

Photograph

History

The 1850s was a period of great social and economic growth in Australia, spurred on by the gold rush and an increasing population. This rapid growth increased the demand for goods and services which could only be met by expansion within agriculture, industry and commerce. This economic climate and demand for passenger ships persuaded the well known ship-owner and merchant Duncan Dunbar to finance the construction of a clipper ship. The DUNBAR was a 1167-ton wooden three-masted sailing ship built in 1852 by the English shipbuilders James Laing & Sons at Sunderland. Costing over 30,000 pounds and constructed from British oak and Indian teak, it was held together by copper fastenings and iron knees. It was designed to carry passengers and cargo quickly between England and Australia but was initially used as a troop transport in the Crimean War. In late May 1857 DUNBAR departed London for its second voyage to Australia, carrying 63 passengers, 59 crew and a substantial cargo, including dyes for the colony's first postage stamps, machinery, furniture, trade tokens, cutlery, manufactured and fine goods, food and alcohol. Many of the ship's first-class passengers were prominent Sydneysiders, who had made good 'currency' in the colony, and after visiting their 'home' in England were returning to Australia. After a relatively fast voyage the vessel approached Port Jackson on the night of 20 August 1857, in a rising south easterly gale and bad visibility. The Macquarie Light near South Head could be seen between squalls, however the night was very dark and the land almost invisible. Captain Green was a veteran of eight visits to Sydney, being First Mate onboard AGINCOURT and WATERLOO and Commander of WATERLOO, VIMEIRA and DUNBAR. Shortly before midnight he estimated the ship was six miles away from the harbour's entrance and ordered the vessel on, keeping the Macquarie Light on the port bow. Shortly afterwards the

urgent cry of 'Breakers Ahead' was heard from the Second Mate in the forepeak. Captain Green, confused by the squalls, and believing the vessel had sailed too far towards North Head mistakenly ordered the helm hard to port. In doing so the vessel sailed closer towards the cliffs instead of the entrance to the Heads. The DUNBAR struck the cliffs just south of the Signal Station at South Head - midway between the lighthouse and The Gap. Within a few minutes the ship had begun to break up. All 63 passengers and 58 of the crew perished in the disaster. The only person to survive the wreck was a young seaman called James Johnson. He was hurled from the deck onto a rocky ledge - from here he climbed up to the cliff face out of the reach of the waves. He remained there until being rescued on 22 August by either the Iclander Antonia Wollier or the diver Joseph Palmer (depending upon sources). Charles Wiseman, skipper of the small coastal steamer GRAFTON (who had decided wisely to stand off the coast that night rather than enter the Heads) realised that a large vessel had been wrecked off the Heads when he sailed through the entrance and noticed large quantities of timber, bedding and bales floating in the water. By the time he arrived at Sydney more reports were filtering in from Watson's Bay and Manly about bodies being washed ashore. Dawn gradually unveiled the enormity of the event to the community of Sydney, as mailbags and other items washed ashore indicating the vessel was in fact the DUNBAR. Many of the local population knew the people on the passenger manifest, consisting of 122 men, women and children. Large crowds were drawn to the scene to watch the rescue of the single survivor, the recovery of the bodies and the salvage of some of the cargo. For days afterwards the newspapers were filled with graphic descriptions of the wreck and the public interest in the spectacle. The victims of DUNBAR were buried at St Stephens Church in Newtown. The funeral procession attracted an estimated 20,000 people who lined George Street. Banks and offices closed, every ship in the harbour flew their ensigns at half mast and minute guns were fired as the seven hearses and 100 carriages went past. The great loss of life caused by the wreck immediately led to an outpouring of letters demanding the upgrade of the Head's lighthouses. They were sent to the newspaper editors at the Empire (28/08/1857) (29/08/1857) and Sydney Morning Herald (27 - 30/08/1857). The upgrade issue was also raised at Question Time in Parliament and recommended by the jury at the DUNBAR inquest. 'The verdict of the jury meets with pretty general concurrence. We may observe that the attention of the authorities is now directed to the subject of improving the arrangements for lighting the entrance to the harbour...' (Brennan, 1993). This recommendation was followed in 1858 and the Hornby Lighthouse was constructed. The effect of the DUNBAR wreck on Sydney is evident by the number of letters to paper editors, lithographs, paintings, poems, narratives and accounts which were published just days after the event. These publications were sold in their thousands. Besides the pamphlets and brochures other items began to appear in Sydney as part of the memorabilia associated with the tragedy. Salvagers had acquired bits of the vessel and were manufacturing items including a set of chairs marked, ' Made from the wreck of the Dunbar', along with 'Church, house and Garden Furniture' manufactured to any design, from the wreck of the DUNBAR in teak and oak. The impact of the DUNBAR disaster is hard to imagine in these days of safe and efficient air and sea travel. For those living in the emerging colony of Sydney during the 1850s the tragedy had a lasting emotional effect.