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The Wreck of the Steamer "Victory"

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The formation of the Otago Peninsula Trust has brought into prominence many of the historic features of the Peninsula. Although much of the tourist potential of the area lies in its natural scenery, there still remains in various places, mute evidence of man's early endeavours and misfortunes in the development of the province.

The Otago Peninsula coastline has been the scene of several shipwrecks during the past two centuries and visible evidence of some still exists in bays around the coast.

Still protruding from the beach at Wickliffe Bay, after 109 years, are the remains of the steamer VICTORY which went ashore there on July 3, 1861. The circumstances leading to the loss of the ship and the subsequent attempts at salvage formed one of the most interesting dramas of the period.

In 1861, the owners of the VICTORY—the Intercolonial Royal Mail Steam Packet Company of London—had a virtual monopoly, through Government subsidies, of the mail services between Australia and New Zealand. The terms of their contract provided for the mail steamers to provide better services to the North Island ports than the South. Otago was paying more than her share of the subsidy but was deriving the least benefit. Port Chalmers was the end of the line for the steamers and there was little time for letters to be answered before the ship sailed north on the return passage. In order to counter the increasing criticisms levelled at them, the Company decided to establish a direct link between Melbourne and Otago. They agreed to run a steamer from Melbourne to Port Chalmers and Port Cooper (Lyttelton) every month, the vessel to leave 24 hours after the arrival of the European mail at Melbourne. The Otago Provincial Government was to pay £2,000 per annum and Canterbury £1,500 towards the cost. Passenger fares were not to exceed £15 per adult and freight 50/- a ton. The contract was for two years.

Inaugurating the new service was the iron screw steamer VICTORY. This ship had a capacity for 1,000 tons and could accommodate 46 saloon passengers. Originally built in 1849 by William Denny and Brothers, Dumbarton, Scotland, the VICTORY had seen service under the North-West of Ireland Union Steam Company and later the Limerick Steam Ship Company in the Irish Sea before being acquired by the Intercolonial Company. When built, the ship was 144 feet long, but in a major refit in 1860 she was lengthened to 215 feet and was re-engined at the same time. Virtually a new ship, she left the Isle of Wight in July, 1860, and arrived at Sydney 137 days later, after a very stormy passage under sail. Although she was powered by two 180 horsepower engines, the cost of bringing her out under steam would have been excessive, and as the length of the passage indicates, she came the whole distance under canvas. Quite a number of ships which came out to the colonies at this time also sailed the entire passage because of the high cost of coal and the need to fill every available space in the ship with it.

In keeping with the name of the ship, the saloon of the vessel was decorated with paintings representing famous battles such as Trafalgar, Inkerman, Waterloo and Alma.

After a month refitting in Sydney, VICTORY left for Melbourne and from there proceeded to Port Chalmers on her first passage across the Tasman. She arrived here on January 21, 1861, and was back in Melbourne on February 5. The Australian newspapers were full of compliments for a ship which had gone from Melbourne to Otago in the "unprecedented" time of 5 days and back in 61- days. VICTORY returned to Port Chalmers on March 2, but over the next two months, the Company employed the slower PRINCE ALFRED on the new service. In the interim the VICTORY had a further refit in Sydney and more improvements were made to the machinery and appointments. On trials in June she made 10 knots.

She left Sydney direct for Nelson, Wellington, Port Cooper and Otago, arriving at Port Chalmers on July 1. At 3.30 p.m. on the 3rd she left for Melbourne with the homeward English mail. Conditions were unpleasant with a cold, wet, north-easterly wind blowing in from the sea and visibility was somewhat hazy. Captain James Toogood, master of the ship for the previous 18 months, set the course which was intended to take the ship up to three miles clear of Cape Saunders.

After remaining on the bridge until shortly after 5.30 p.m. Captain Toogood went below to

have his tea, leaving the ship in the care of the Third Officer, until such time as the Mate was able to relieve him.

The Third Officer had little practical knowledge of navigation and had been promoted to the position from Bosun less than a month previously. Just prior to 6 p.m., George Hand, the Chief Officer, took over control on the bridge and ten minutes later the VICTORY steamed on to the sandy beach at the southern end of Wickliffe Bay.

Attempts to pull the ship off were to no avail and after an hour and a-half of going full speed astern, Captain Toogood decided to run her up on the beach as far as possible to protect the ship and the cargo and property on board. At midnight, a boat was lowered and passengers, mails and luggage were taken off. Local settlers provided the horse and dray transport to take them to Portobello.

VICTORY lay firmly embedded in soft sand and at low tide drew only 4 feet of water.

The Inquiry into the stranding showed some remarkable deficiencies in the management of the ship. Compared to present day disciplines and ship handling methods, the reasons for her stranding could be solely attributed to gross neglect and incompetence by the responsible officers in the ship. Apart from the Captain leaving the bridge in the care of an inexperienced officer, the Chief Engineer decided that he too wanted his tea, and proceeded to the saloon. Although he called for his replacement in the engine room, he left his post before his relief was in sight. However, these casual acts on the part of the Master and Chief Engineer were largely overlooked when it came to finding someone responsible for the stranding.

It was the Mate who was proved the "villain of the piece." He had apparently enjoyed a convivial time at Port Chalmers prior to the sailing of the ship and later had a further drink with the pilot just before the latter left the ship. Although he had gone to the bridge to relieve the Third Officer, he had apparently wandered off in his befuddled state and when the vessel struck, only the helmsman was on deck and the engine room was devoid of a competent engineer to receive orders from the bridge.

Captain Toogood immediately alleged the Mate was intoxicated and in order to make sure he had sufficient grounds, arranged for the passengers to be called so that they could all see his condition. One of them insisted the Mate walk along a straight line, but this he could barely do.

At the Inquiry, the passengers supported the charge of drunkenness and although the Magistrate, John Hyde Harris, stated the Master and Chief Engineer were not entirely free of responsibility, nothing was done with their Certificates. The charge against the Mate was upheld, and he was sentenced to three months' imprisonment with hard labour.

While the official Inquiry had sorted out the responsibility for the stranding, the VICTORY was still sitting upright in the sand, comparatively undamaged. The Intercolonial Mail Company abandoned their direct

service to Otago and the Underwriters instructed that the VICTORY be sold by auction. This was done on July 24, at an open-air auction on the beach alongside the ship. Valued at £25,000 she was sold, along with 300 tons of coal, for £570 and the total proceeds of the auction, including cargo and stores, amounted to £1,900. One of the main reasons for the low prices was the difficulty of removing the purchases from the wreck and transporting them over the rough tracks to Portobello and then by ferry to Port Chalmers.

The ship was purchased as a speculation by R. B. Martin of Dunedin, as Captain Toogood and others considered that there was every possibility she could be salvaged and put back into service. Interest in these proposals developed and an inspection of the ship was made by James Scott of Newcastle. This engineer was well known in Australia and New Zealand for his salvage work and he specialised in hydraulic lifting equipment.

Following his favourable report, R. B. Martin offered the ship for sale at £3,000 and contended she could be floated for a further expenditure of £2,000. An additional £2,000 would refit her for service. Public support for the venture followed when the Victory Screw Steam Ship Company was floated in Dunedin in January, 1862. The Capital of the Company was £7,000 in 1,400 shares of £5; £2 a share was payable on allotment and the remainder in three calls. of each spread over four months. The Directors of the Company included some prominent Dunedin businessmen of that era, amongst them W. C. Young, E. B. Cargill, R. B. Martin, W. Rawlins, J. Kilgour and A. S. Wilson. They made firm arrangements with Scott and he proceeded to Sydney to obtain his lifting equipment.

The plan to raise the ship was quite ingenious and spectacular for those early times. Twelve hydraulic cylinders specially made in Sydney for the purpose, were to be fastened to the ship's side by strong ironbark timbers placed vertically, with each timber holding three angle irons so that the lifting strain would be evenly distributed throughout the hull. The base of each cylinder, with a surface of 50 to 60 square feet, was to sit on the sand. The ship's engines were still in first class order and were to be used to provide the power for the hydraulic jacks

and the anchor chains. Heavy chains were to be attached to the ship and anchored 200 feet out in deeper water. These were intended to control the movement of the ship once the hydraulic jacks commenced lifting and to prevent her riding further up the beach. The plan was to "walk" the ship into the water.

Work commenced in July, 1862, and most of the equipment was towed by barge or carried in small boats round to the wreck. Captain Toogood, who had remained a recluse on the VICTORY for a year, had buoyed the entrance to Papanui Inlet, to guide the small boats in.

By August 12, she had been shifted 64 feet from her original position with her bow heading out to sea. However, an unusually high tide and heavy swell broke the anchor chain and she carried back almost to her original position.

Scott and the large team of men employed did not give up and in September and October considerable progress was made. Despite the difficulty in reaching the scene, many Dunedin people visited Wickliffe Bay to watch proceedings. By the end of October she had been lifted and moved 74 feet out to sea and the work of lightening the ship continued day and night. Scott was hampered through a shortage of men as the task dragged on into November. Many had forsaken the hard, heavy work, at times very wet and cold, to pursue their fortunes at the gold diggings in Central Otago. The occasional periods of heavy swell also washed away some of his equipment and many of his hardwood shores had to be replaced by local timber cut in the bush from trees up to four feet in diameter.

During November, preparations were well advanced for the final effort, and the ship's engines were continually being kept at the ready. On November 21, she was moved several hundred yards, and the following day,

VICTORY was once more afloat. Steam was being raised when again the main anchor chain broke and back she drifted on to the beach.

This time she grounded awkwardly and broke her back, the hull soon filling with water and sand. So near and yet so far ; there could be no doubt that this was the end of the line for the salvage team. With all hopes of recovery now dashed, the Victory Screw Steam Ship Company offered the VICTORY for sale as she lay, now almost buried in the sand and barely 2 feet of her hull visible at high tide.

At auction on December 3, 1862, she was sold to James Scott and others for £ 200. Scott was determined to attempt the impossible but his efforts met further misfortune and he narrowly escaped drowning when the small schooner FAVOURITE carrying much of his equipment was swept ashore at the entrance to Papanui Inlet on December 23. Despite this setback he did return and was able to salvage further equipment and fittings from the wreck. In January, 1863, Scott finally left the scene and returned to Australia. Captain Toogood also left the wreck at the end of 1862 and is believed to have joined in the rush to find gold in the Shot-over area. Some sources of reference erroneously attribute him to being the "Skipper" after which Skipper's Point, some 20 miles from Queenstown, was named.

Although there was now little more which could be removed from the VICTORY she was again put up for auction in July, 1863, but there was no interest. As the years progressed she gradually broke up and became buried in the sand until today, only the engine room fly wheel encrusted with barnacles, and portion of her stern frame is visible above the surf. The beach where she stranded has become generally known as Victory Beach.

After 109 years, the relics of the VICTORY have some national interest as they represent the oldest steamer shipwreck still visible around the entire New Zealand coastline.