

The wreck of the Dunbar

ON FRIDAY, August 21, 1857, the crew of an incoming vessel noticed masses of wreckage and debris floating about between the Sydney Heads.

There were ship's timbers, bales of goods, children's toys, even furniture — and, later in the day, more items began turning up all over the harbor.

It seemed certain that a ship had been wrecked near the harbor entrance and two pilots at Watson's Bay began searching along the cliffs and around the rocks at South Head.

They soon saw spars, cargo and bodies floating in the waves offshore. The identity of the ill-fated ship was not learned until later in the day, however, when a mailbag was washed up at Watson's Bay marked with the name Dunbar.

So was discovered Sydney's worst shipping disaster and, indeed, one of the most tragic shipwrecks in Australia's history. All but one of the 122 passengers and crew on the Dunbar — 81 days out from London — perished when it was smashed to pieces at The Gap, just south of Sydney's front door, at the Heads.

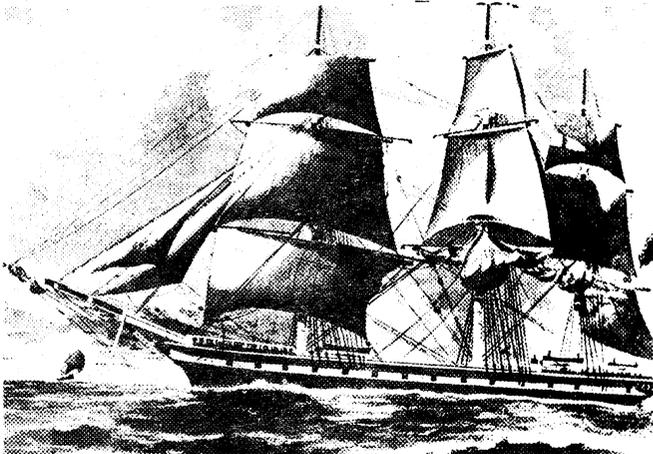
A fine, three-masted sailing vessel of 1321 tonnes, the Dunbar had been built specially for the England-Australia trade. It had left Plymouth on its second voyage to Sydney on May 31 under Captain James Green and carried 63 passengers, a crew of 59 and mixed cargo valued at \$144,000.

Many of the passengers were well-known Sydney citizens, returning from holidays in England. News of the wreck, which was published in the newspapers on Saturday, August 22, cast a shadow of tragedy over the city. Early that morning, South Head Road was thronged with horse-drawn vehicles, as well as crowds of pedestrians, making for the cliffs at The Gap to try to get a glimpse of the wreck.

More than 1000 spectators gathered on the clifftop to peer down at the grim scene as corpses of men, women and children — many of them horribly mangled — were dashed against the rocks and then washed back again by the surge of the waves.

In the crowd was a 17-year-old apprentice watchmaker, Antonie Wollier, a recent arrival from Iceland. Thinking there could be survivors down on the rocks and not visible from the top, he made up his mind to climb down and see.

Leaving his hat, coat and boots with a friend, he went along the cliffs and found a spot where the drop was not so precipitous as at The Gap. He made a perilous descent and worked his way around the bottom of the cliff. As each wave roared in, he had to wedge himself between the rocks to avoid being washed away.



A painting of the ill-fated barque, which was making only its second voyage to Australia.

Almost at the foot of The Gap, Wollier found a man on a ledge, not far above the waterline but out of sight of the watchers above. Signals and shouts brought a rope snaking down and the youth helped the survivor secure himself to it so he could be hauled to safety.

Wollier continued his search for another 45 minutes, making sure there was no one else down there and then climbed back to the top. He was warmly cheered and the Lord Mayor of Sydney, Alderman Thornton, took up a collection from the crowd in appreciation of his courage.

More than \$20 was donated and handed to Wollier who, overcome with emotion, managed to stammer out in his halting English: "I thank you all, but I did not go down for money. I did it for the feelings in my heart."

Meanwhile, the rescued man, Able-Seaman James Johnson, had been taken from the clifftop to the Marine Hotel at Watson's Bay. A doctor examined him and he was found to be uninjured and not seriously affected by his ordeal.

He was 23-years-old and a husky, well-built 185cm in height. Unusual strength had enabled him, after being hurled ashore in the heavy seas, to survive for about 36 hours by clinging to a rocky ledge and defying the waves to wash him back again.

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had come perilously close to the rocky coast.

Just before midnight, there was a momentary wink of light through the murk. Its direction indicated that the ship had passed to the north of the lighthouse, and Captain Green knew he was close to the entrance to Sydney harbor.

Later, it was suggested that the skipper had mistaken The Gap for the Heads and turned to port too soon. From evidence subsequently given by James Johnson at the inquest, it was clear this was not so.

Because of the storm, Captain Green could not see the light, let alone any imagined opening in the dark cliffs. What happened was that the wind and a strong current were slowly taking the Dunbar broadside into the cliff.

Captain Green had not made any turn. He sent Third Mate Pascoe forward with two men and ordered them to keep a sharp look-out for North Head. Clearly, he intended to make his turn only when they saw North Head, and he knew he was in the opening to Sydney harbor.

Twice, James Johnson heard the captain shout: "Mister Pascoe, do you see North Head?" Each time, the answer was "No!"

Still the ship ploughed on. Then suddenly came another shout from forward: "Breakers ahead, sir! Breakers ahead! And very close."

Captain Green barked orders to the helmsman to swing the Dunbar away but it was too late. Through the gloom, the cliffs could then be seen towering above the ship and looming closer. Two minutes after the skipper's command, the Dunbar hit the rocks. It was then just after midnight on August 21.

Shouts of panic, as passengers came tumbling on deck, mingled with the howling of the storm. In his evidence at the inquest, James Johnson referred to "the passengers running about the deck and screaming to be saved". The captain, he said, was "cool and collected", but "there was great confusion

He told the full story of the loss of the Dunbar. All the way up the east coast of Australia, the ship had battled constant gales, which threatened to drive it inshore. Captain Green had not been off the deck for more than two hours in the whole two days before the wreck.

At about eight o'clock on the evening of Thursday, August 20, land was sighted near Botany Bay. Slowly, the Dunbar headed north in heavy seas, on the last few kilometres of its long voyage.

Below, despite a rising easterly wind whirling up out of the Tasman Sea, and the driving rain it brought, the passengers, knowing they would be docking next morning, were celebrating with revelry and song the end of nearly three months on board.

On deck, the weather worsened and sight of the coastline was lost. Occasionally, the South Head light was visible momentarily through lashing rain squalls. Captain Green was worried because he knew he was on a dangerous lee shore and constant vigilance was necessary to keep the ship away from the shore.

Hours passed and the rain squalls increased. The South Head light could no longer be seen. There was silence except for the moaning of the wind and the lashing rain. In the eerie darkness, the Dunbar



James Johnson, who survived by clinging to a rock ledge at The Gap, and told of the Dunbar's final hours.

and uproar on deck, with the shrieks of the passengers".

At the first shock of impact, the topmasts snapped and crashed down in a tangle of ropes. Huge seas pounded the stricken ship, smashing bulwarks and boats and washing a number of people over the side.

On the captain's orders, one of the crew lit a blue signal flare. But it made only a brief, futile flash in the darkness and, even if it had been seen on shore, there was no time for anything to be done to aid the doomed Dunbar.

Captain Green and his officers tried to quell the passengers' panic. "The Dunbar cannot break up," the skipper told one group of men and women. "She'll last until morning."

But, as a veteran seaman, Green even then must have felt the deck quivering beneath his feet. Hammering water below was forcing the planks to straining point. Then came a tell-tale creaking and, within five minutes after striking the rocks, the Dunbar began to disintegrate.

The final break-up came with a roar like the explosion of a cannon. Seaman James Johnson found himself in the foaming water, clinging to a large spar. With him were two Dutch crew members and the ship's elderly bosun, Charles Sappy.

Within a couple of minutes, both the Dutchmen were washed away and disappeared immediately. Johnson and the bosun still kept their grip on the spar, which was taken in towards the rocks by the waves.

Meanwhile, at the lighthouse on the cliff-top, the keeper's dog had begun to bark and run madly along the edge. Apparently, he had heard the noise of the break-up of the ship. The keeper left the lighthouse and went to the cliff but could see nothing in the darkness. After a few minutes, the storm drove him back inside.

At about the same time, a wave had picked up the floating spar and dashed Johnson and Charles Sappy on to the rocks. Already exhausted from his struggle to hang on to the spar, the bosun fell back a few seconds later and sank from view.

Johnson was luckier. "I was thrown on to a shelf of rock," he was to tell a hushed Coron-

er's Court. "Immediately on the sea receding, I got a bit higher, out of reach of the water." There, alone, he braced himself desperately to hold on, as the surging surf tried to dislodge him.

All that night and all the following day and night, the shivering Johnson remained on the ledge. Below him, he could see dead bodies floating off-shore, and he realised he was the only survivor. It was noon on the Saturday, before he was rescued. Over the rest of the weekend, 31 bodies were recovered.

An inquest into the 121 deaths was held at the King's Arms Hotel, Lower George Street, on the Monday following the wreck, August 24. The jurors first went to examine the recovered corpses, or parts of corpses, at the morgue. According to one newspaper report, "one juror fainted, while others were so deeply moved that they were compelled to leave the place".

When he gave his evidence, James Johnson loyally stood up for his skipper. "Captain Green could not stand off the land more than he did," he said. "He did all he could in the easterly wind."

The jury was non-committal in its verdict. It decided that, although there might have been an error of judgment, in the vessel being so close to shore, it attached no blame to Captain Green or his officers.

That same afternoon, 20,000 people stood along the route as the funeral procession of the recovered Dunbar victims made its way to O'Connell Town (now Camperdown) cemetery. Those remains which could not be identified were buried in a common grave.

Survivor James Johnson did not return to the sea. He married and, for many years, was the keeper of Nobby's lighthouse at Newcastle. He died in 1915, while living in retirement at Lewisham, in Sydney. He had survived to see the 50th anniversary of the loss of the Dunbar.

Following the recovery of one of the ship's anchors by a deep-sea diver in 1910, Johnson also was present when it was erected at The Gap as a monument to those who had lost their lives in the disaster.