ON FRIDAY, August 21, 1857, the crew of an incoming barque were horrified to see a mass of wreckage and debris floating about between the Sydney Heads.

There were ship's timbers, bales of goods, children's toys, even furniture, all turning up all over the harbor.

The crew of the vessel, which had 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 signs, bales 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 message was received that Watson's Bay marked the ship the 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 passengers and crew on the Dutch ship were lost. It had left London — perilous 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 1213 tonnes, the Dunbar had been built specially for the England-Australia trade. It had left Plymouth on its second voyage to Sydney and was under Captain James Green and carried 63 passengers, a crew of 8 and a payload of 600 tonnes valued at $144,000.

Many of the passengers were well-known Sydney citizens, including the newspapers on Saturday, August 22, cast a shadow of gloom over the city. Early that morning, South Head had been surrounded by horse-drawn vehicles, as well as a number of aircraft, making for the cliffs at The Gap, in the hope of seeing the wreck.

Another 1000 spectators gathered on the cliffs to peer down at the grim scene and watch the bodies of men, women and children, — many of them belatedly washed ashore. These were tossed against the rocks and then washed back again by the surge of the waves.

Almost at the foot of The Gap, Wollier found a man on a ledge, not far above the 50-yard smooth stretch of cliffs on the east. He was assisted and brought to the top of the cliff, where 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 $50 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."

M e a n w h i l e, the rescued man, Aisec-Searlman James Johnson, had been taken from the cliffs 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 ordeals.

He was 23-years-old and a husky, built man in height. Unusual strength had enabled him, after being hurled ashore in the heavy seas, to survive for about 26 hours by clinging to a rocky ledge and defying the waves to wash him back again.

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 insane. 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, a light was sighted from 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 the next morning, were celebrating with reverie and sense 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 momentaneously through lashing rain squalls. Captain Green was worried because he knew the ship could not get ashore 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 had come perilously close to the rocky coast. Just before midnight, there was a terrific moment of light through the fog. It indicated that the ship had crashed against the rocks. Captain Green, with his light-house, and Captain Green knew he was close to the rocks. Later, it was suggested that he made any turn. He sent Third Mate Paoue for'ard and two men and ordered them to keep a sharp lookout 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.

"Breaking ahead, sir! Breakers ahead! And very close!"

Captain Green backed orders to the helmsman to swing the Dunbar away but it held on. For another 45 minutes. All the passengers and crew were ship's timbers, bales of goods, children's toys. The identity of the ill-fated ship was not known until later in the day, however, when a message was received that Watson's Bay marked the ship the Dunbar.

At the captain's orders, one of the crew it a blue signal from the Dunbar. The skipper tumbled, skipper told one group of men and women. "Breakers ahead. And very close!"

There was nothing for it but to see the wreck. Captain Green had been looking for the wreck. The skipper tumbled, skipper told one group of men and women. "Breakers ahead. And very close!"

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