

Was the Bencoolen a Coffin Ship?

The *Bencoolen* was wrecked at Bude on 21st October 1862, with the loss of 25 of the 31 crew members. It is linked to Port Isaac through its ship's bell being purchased at the auction of the ship's effects by Thomas Hills on behalf of the trustees of Roscarrock Chapel, and brought to Port Isaac in his one-masted coasting smack. An Internet search came across this fascinating contemporary report giving the circumstances surrounding this wreck. It is from the South Australian Advertiser for 24th January 1863, having been originally printed in the UK publication Mitchell's Steam Shipping Gazette in November 1862.

Before the Merchant Shipping Acts required every vessel to have a 'Plimsoll Line', or Load Line in 1876, overloading of vessels was no doubt commonplace in the rush for greater profits. Even in calm conditions a heavily overloaded sailing vessel would be literally a disaster waiting to happen. Caught in a storm, it would stand little chance. Unscrupulous owners were known to send out unseaworthy and overloaded ships with inexperienced or undermanned crews just so they could claim the insurance on the vessel and contents, often at inflated values, with no concern at all for the fate of the hapless crew, and such vessels were known as 'Coffin Ships'. This report suggests that in the Bencoolen wreck, the hallmarks of this despicable practice were present – overloaded with a heavy cargo, undermanned and with a drunken master. Was the Bencoolen sent to sea so the owners could claim insurance, or was it just an unfortunate accident?

The Loss of the Bencoolen

(from Mitchell's Steam Shipping Gazette)

Of all the recent losses by the furious gales of the past fortnight the most serious is that of the full-rigged ship Bencoolen, of Liverpool. The Bencoolen was of 1,415 tons register, built at St. John's (N.B.) in 1855, and owned by Messrs. Bates and Co., of Liverpool. She left the Mersey for Bombay on the 13th inst., and experienced the full effects of the gales. Being laden with a large portion of iron, it was to be expected she would roll badly when caught in a heavy sea. G. Walsh, one of her crew, states that "when the ship left Liverpool she was making 18 inches of water in 24 hours. The rigging at the time of sailing had not been properly set up, and the crew were obliged to be employed in setting up the lower rigging and backstays. He attributed the catastrophe to the mast having given way; and had the rigging been in good order this would not have occurred. Immediately after the mast gave way the captain came on deck. He soon, however, went down again and got drunk. He came up and fell down several times on the poop, and at last went down again and got into bed. The captain was drunk at other times during the voyage." Here, indeed, was cause sufficient to lose the finest vessel that ever swam the seas. A cargo made up largely of dead weight, rigging not set up, and a drunken master. From the evidence of the boatswain we learn that on the 16th or 17th, in a strong gale from S.W. to N.W., the mainsail was carried away. There was nothing particular in that, for sails are not proof against hurricanes. On the 19th, when about 40 miles to the westward of Tuskar, the ship at the time earning her three topsails and foretopmaststaysail, the foretopmast gave way, and the foremast quickly followed. The lower masts were iron, with wire stays. When the foremast went, it carried away the main and mizenmast close to the deck, and thus the ship was dismasted, and drifted with the gale. For three days she was driving before the storm, when on Tuesday, the 21st, by the aid of a studding boom-sail with a-sail upon it, she was steered for land, and at 3.45 p.m. on that day struck on the sands on the coast of Cornwall, at Bude Haven. A raft was constructed, but only six of the crew succeeded in reaching the shore out of 31 hands. The ship broke up and became a complete wreck.



Policemen stand guard over the wreckage

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The wreck of the Bencoolen has been seized upon to make an attack upon the system of manning ships. One writer, who professes to understand the law in this particular, declares "that by the Merchant Shipping Act no vessel could deer from any port in this kingdom without a crew of three men and a boy to 100 tons. If this be the case, the Bencoolen, of 1,415 tons register, was entitled to a crew of 42 men and 14 boys, or at least six men instead of the boys, which would be 48 men - quite half as many more as she had." For the information of this expounder of the Maritime Code, we will explain the law of manning. Under the old Navigation Act it was provided "that vessels in the coasting trade should be manned exclusively by British seamen; and no vessel was allowed to proceed to sea on a foreign voyage unless the master and at least three-fourths of the crew were British subjects, - provided always that every British ship which should be navigated by one British seaman for every 20 tons of the burthen of such ship should be deemed to be duly navigated, although the number of the other seamen should exceed one-fourth of the whole crew." It was this proviso which gave rise to the supposition that a ship, to be duly navigated, should carry one hand, apprentices included, for every 20 tons. But when free trade in navigation became an accomplished fact the law was repealed, and an owner is not now bound to carry apprentices, nor is he restricted as to the number or nationality of his crew. The Merchant Shipping Act says nothing about the manning of ships, and the proportion to tonnage is purely a question between the owner and the seamen he employs. The Passenger Act directs that every passenger ship must be manned by "an efficient crew" for the intended voyage, to the satisfaction of the officer from whom a clearance is demanded, and the strength of the crew must not subsequently be diminished without the consent in writing of that officer or of the shipping-master. Had the Bencoolen been an American ship, she would have gone to sea with about 21 hands. Some of the New York liners carry about 17 to 19, all told. Suppose a British ship of 1,409 tons were compelled to ship a crew of officers and men equal to one hand for every twenty tons, she would have to clear out with 70 hands, whilst an American vessel of the same tonnage would carry under 30 hands. The American ship, therefore, could be sailed cheaper than the British, and, consequently, be chartered for less money. It is the competition with under-manned ships of other countries, but American more particularly, that has led to the abrogation of apprentices, and the sending of ships to sea, if not exactly under-manned, certainly weakly manned. A shipmaster writes:-

"It is a matter of great surprise to me that Lloyd's, who are so particular as to every bolt, trenail, or piece of timber or iron used in the building of a ship, should be so indifferent as to the manning of finding of her. The Bencoolen is not the only under-manned ship which I have known. Many ships go to sea without nearly sufficient men to work them, and, if caught on a lee shore, must inevitably share the same fate as that unfortunate vessel."

Now, it is not yet proved that the Bencoolen was actually lost from being undermanned, though, in all probability, if she had carried a full complement, her crew might have rigged jury-masts, and made better efforts to keep the sea, or reach a port of safety. Her master, if the evidence be reliable, was addicted to drink, and neglected the safety of the ship under his command. The lower masts were iron, the shrouds and back stays were wire rope, not very pliable in exigencies, while in running for land, Bude Haven, on the Cornish coast, was mistaken for Milford. The question of manning is no doubt open to serious consideration; but whether a few more hands would have saved the Bencoolen, under the circumstances detailed, is very questionable, and the manning of British ships in these days of close competition must be influenced to some extent by those of foreign rivals.

Text from - <http://newspapers.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/31819438?searchTerm=Bencoolen> (retrieved 21/10/2010)
Picture from – Images of England Around Bude. Compiled by Bude, Stratton and District Old Cornwall Society 1998
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