

ST HELENA SHIPWRECKS

by Trevor W. Hearl

Philatelists who find as much interest in ships that founder as in those that sail safely away with the mail will welcome accounts of some St Helena shipwrecks by “Windjammer” (otherwise known as Robert A. Wilson, Chief Radio Officer of RMS St Helena), recently published in the *Merchant Navy Past and Present*. His report concentrates on three 20th century wrecks in James Bay known to every St Helenian - the *RMS Pappanui* (1911), the *Spangereid* (1920), and RFA. tanker *Darkdale*, torpedoed at anchor during WWII (no one offers the date). Among earlier wrecks off Jamestown, the *Salaween* and the *Witte Leeuw* (commemorated philatelically by St Helena in 1978 and described graphically in the National Geographic Magazine that October) have become the best known on the island in recent years, but their stories are beyond the scope of “Windjammer’s” present enquiry.

Mementoes of diving exploits around the *Pappanui* and the *Spangereid* - better known by her original name, *Ealtianzi* - are to be found in not a few island homes. Several *Fairport* relics, including the wheel, decorate the dining room of the Consulate Hotel in Jamestown, where, making virtue out of necessity (as the designer once told me) the ceiling is actually supported by one of the masts of the ship.

The *Fairport* earned herself a footnote in maritime and naval history in 1914 by innocently sailing under full canvas among the warships fighting the Battle of the Falkland Islands, her crew at first mistaking the gunfire for rather a heavy thunderstorm! I have tried to trace the original of Henry Scott’s remarkable painting of this episode, so far without success. By one of those coincidences such as spice many an island story, the British Admiral who won this decisive engagement, Frederick Charles Doveton Sturdee, was born on St Helena, at Oak Bank, the Doveton family home, in 1859.

Turning to more recent battles in the Falkland Islands, “Windjammer” recounts in some detail the experiences of *RMS St Helena* and her crew serving with the Task Force from May 1982 to September 1983, illustrated by 26 telling photographs (pp. 36-48), enlargements of which I understand he is willing to supply for a modest fee.

The *RMS Papanui* is also featured in Robert Wilson’s previous publication, *the Art of Modelling Merchant Ships*, a work which represents another of this versatile author’s interests. Mr. Wilson, who is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, has made models for many discerning patrons, including the late Claude Muncaster, the distinguished marine artist who portrayed the *Southampton Castle*. entering Durban harbour after calling at St Helena and Cape Town on her maiden voyage in 1966, and then painted another oil portrait of her in the Solent, presented to Princess Alexandra who had launched her. *The Southampton Castle*, and her sister ship, *RMMV Good Hope Castle*, which together served St Helena and Ascension Island

monthly between 1966 and 1967, were then so far ahead of their time “that they still appear extremely modern” in performance, comfort, and looks, writes Robert Wilson in *The Merchant Navy, Past and Present* (p. 35). They now sail under the Italian flag as *Paoli C*, he tells us, but does not relate the incredible story of how *RMMV Good Hope Castle* (depicted on the 2/3d. value of St Helena’s Mail Communications issue of 1969) was almost shipwrecked a few miles south of Ascension Island in 1973 when one of the world’s most modern mailships was abandoned ablaze only a short sailing distance from one of the world’s most sophisticated communication centres - which failed to pick up its distress signals because no one was listening! How the mail fared is therefore only one of the many matters into which some philatelic or maritime historian should delve while survivors are still alive to tell their tales.

But to return to Jamestown and the *Papanui*. Robert Wilson’s model of this former passenger liner, the construction of which he describes and fully illustrates in his “modelling” book (pp. 37- 47), is now an exhibit in the St Helena Heritage Society Museum in Broadway House, while that of the *Fairport* belongs, I believe, to a member of this Society on the island, Clifford Huxtable.

Among shipwreck stories heard in Jamestown is one of a schooner sinking in James Bay in the 1860’s under the weight of her cargo of railway lines destined for Cape Town, thus explaining, it was said, why lengths of railway line are to be seen - though rarely noticed by visitors - supporting the ceilings and roofs of many a Main Street building in defiance of the white ant. But I suspect the lines in Jamestown came rather from the tramway built alongside the famous Ladder by Lieut. G. W. Melliss in 1829, when it later fell into disrepair from lack of maintenance after the East India Company’s staff had been sacked by the incoming Government in 1834.

Some of the best shipwreck stories concern East Indiamen on their intrepid voyages between England, India, and China. Two which should interest members of the St Helena and Dependencies Philatelic Society have been the subject of books: the wrecking of the *Blenden Hall* on Inaccessible Island in 1821 (where the Denstone College expedition recently camped) and the burning of the *Kent* East Indiaman in the Bay of Biscay in 1825 (as depicted on the 22½p value of St Helena’s East India Company commemorative issue in 1973) when many passengers, driven to choose between drowning, incineration, or being blown up, opted for the latter and sat on the gunpowder store! I hope it does not spoil the story to tell the sequel: all were saved by the captain’s skilful seamanship and the timely arrival of a British ship willing to risk the rescue.

References:

- “Windjammer” *The Merchant Navy, Past and Present*, 1984.
- Robert A. Wilson, *The Art of Modelling Merchant Ships*, 1982.
- Edward Carter. *The Dovetons of St Helena, Cape Town*, 1973.
- J. G. Lockhart, *Blenden Hall*, London, 1930.

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**St Helena and Dependencies Philatelic Society Newsletter, October 1984,
Vol. VIII, No. 4, pp 26-27.**

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