

## A Letter Home.

A few weeks ago I read a letter written by a young seafaring Apprentice to his mother and father. It is a “matter of fact” letter, written some 121 years ago and the young man writes to reassure his parents that, despite the loss of his ship, he is “safe and getting on all right again”.

The full rigged ship “Dunnottar Castle” was built in 1876 by the Clyde shipbuilders Stephenson and Co. of Dalmuir and her owners were Thomas Skinner and Co. of London and Glasgow. An iron hulled ship, she was 258 feet in length and the gross tonnage was 1,750. Early records show her trading to New Zealand on charter to Shaw, Savill and Co. and mention is made of her “commodious and neatly fitted” passenger accommodation for six saloon and 16 steerage passengers.

The apprentice, Edward J. Holl, joined the ship in London early in 1886 and in May of that year the ship completed discharge of general cargo in Sydney, Australia before loading a full cargo of coal for discharge in California, USA. In his letter, written on passage to California, Edward reports fine weather but comments that “the navigation is rather dangerous as you are continually on the lookout for reefs, shoals and rocks, most of which you can’t see until you are on top of them –as we found to our cost”

Lord Howe Island was passed on June 12<sup>th</sup>. and the ship made steady progress passing Fiji Islands on the 19<sup>th</sup>. A week later “Dunnottar Castle” crossed the 180<sup>th</sup>. meridian and the young man noted “so we had eight days in the week but they took jolly fine care to make it come to two pea soup days”. Obviously the Chief Steward was aware of the ravages an extra days victualling would inflict on his accounts!

A few days later the ship passed Sophia Island and then Holl casually comments

“I saw nothing more until we found ourselves on top of Cure or Ocean Island (28 degrees 23 minutes North and 178 degrees 25 minutes West) on July 15<sup>th</sup>. It was in the first watch when we struck and the second mate’s watch on deck. I was keeping a lookout on the poop as we expected to make the land that night; well, one bell had been struck and the watch called. I had just hove the log and told the second mate how many she was doing and whilst he went down telling the skipper I thought I could smell the land and when the second mate came up I told him and we both had a good look round with the glasses but could see nothing. He went to tell the Captain but almost before he could get on deck we found ourselves grazing over some rocks and the next minute we were on top of a coral reef, and all that night we were hauling the yards round and round trying to back her off, but all to no purpose. There was a ground swell on at the time and every time it caught her it bumped her further on and almost shook the sticks out of her. As soon as daylight appeared we saw that we were in between two reefs with Cure Island about eight miles distant on our starboard bow.

From the time we struck until Monday morning we did not stop running out kedges, discharging cargo etc. but could not keep the water under so had all the boats over and provisioned them”

On Monday, July 19<sup>th</sup>. – four days after the grounding – the crew abandoned ship and made for Cure Island where they arrived in the afternoon “and found it to be nothing more than a big coral sandbank about two miles long, half a mile wide and the highest part about ten feet above the level of the sea with no sign of living thing or vegetation on it”

Tents were rigged and the exhausted crew slept soundly and on the next day (Tuesday) some of the crew returned to the ship and brought ashore the remainder of the food stores and the charts, compass, chronometer and other navigational equipment.

Other crew members rigged more tents and dug wells in search of water “which they found but it was rather brackish”

On Wednesday, after some discussion it was agreed that the island was so remote that any chance of being rescued was extremely unlikely and so the Mate, Apprentice Holl and five hands volunteered to sail a lifeboat some 1200 miles to the nearest “habitation” and having taken supplies for a month, they said farewell to their shipmates and, on Saturday, July 24<sup>th</sup>, set sail.

Holl continues “we took enough provisions for a month as we expected to get the NE trades and run down in 15 to 20 days but, instead of that we got a wind from the south’ard and east’ard and had a dead muzzler right the way down. The old hooker only had one good quality about her and that was that she was a good sea boat, but as for sailing she would go like an old crab. After we had been out a fortnight we found that it would be like taking us two or three months – instead of two or three weeks – so we had to start and economise our provisions .....so on August 23<sup>rd</sup>. we had to buckle down to one biscuit and one pint of water a day. On August 28<sup>th</sup>. we decided to alter course for Necker Island in hopes of being able to get water”

August 31<sup>st</sup>. saw the boat approaching Necker Island but as they got within five miles of it they experienced a strong offshore current and so the landing was aborted.

Rations were cut further (“as we thought a little was much better than none at all”)

and course was set for Bird Island which was sighted on September 5<sup>th</sup>. Again, no landing was possible as the island turned out to be “nothing more than a big steep rock, but we managed to catch two boobies (sea birds) and as we had a little spirit lamp in the boat we had a jolly good feed”.

Course was set for Kauai and with a freshening wind the boat made a good passage of some 110 miles in four days but then the wind dropped and “for the last 30 we pulled every inch as it was a dead calm and we only had enough tucker in the boat for a day.

When we got near enough to the shore to make things out I can tell you it raised our spirits to see smoke rising and afterwards we saw some natives galloping down on horseback. At first sight of these fellows we hardly knew if they were civilised or not.

But, at any rate, as soon as they saw us they came off in their canoes and one of them spoke a little broken English so we told them we were hungry and thirsty. Well, they took us ashore in their canoes and I can assure you that I never met a kinder hearted set of people. You would have split your sides to see us when we landed on the beach, not one of us could stand and we rolled about as if we had been drinking. They took us up to their huts and gave us everything they had and if ever I had a feed in my life I had one then”.

The date was Sunday, September 10<sup>th</sup>. – some 52 days after they had set sail from Cure Island – and they were now concerned for the safety of those they had left on the island, with little food and brackish water. Their hosts agreed to take the Mate to a small port called Hanalai where he would find an English steamer “which he did and they came round after us and brought us all on to Honolulu where we arrived on Monday night. On the Tuesday the consul chartered a steamer to go down for the rest of the boys so she did not lose much time. The mate has gone with her so we hope to see the rest of them up here in a week or two. The people here have been very kind to us and we are living like young fighting cocks”

What Edward J. Holl was not to know was that, within a very few days of his departure from Cure Island to get help for his shipmates, the full rigged ship “Birnam Wood” passed close to Cure Island, spotted the balance of the crew and took them to Valparaiso, Chile. When the chartered steamer “Waialeale” arrived off the distant atoll they found it was deserted – with the exception of the three dogs from “Dunnottar Castle” – two terriers and a retriever –which were duly rescued and brought back to Honolulu to be reunited with Holl and his six shipmates.

Researching this event threw up another very interesting aspect of this story – the reason for the extreme haste with which the Hawaiian Commissioner in Honolulu agreed (with the British Consul)) to share the cost of the rescue steamer “Waialeale” to voyage to Cure Atoll in a fruitless effort to rescue the already-rescued balance of the crew of “Dunnottar Castle”.

Hearing the British seafarers were on an uninhabited atoll the Commissioner feared that they would annex it for the British Crown and, on arrival at the island, his first duty was to row ashore and claim it for the Kingdom of Hawaii.

On July 4<sup>th</sup>. 2006 an American maritime archaeology team discovered “ the massive hull sections, frames and deck machinery of an enormous iron hull sailing vessel” and, after a little research, they identified the wreck as being that of “Dunnottar Castle”. Some years after her stranding an Enquiry ruled that her loss “was, most likely, caused by a defective chronometer”. In those days “time” and “longitude” were closely related!

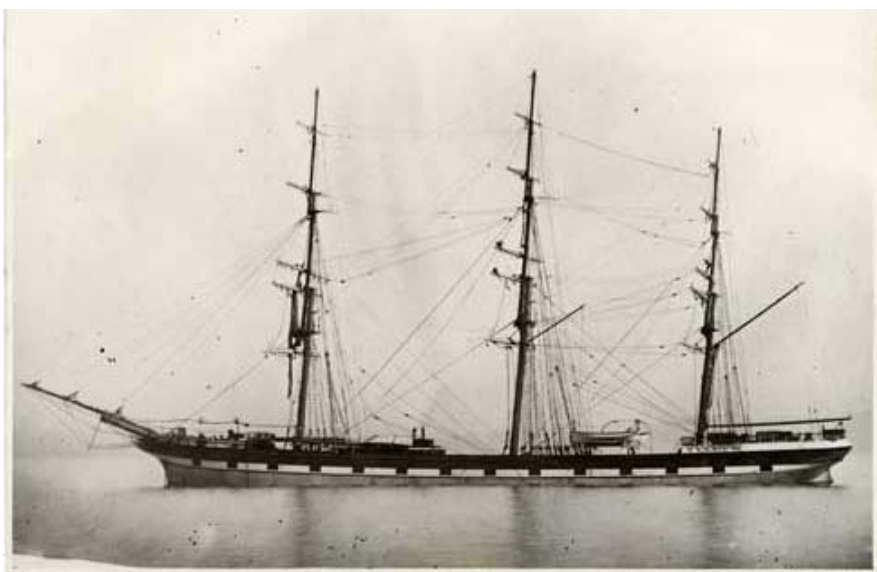
Apprentice Holl returned to the United Kingdom and continued to pursue a seafaring career. In 1900 he joined the Union-Castle Line (formed that year by the merger of The Union Line and The Castle Line).and rose to command in that company.

Following the merger, the house flag of the amalgamated company was hoisted on March 17<sup>th</sup>. 1900 on the mail steamer – yes – you guessed it – “DUNNOTTAR CASTLE”.

Captain Holl lost his life in 1916 “as a result of enemy action”

The name of his command is not known but it was not “Dunnottar Castle”; she foundered off Cape Wrath in September 1915 on passage to Scapa Flow.

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San Francisco Historical Photograph Collection

Dunnottar Castle