

## From Sail to Steam

Past Captain Ian Thomson's great grandfather, Captain Robert Thomson, was master in sail with Rathbones and steam with Alfred Holt. Ian, who was Club Captain in 1991, has several of Robert's letters home but most are now in the Merseyside Maritime Museum.

One of Robert's sons, George Bruce Thomson, was indentured to Rathbones and did his first voyage to sea in 1876 on the "Auriga" from Liverpool to Australia via the Cape. (Coincidentally, Ian was to make his first trip on the same route, some 77 years later.) George later commanded Larrinaga steamships and retired as their Marine Superintendent.

Ian has a large collection of letters from the two seafarers and we hope to be able to reprint some of them here in a series of articles which we hope will be of some interest to you.

This first is an extract from the history of Rathbones and details Robert's career with them while he was master of the tea clipper "Scawfell".

The Scawfell was a wooden full-rigged ship built by Charles Lamport at Workington in 1858. She was strongly built, with teak beams, strengthened with iron braces, and with oak planking and an oak deck. She could carry a cargo of just over 1 million pounds of tea (approx. 500 tonnes in modern measurement).

The Scawfell was a true tea clipper, and under Capt. Robert Thomson achieved one of the fastest ever voyages from China to England, leaving the Canton River on the 14th January 1861 and arriving off Point Lynas, bound for Liverpool, on the 11th April (85 days pilot to pilot).



The Scawfell was first owned by Rathbone Bros. of Liverpool, and then was sold to Wilson & Balin of South Shields in 1872, then W. Hutchinson of Newcastle in 1880. She was abandoned at sea in a Force 12 storm on the 9th January 1883, at 47.30 N 11.10 W, her pumps having become blocked by the coal cargo.

Rathbones dates its history back to 1742 when it was founded as a Liverpool based shipping business. In the early 20th century it turned to financial management and is now one of the UK's leading independent investment management banks with a total assets portfolio in excess of £8 billion.

Rathbones' strong position in the China trade in the 1850's and 60's was largely due to good management of their tea clippers. There are paintings of two of these ships, the *Bosphorus* and the *Scawfell*, in the Merseyside Maritime Museum. Painted in about 1855 by an associate of the Liverpool marine artist Joseph Heard, the *Bosphorus* is seen in full sail, entering the Mersey with New Brighton Battery in the background. She flies the Rathbone flag with the letter 'R' on a central white band flanked by two red bands, and the ship's name on a blue pennant. At 1,346 tons and 217 feet in length, she was one of the largest of the Rathbone vessels.

The *Scawfell* built by Lamports of Workington in 1858, was only 825 tons but was capable of carrying a cargo of 1,020,000 lbs. of tea; she was one of the fastest clippers of her day and, under her master Robert Thomson, broke many records. The painting of the Chinese school depicts her lying at anchor in Hong Kong harbour, with the town and mountains in the background.

Several documents relating to the voyages of the *Scawfell* also survive and life aboard a tea clipper can be glimpsed through a crew list and the official log for the voyage to Manila made between February and December 1870. The crew was a multi national group of over twenty men from all corners of the United Kingdom, from America, Norway and Holland and some unfortunate instances are recounted by the log. The second mate was lost overboard, the log noting 'Wm Maitland could not swim' and poignantly a list of his belongings is appended: '4 books, 4 singlets, 4 pr. drawers, 5 pr. stockings, 4 crimean shirts, 1 muffler, 5 pr. trousers, 1 great coat, 1 jacket, 3 vests, 1 oilskin, 1 towel, 1 pr. sea boots, 1 pr. braces, 2 pillow cases, 1 slate, 1 pillow, 1 rug, 1 bed, 1 cap, 1 bible, 1 pr. shoes, 1 bed curten'. These were signed for by the unfortunate man's younger brother, only 19 years old and on his first voyage as ship's carpenter.

A second incident occurred in Manila, when the cook took exception to the steward's criticism of 'his useage of the cabin beef, struck him – the steward – on the face with a piece of wood causing his face to swell and his eye quite black, then drew a knife to stab him and was only prevented by the steward running away'; a sensible precaution, as the cook later asserted that he would 'slay him like an ox' if the steward came into the galley again!

Robert Thomson was master of the *Scawfell* throughout her career with Rathbones from 1859 to 1871, and during his voyages he wrote regular letters to his wife at home in Liverpool. These letters in the possession of the Merseyside Maritime Museum, give a delightful, personal view of the life of a master of one of the foremost tea clippers.

Thomson married Helen Bruce in 1855 and their growing family lived first in Nelson Street and later moved to Govan Cottage, 44 Edge Lane. He was evidently a competent and conscientious master, deservedly taking a pride in his sailing prowess and

in the qualities of the *Scawfell*, and his letters frequently refer to competition between ships. In 1859, he wrote from Foochow of an excellent run, 'the people here say it is the smartest this year', in 1861 he sailed from Macao to Point Lynas in a record 85 days, and in 1866-7 had a record voyage from Foochow to Deal. He was ambitious and, besides getting the best prices and cargoes for Rathbones, he also traded tea and other cargo on his own account, writing to his wife: 'so you see if I am fortunate, I intend to be rich some time or other'. His own trading in 1864 included cheeses and hams, the latter 'pronounced to be the best in Hong Kong', and he used some of the cheese to pay for a chess set for his family. But trade was difficult: 'all I have sold has brought me little profit . . . [but] not so much as I have been accustomed to'. Nonetheless, he appears to have prospered; he was able to send his children to boarding school and by the 1870's he was negotiating to buy a house costing the considerable sum of £500.

Besides news of the voyage and his trading activities, Thomson regaled his wife with details of life in the various Eastern ports. On one occasion, in 1859, he reassured his wife that he had been to church but, even better, had been visited on board by two parsons: 'the one wanted his dinner and the other a glass of grog – both of which they had'. He told his son that his pet cat, which was on board the ship, had 'whooping cough', but was recovering; complained about the laundry service in Colombo, which could take as long as a fortnight and necessitated his buying new shirts; and was surprised, after going on 'the scale', to find that he weighed 220 lbs. Evidently he had grown a moustache, as he described his pleasure when, returning home from a voyage, he was greeted by his wife running into the room looking 'almost young', jumping up to kiss him – and being rather taken aback by the moustache.

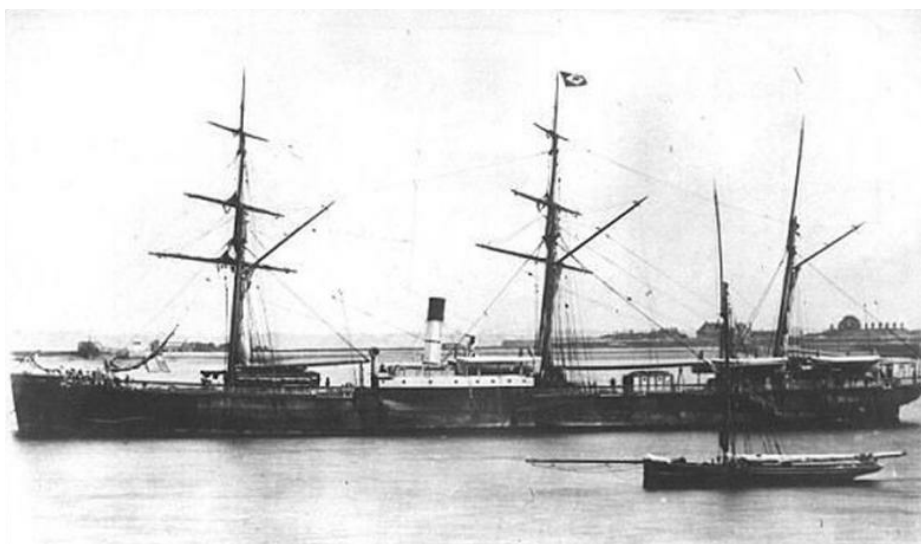
In 1871 a disaster befell the *Scawfell*: the ship had loaded cargo in Colombo and Tuticorin and was heading home, when the cargo caught fire and Thomson was forced into St Helena. The following is printed notification from the agents there:

Capt. Thomson, ship *Scawfell*, from Tuticorin reports that on the 18<sup>th</sup> September last two days after rounding the Cape of Good Hope, lat 32S, long 14 E, he discovered the cargo to be on fire, and on opening the hatches found the smoke to be so dense that it was utterly impossible for anyone to go below, so deemed it advisable, fearing the flames may ascend, to batten down the hatches and caulk them as well as fasten the skylights, so as to exclude all air from the cargo. The vessel is still on fire and has put into port for the purpose of extinguishing it. A survey will be held today. The crew have been obliged to live on deck since the discovery of the fire. NB The *Scawfell* has discharged a portion of cargo (all more or less damaged) and the fire now being extinguished, will as per recommendation of Surveyors, effect temporary repairs and proceed on her voyage . . . A quantity of cotton, coir, cocoa nut fibre being so much burnt was hove overboard as useless. A part of the upper deck on port side had to be cut away for the purpose of getting at the fire, and a large quantity of water pumped down.

Captain Thomson brought the *Scawfell* home safely, and she was sold to Wilson and Blair the following year.

Thomson's son George was indentured to Rathbones as an apprentice on the *Auriga* in 1876, and it is not clear why Thomson himself did not continue his employment with them. He joined another shipping firm in command of the steamship *Agamemnon*, with which he continued to break records; in October 1872 he wrote of a voyage of 32 days from Penang to Liverpool that it was 'the quickest passage on record . . . I think how lucky I have been to get clear of a sailing ship and I hope I will never be on one again'.

Perhaps a fitting final comment to record from Thomson would be the following, written in October 1872: 'We have made the quickest passage to Port Said that has been made by any of the steamers yet – with the exception of Rathbones which we do not pretend to beat'.



**Alfred Holt's "Agamemnon" in 1866** (John I Bax collection [www.red-duster.co.uk](http://www.red-duster.co.uk))

"Scawfell" Shanghai June 20<sup>th</sup> 1863

My Dear Helen



I am happy to inform you that I received last mail no less than three letters besides the one enclosed from Lizzie and all the overdue papers addressed to Hoare Miller & Co. Hong Kong. Just think of that, but I need not scold you any more now since - after a little trouble and detention - I have got them all. I had to write to Birley & Co. of Hong Kong and they called at the post office there and got them and they are to inquire every mail while I am here so I do not care now what you put for an address, it may be to the care of old boots & co. If you put "Scawfell" & Hong Kong, or Shanghai I will get them all the same. I am very glad you are to write next mail as I am likely to be here. We have been getting on very slow with the loading, the price of tea being so high that the merchants cannot buy it. The "Whinfell" had to be sent to Foo-Chow eight days ago, they being unable to load us both here. There are none of the ships getting away so early as expected and in consequence of there being so many ships here and the teas so high in price, the freights have come down. We are now loading at £5-10/- instead of £6-10/- expected when I came here, besides being longer in getting away, we are more likely to make a longer passage down the China Sea, so that you need not expect me so soon as last year. There will be four or five ships away before me from this and the Foo-Chow ships sailed in the end of May and beginning of June. I have been unable to buy any tea for myself on account of the prices, so I am remitting my money home. I may send you a small bill next mail but not certain. I have sold all my spec pretty well. This place is better than Hong Kong for that, but it is getting worse every year. You say that Capt. Westcott wrote to me six weeks ago. I have never got it and I don't believe ever he wrote. Capt. Shewan is just on the point of sailing again. His agents are his owners and have been able to load him at once. I knew all about his house before I got your letter. He did not expect that Mrs Hogg would have been remaining in her house so long, as she has been expecting to get into the Trinity widows fund when they get a free house. I think I would prefer stopping with her than Mrs Robertson, what say you?

I think I told you that I had found Capt. Smith's brother and that he was not doing well, so I have now to inform you that he has drank himself to death and was buried yesterday. He is just as well dead as he would never have done any good. He is owing me £7 or £8 which I suppose I will have to put down to profit and loss. I am write up to Capt. Bowers and I think I may as well write to his sister in Aberdeen as I think Mrs J Smith and them do not correspond. I hear he was owing money to several people.

June 21<sup>st</sup>. Now my dear Helen the mail closes today and I am to break the Sabbath day in finishing your letter which I have no doubt you will highly disapprove of but it cannot be helped. You know I would not desecrate the Sabbath wilfully. There is a Capt. Beddie here it seems he knows you all at Nelson St. and I think I have heard you mention his name. Probably some old sweetheart. I have not been introduced to him yet but likely will be.

The "Chaazee" sails today. He is not quite full but he will not wait any longer, he is in such a hurry to get first home. The "Coulnakyle" Capt. Morrison sailed yesterday. The "Guinivere" and "Glenaros" will be next and probably after that your humble servant. There are other ships sailing with cotton and troops, but them we do not care about.

I shall put in a note to Lizzie but not to scold her as you mentioned. I think you frighten her by saying you will represent her conduct to me. It is best to keep charge of her yourself and I will see about it when I come home when I have no doubt I shall find her very good as usual and when I hope to find you all quite well. I hope your trip to Ireland will do you all good and by what you mention of yourself in your letters I think you have need of it. Now I must conclude with kind love to you and the children and return their usual amount of kisses. I think you better wait my likeness until I come home. It costs too much money here. Remember me to all at home at the Swan and all friends and I remain my dear Helen ever your loving and affectionate husband

Robt. Thomson

"Scawfell" Shanghai June 30<sup>th</sup> 1863

My dear Helen



I now write you for the last time before sailing and hope it will find you and the children quite well as usual. We have had a hard fight in getting loaded and have managed it at last and I intend sailing tomorrow if I can get a steamer, which as yet is doubtful. However, I will sail first opportunity. The season is now getting far advanced and I expect a long passage down the China Sea but I am going the Eastern Passage this time and will not pass Anger without the wind should be favourable for going that way. There are a good few vessels sailing about the same time, some before and some after, so that I must make as quick a passage as possible and not let them all beat me. You will likely see their names in the paper so that I need not mention them here. I enclose a copy of money advanced to crew up to this date, which please keep until I come home. I am sorry that I will not be able to bring good tea for you this time as there is not any to be got here of the same quality I used to bring, but I have bought a little such as it is and I have also bought a toilet set. Japanese ware, which is all the purchases I have made. There are two basins. One large enough to wash the bairns and the other to wash you and I providing we do not want to wash both at one time. With jugs to match and some small things for holding soap etc. they have cost me twenty five dollars (£5). Too much money you will say, and so do I. And that is all the money I have laid out we'll say for your benefit since I have been here. I hope I will get them home without breaking. Now you said in your letter of 25th April that I was to have another next mail, but it has been here a week and I have got neither letter nor paper. Now what do you deserve when I come home. I will tell you when I come. I suppose by this time you will be located with your Irish friends and I hope will enjoy yourself. Do not learn too much of the brogue in case I do not understand you. I hope I will be able to get to London in October but not certain, as I have been so long in getting away. However, I am not so bad as some others who were here before me and no sign of getting away yet. There are too many tea ships here and the freights are getting low. I shall average £5 per ton but the ships that are to load after this will not get so much. Every one is complaining of bad times here and no signs of getting better.

6am July 1<sup>st</sup>. My dear Helen,

The last of our cargo is now alongside and we sail today about 11 o'clock. I am going on shore immediately after breakfast to clear out and come on board again as soon as possible. I am not sure of getting clear of the river today as the winds are right ahead. Outside, the S. West Monsoon being blowing strong.

Now I must say goodbye until you hear from me again from the Downs which I hope will not be more than four months.

May God bless you and our dear children and kiss them for their Papa and keep one or two for yourself. Remember me to all at home and all friends.

I remain my dear Helen

Your affectionate husband

Robert Thomson

Another letter home from Captain Robert Thomson, two years after the one printed in the last edition. During those two years the freight rate has dropped from £6 to £1 per ton and the shipowners are feeling the pinch. Captain Thomson also finds himself in the business of a marriage broker.

"Scawfell" Whampoa August 9<sup>th</sup> 1865

My dear Helen

I now write you in hopes it will find you and all the children well, this leaves me quite well as usual with the exception of a boil on my knee which makes me lame but I hope it will soon be better. I have not had a boil for twenty years before but many people are troubled with them here just now on account of the hot weather. We are now three parts loaded and filling up fast so will soon be away, not before time you will be saying, but I have to go back to Hong Kong and take in more than one hundred tons to fill up, so I will write you next from there before sailing. I hope to be on my way home before the mail after this leaves. I see by the paper that Capt Winchester is still in Foo-Chow and most of the ships there are as badly off as we are here. Capt Shewan has got loaded up quick at Foo-Chow and is sailed for home some time ago so he is lucky this time and the "Devana" has also sailed from Foo-Chow. The "Whinfell" is still there and many other ships, and Hong Kong is still full of ships doing nothing. I hope I shall manage to get home before Christmas, so you will better prepare yourself for a cold journey on the railway again as we will have to make all our journeys in dead of winter. But I have been thinking that it will be no use me coming to Liverpool this time, as the ship is so very late, they are sure to want her away again in a fortnight at least. The ships that are left a fortnight after me last year got to Hong Kong just as soon as me, such is my luck. There is a ship called the "Mary Nicholson" will leave China a little before me, so when she arrives, I hope I will not be far off. She has only got £1 per ton. The "Scawfell" will have £1-10/- but no other ship will get more than a pound from here, so you may see that ship owners are to lose plenty of money this year. I was never in a place so long with less to do than I have had here and there are few people here to correspond with. I sit under the awning all day and read all newspapers I can get hold of. I am now commenced upon the bundle Matilda gave me and I suppose if I am here much longer, will devour them all. The sun is so hot during the day that everyone who can is glad to keep out of it, but in the evening, I generally manage to go and spend the evening with some friends. There are only a few Europeans here and most of the old residents I am acquainted with. I was out dining the other evening with a Mr Gillies. He is from Glasgow and is manager of the Hong Kong and Whampoa Dock Company and I have got acquainted with a Capt and Mrs Blacklock of the "Anne Archbald". They are from far North but the ship belongs to London, so you will see that I am not entirely without society, even ladies, and further, I am commissioned by a gentleman here to bring out a wife to him next year if I can find one. She must be of domesticated and economical habits, not too proud to sew a button on her own or her husband's shirt and of healthy constitution so as to stand the climate, from 25 to 30 years of age or a year or two back or fore. Do not matter if other qualifications be good. Her passage out is to be paid with all incidental expenses and guarantees that she will be married in three days after arrival in Hong Kong, but in case of accident, her passage home again also guaranteed the whole sum not to exceed £150. The gentleman only expects to remain five years more in China, as by that time he expects to be able to retire from business, but would send his wife home sooner should she not keep her health. Now that is all I have got to say on the subject and you need not be scrying it about because it is all true that I have stated. I said that I did not think that I knew anyone, but he said to try and find one, so I have mentioned it to you so as you may look out for someone if you can by the time I come home. But mind, you must be very careful, because if you pitch upon one and I thought would not suit, I must reject her. One that will put on airs, or would be indolent or careless, would no more suit than she can fly in the air. All I can say more is that it will be a first rate bargain for the one that does suit. No money is required. My dear Nell, one like yourself would just do exactly, if you could find one. I do not suppose I could.

Well this is the 10<sup>th</sup> and we are still going on loading and will be full in a few days at this rate, so I hope soon to be on my way home again, but I was never starting from China with so little heart, the ship losing about £2000 and so much behind time that she will be again in the same position next year. However, I must just do the best I can so it cannot be helped.

I have bought you a chest of camphor wood drawers that I think you will like. They cost a good deal of money, but I think they are the best set that has ever been made in Whampoa. Of course they are all solid, as they cannot veneer in China. I think I have all bought that I am going to buy except the mats which I will get in Canton. There is a man bothering me to buy a dress but I am tired of spending money. I am to write to Robert at Little Alford this mail. I suppose he will let you know when he receives it. I wrote his father last mail.

Now what are you and all the children doing? I suppose running about on some sea beach, listening what the wild waves are saying, but I suppose by the time you receive this, will be housed up for the winter. I hope that you will all be comfortable, more so than you sometimes say you are, but I suppose there will be changes soon at home. I often (wonder) what they are to be. I miss your letter on mail day very much. This makes two mails now I have been without one and one French mail.

Now I will have to conclude with my blessings on you all and in hope you are all well. I send lots of kisses to all the children and kind remembrances from Papa.

Remember me again to all relations and friends when an opportunity offers, to all the good people at home and enquiring friends, that is if there are any of the last description. Accept dearest love for yourself.

I remain My Dear Helen  
Your affectionate husband  
Robert Thomson



**“AURIGA”**

Reproduced with kind permission of the artist, John Michael Groves, R.S.M.A.  
([www.johngroves.org](http://www.johngroves.org))

Ship Auriga  
June 1876

My Dear Mama

I received your kind letter and also Argo's and Robert's. (*His elder sister and younger brother.*) I was very glad to get them as I had been waiting for them ever since we arrived and I should have been very much disappointed if I had not. I shall give you an account of our passage of what I can remember of it, as Robert wishes to know every particular. We sailed out of the Mersey on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March with a head wind. When we were off Holyhead at 12 o'clock the first night I felt rather sick. It was pretty rough then and I went down off the poop to turn in. I was just going in the door thinking I was going to have a nice comfortable sleep, when a big sea came over and sent me flying along the deck into the scuppers and after about five minutes wandering about in water I managed to get in our berth so you guess how I enjoyed the first night. The tug left us off Tuskar in very heavy weather. I should have sent you a note but I was so sick I could not manage to write one. The Bay of Biscay was still worse. The first fine day was off Cape Finistere. We were very close in to it and we could see the surf lashing round the rocks, but we could not weather it on account of being so near land and on a lea shore and we had to stand into the Bay of Biscay again where we got more bad weather. We were beating about the Cape and after six days we weathered it after nearly being ashore once and putting the ship about two or three times a day. After we got round the Cape we had fine weather all the way South except a few tropical squalls. We caught five or six albatross and numerous other birds going round the Cape of Good Hope which would make a nice muff for Argo or you. We had two or three gales in the Indian Ocean. Two or three days before we sighted the coast of Australia we had a very heavy thunderstorm. It began about 11 o'clock P.M. It was blowing pretty fresh and about 12 o'clock the thunder was something fearful, fork and chain lightning and not a breath of wind. It had gone down in less than ten minutes. It was pitch dark and hailing. Some of the hail was almost as big as marbles. The darkness was the worst part of it, all the men running up against the house and blocks and tripping over each other. I shall never forget that night as I nearly broke my nose. I tripped over a spar or block, I don't exactly know what it was but I came down on the deck like a hundred of bricks. Two days after this we were along Sandridge Pier and I am now sitting down writing this letter safe, well and healthy and now I think I have given you a very fair account of our passage out. We had over 30 steerage passengers with and in the rough weather their place was something awful. Some of them never came on deck for a month after we sailed but they were very good company for us. While we were in the tropics we played cricket, had all sorts of games on deck and if it was raining we would have concerts in the steerage, in fact I would not mind having passengers every voyage. We have now been in port nearly a fortnight and I have only been in Melbourne once so I can't tell you anything about it yet. The Captain is very good to us and so are all the officers and I like them very much indeed. I don't know where we shall be going and neither does the Captain until he gets a letter from the owners but I shall let you know in my next letter. I suppose you won't whether we have arrived or not until you get this letter as the tele between England and Australia is cut off or something to do with it as no communication goes on. We are very comfortable in our berth except in weather like we had in the Channel and Bay of Biscay when it was six or eight inches deep in water. Fancy if all the bedrooms were six inches deep in water for 3 weeks and no fire to dry your clothes with, you would all feel very comfortable I am sure. When I left, Mr McKenzie asked me to enquire at the Olive Branch Hotel about his son. I have not done as yet but I will, and let you know in my next letter, so if he asks, you can tell him that I have not been there yet. I suppose when you read all, you will be saying you will expect another soon but I don't think I can write more than two more. I expect we shall not stop here more than a month. Some of my things are not good at all and I have no boots, for they are not fit to go ashore with, for they all want mending. I shall write Argo and Robert as well as you next time so I think I shall do very well. I don't think I can find any more. I will close and hoping you will get this and that you are all well.

I remain

My dear Mamma

Your affectionate son

Geo. B. Thomson

P.S. Tell Robert that the fastest we have gone is 15 1/2 knots an hour and 309 miles in 24 hours.

Thirteen years after his first trip, George Bruce Thomson is now in command of the three masted ship, the "Bay of Naples" This letter to his brother Robert describes dramatic events while loading cases of petroleum oil (kerosene) in New York.

Bay of Naples. New York

Sept 1<sup>st</sup> 1889

My Dear Rob

Here we are nearly ready for sailing and I am glad of it, for I am about tired of this place. It's a very fine place as long as you have plenty of the almighty dollars but unless you are prepared to shell out a sufficient quantity of them you won't get along 'no how'.

Two or three of the skippers here have been up to Niagara Falls but I have not visited them yet and will have to wait until my next trip here.

Tom Elsmore is not back from his holidays yet so unless he gets back by tomorrow (which I think is his day for returning) I will not see him. He says he is going to try to get to Liverpool next year.

I went on board of the 'Umbria' the other day and saw Mr Thomas and had a look all over the vessel which I think is nearly OK. He is going to call at your office and let you know I am alive here and getting fat. I might as well say here that I have gained about five lbs in weight since I left London so I reckon that's not so bad for me inside of three months.

I have had my photos taken here and am sending two by this mail, one for Argo and one for Mamma or Nellie. Tom can wait until I come home and then I will give you half a dozen if they are not all gone.

It's an awful job writing letters, I never seem to have time to write one and still am never doing anything. If I could only get a mail off now and again when I am at sea in one of those lonely moralizing moods which so frequently occur to windjamming sailors, I think I could write a pretty decent one. I think when my girl arrives she will have to be content with mighty few, or else have to write herself for the two of us. Still, when I was second mate too I used to fill up 16 or 18 pages to Newcastle NSW and never seemed at a loss for something to say. This reminds me that I have not got my album with me this voyage and it's your fault as you were looking after my books.

Well I suppose I will have to say something about the 'Naples'. We have got 55,600 cases on board, a very poor cargo for a ship of this tonnage. She is only a blooming old pick pocket anyhow and she is as deep as a sand barge.

Seventeen of my crew have deserted here including my steward. I think I told you about him so need say nothing more. Tell Ned I will write to him from Rangoon. I would have written him from here but I thought it was too soon to bother him with my nonsense as he will not be finished with his own yet.

By the bye, I have not seen colour of that breast pin of mine since I left Westfield House. I suppose you fellows are taking it in turns to wear it as you have not one as good of your own. That's the way you take advantage of your little brother.

Now Rob, I must wind up. If I think of anything else to say before sailing, I will put it in as I am going to send this back with the pilot.

4<sup>th</sup>. My dear Rob, little did I think when I was winding up the other night what else I would be obliged (to) put in this letter. As I was sitting writing the night before sailing about 11.30 pm, I was startled by a cry of fire. I jumped out on deck and then saw flames bursting out of the fore hatch. We aroused all hands and got our pumps to work on it, at the same time sending rockets and signals of distress up. Our pumps were as nothing on the fire, for the petroleum burnt well, as petroleum will burn. About half an hour after the fire started, we got two tug boats alongside and got their hoses to work but the fire gained on us rapidly until about 1.30 am when I suppose we had eight or nine tug boats alongside which gave us about 17 streams of water. We were anchored in about nine fathoms of water and I came to the conclusion that if this lasted very long, the ship would sink at her anchorage. I had holes cut in the deck on each side and got hoses down abaft the fire to stop it from working aft. About 3 am I got a couple of boats to tow me ashore on one of the islands as there was 15 feet of water in the hold, slipped my anchor and landed alright on a soft bottom. After this we gained on the fire. The foremast in the between decks was red hot, also the plates on the starboard side, beams bent out of shape with heat and by the time the fire was extinguished the decks were just beginning to give way. All around the fore part they are about an inch thick.

I saw the last of the fire about half past six am and at that time there was 17 feet of water in her fore and aft. We got her pumped out again and finished this evening, picked our anchor and chain up again the same day as it was ranged and now lie at anchor in the same place as I was before.

We have got to discharge all our cargo again so I shall be in New York about another six weeks.

Now Rob, I must wind up again and will let you know more particulars later.

With dearest love to Mamma and all at home.

I remain your affectionate brother, George.

P.S. Can't find out cause of fire at all. Hatches were all on and everyone turned in except the anchor watch and myself and I was writing in my room at the time. A mighty good job I was on board at the time. GBT.

## HIGH HOPES OF SALVAGE

### STEAMERS WHICH HELPED THE BAY OF NAPLES A SHIP HAS A NARROW ESCAPE FROM DESTRUCTION BY FIRE- RUN AGROUND NEAR GOVERNOR'S ISLAND.

There was cause for rejoicing aboard at least five vessels in New York Harbor yesterday-and tugboats at that; all but one of them.

A big ship had been saved from destruction by fire and a sum calculated at not less than \$30,000 is likely to be divided among the five rescuing vessels. As a result there is not a deckhand or cook aboard the tugs Talisman, Temple, Indian, and Mirand and the steamer John Sylvester who is not hoping that he will be awarded at least \$1,000. It is expected that fully \$150,000 salvage will result from saving the British ship Bay of Naples from burning early yesterday morning at her anchorage off Bedlow's Island.

The Bay of Naples was to have cleared for Rangoon to-day. She had on board a full cargo of case oil and was manned by a crew of twenty-four men. A little after midnight the anchor watch smelled the odor of fire from his position on the forecabin. He sprang at the fastenings of the fore hatch, tore them off with the assistance of an axe, and the next instant saw that the fore hold was a mass of flame. Closing the hatch the sailor rushed aft to the cabin door and gave the alarm. Capt. Thompson took in the situation in an instant. His ship, loaded with oil, was on fire. He seized a couple of rockets, rushed on deck, planted the sticks against the rail, and fired the signals.

By this time all hands were on deck. The hose was led along from three or four pumps and a couple of hands chopped holes in the deck. Through these apertures the nozzles of the hose were run, and while three-fourths of the men worked at the pumps the remainder stuffed battens around the hose nozzles, and closed tight every crack through which it was possible for any air to get below.

Within twenty minutes after the first rocket had been fired the Mirand bore down on the ship. The tug was on her way to Philadelphia, going out on the last of the flood tide, when the sight of a ship in distress caused her to alter her course without delay. Then, following each other in quick succession, came the Talisman, the Temple, the Indian, and the Sylvester. The Sylvester is a ferryboat plying between South Ferry and Bay Ridge. She was on her last trip when the signal of the Bay of Naples was discerned. Notwithstanding there were a few passengers

aboard, the Sylvester bore down direct on the Naples and got her lines aboard and was at work in a very short time. It will, no doubt, surprise some of her passengers to learn that each of them is entitled to a certain portion of the salvage money.

As soon as the fire steamers got hold of the Bay of Naples steps were at once taken to get the vessel into shallow water. There was no time to weigh anchor, so the chain was slipped and the steamers started ahead, making direct for the anchorage to the southward of Governor's Island. The Naples was pulled in close to Governor's Island and as soon as she grounded the water was poured into her hold with a vengeance. The police boat Patrol coming up rendered further assistance by turning in water from her four pumps. By this time the fire was in hand, and a little later, with 17 feet of water in her hold, the Bay of Naples was safe and the fire was out.

The next thing to do was to get the water out. The pumps were set at work, but the crew was pretty well used up, some by burns and others by hard work, and a tug was employed to pump the ship out. As the Bay of Naples lies now she is on good soft mud, off Governor's Island, and can be readily gotten off at high water. Aside from the oil that was stowed forward of the foremast, there is comparatively little injury done. It seems a miracle that the vessel did not go like a flash, and it can only be accounted for by the prompt flooding of the hold. So great was the heat at times that the men could not work forward of the foremast, while in the starboard bow twisted plates attest to the heat to which they were subjected.

The Bay of Naples is a full-rigged three-masted iron ship of 1,621 tons burden, 286 feet long, 39 feet wide and 23 feet depth of hold. She belongs to J. & G. Bullock & Co. of London, and was built in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1875. She arrived at this port on July 24 with a cargo of 1,000 tons of Portland cement consigned to her agents Simpson Spence & Young of 78 Broad-street. She reloaded at Hunter's Point with 55,600 cases of high-proof refined kerosene oil, shipped by Russel & Co. of 60 Wall-street to their agents in Rangoon. It is estimated that the cargo, which is valued at \$55,000, has been damaged at least \$12,000, as from 6,000 to 8,000 cans of oil are a total loss. The vessel will be taken to Erie Basin, where she will be put on the dry dock and repaired. The loss on the ship will be at least \$15,000. She is now in charge of the underwriters.

Tug men were figuring yesterday that 60 or 70 per cent of the value of the ship and cargo will be awarded as salvage, or, allowing for damage by the fire, about \$150,000, as their estimate is that the Bay of Naples and the oil she carried were worth \$200,000. These figures are bigger than those of the agents, but if they are anywhere near

correct each of the rescuing steamers will get about \$30,000. According to Admiralty decisions, one-half of each vessel's share goes to the crew and the other half to the owners. Of the one-half for the crew the master takes one-half - or a quarter of the whole - while the remaining one-quarter of the whole is divided up among the engineer, firemen, and deck hands pro rata. This would give the Captains of each of the steamers about \$7,500, and as each tug carries about five hands the share of these men is figured at about \$1,000 apiece, the engineer receiving, however, the largest amount after the Captain. Salvage money can only be allowed to those who are actually on board, whether crew or not.

There are few deck hands on the tugboats of this harbor who are not well posted on Admiralty law. Young and old hands will spin out with remarkable accuracy list after list of salvage cases decided by the courts. To get hold of a distressed vessel any craft showing the "Union down" by day or a sky rocket by night is the aim and ambition of every tugboat man.

As an evidence of the sharpness displayed on this score, it is told of the tug Hawley, one of the handiest boats in the harbor, that she recently ran across a big ship anchored off the bar, deserted. It appears that the ship got aground on the bar at low water, and that the master decided to go up to the city in a tug that had hold of the ship, get a gang of riggers, take them aboard, and, as he was towed up the bay, get his topgallantmasts housed for passing under the bridge. The master took all hands off in the tug, and left the ship at anchor. About an hour later the Hawley came along, ran up alongside the vessel, and hailed, but received no answer. The master of the Hawley boarded the craft, but could find no one. Going up on the poop deck he discovered that the ship was dragging her anchor. Then he signaled a tug lying close in shore, proceeded to get up anchor, and had the latter nearly aweigh when the signaled boat came alongside. Accepting the offer to take half that was made, the second tug took hold with the Hawley and little difficulty was found in crossing the bar.

About half way up the lower bay a tug was met carrying back the Captain of the ship with a gang of riggers. The Master of the Hawley forbade any one to touch the ship's deck before his charge was anchored off Communipaw Flats. A salvage claim was at once put in and the court allowed the Hawley and her ally \$30,000.

*The New York Times*

Published: September 4, 1889

*It is interesting to compare George's matter of factual account with the above report as it appeared in the New York Times.*

*It leaves little doubt of the mercenary nature of the local tugboat crews and would even seem to boast about their "sharpness". One can envisage George's "almighty dollars" spinning before their eyes. But then where would the "Bay of Naples" have been without their rapid response?*

*In the event, their optimism was ill-founded: only 283 of the 55,600 cases were damaged and the oil left in them filled 211 new ones. The total salvage award was \$20,000, not the \$150,000 anticipated. Read the interesting original report of the Admiralty judgement at <http://bulk.resource.org/courts.gov/c/F1/0044/0044.f1.0090.pdf>*





From a Liverpool newspaper, October 1908:

## **REWARDED FOR HEROIC SERVICE WHILE AT SEA**

Capt. Thomson received a gold watch from the president.

Now on his way to Galveston in new vessel, Ventura de Larrinaga, well known here.

The Journal of Commerce of Oct. 23 contains an interesting account of the presentation of a beautiful gold watch from President Roosevelt to Capt. George B Thomson, late commander of the Miguel de Larrinaga, but now on his way to Galveston as commander of the new steamer Ventura de Larrinaga, of the same line.

The watch was presented as a reward for the rescue of the crew of the American schooner Gardiner B Reynolds on the 4th day of December last in mid ocean

Article from the Journal of Commerce Saturday 24 October 1908.

### Chart-Room Gossip.

We have great pleasure in recording another instance of gallant life-saving by a Liverpool shipmaster and his officers and crew. Captain George B. Thomson, master of the Miguel de Larrinaga, was on Thursday at Liverpool, the recipient of a present from the American Government in recognition of his services in assisting to rescue the shipwrecked crew of the American schooner Gardiner B. Reynolds on the 4th December last. The presentation was made through the Local Marine Board, Colonel J. Goffey, V.D., J.P., presiding. The present consisted of a watch, albert and charm. All beautiful specimens of the goldsmith's art, the watch bearing a suitable inscription under the American coat of arms.

The Miguel de Larrinaga was on a voyage from Galveston for Manchester, and on Dec. 4 last, during a heavy gale, sighted the American schooner Gardiner B. Reynolds in a sinking condition in mid-Atlantic. The schooner, while on a voyage from Wilmington to Portland, Me., encountered a succession of heavy gales, in which she became dismasted and water-logged; it was in vain that all hands were at the pumps, for the water gained upon them and their danger became hourly greater. Signals of distress were hoisted, but as no succour arrived the men were giving up all hope of being rescued when the Manchester-bound ship hove in sight and bore down upon the sinking vessel. A fresh gale was blowing, with a high sea, but the serious condition of the sinking vessel was so critical that a speedy rescue was necessary if life was to be saved. Despite the gale and high sea a boat was launched, and after great difficulty and danger the whole of the ship-wrecked crew were transferred in safety to the steamer (comprising the captain, mate and five men), and the schooner abandoned. It was thought she would not remain very long afloat.

Captain Thomson has very rightly been described as an admirable type of British shipmaster – skilled, resourceful, courageous, and humane. He comes from an old seafaring stock, his father having been Captain Robert Thomson, who about four years ago died in his 83rd year, having been for nearly a quarter of a century in command for Messrs. Rathbone Brothers, and latterly for Messrs. Alfred Holt and Co. His son Captain Geo. B. Thomson, has proved a worthy successor to a worthy sire, and a worthy upholder of all the best traditions of the "cloth." He served his apprenticeship with Messrs. Rathbone Bros and Co., and in 1881 joined Messrs. Thompson Anderson and Co.'s sailing ships as an officer in the Eastern trade. He remained with them until 1889, and then secured the command of the ship Bay of Naples, owned by Messrs. Baldock and Co. In 1892 he took the inevitable step of going into steam, joining one of Messrs. Crow, Randolph and Co.'s steamers as chief officer, and shortly afterwards secured his first command in steam. He entered the service of Larrinaga in 1898, and he is shortly to take command of their new steamer Ventura de Larrinaga.

*Captain Thomson retired as Marine Superintendent of Larrinaga Shipping.*