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THE “LIVERPOOL HURRICANE” OF 1839

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To become known later as the "Great Storm" with winds reaching hurricane strength around the whole coastline of the British Isles, the reference "Liverpool" would appear to have American origins, perhaps because of the foundering of three New York packets off the port. This was as many as had been lost in the twenty years since the start of this service, and on one ship, the *Pennsylvania*, the loss of life was to become the heaviest on the New York ocean run between 1824 and 1847. Even without these tragedies there is little doubt that the havoc caused ashore and the casualties inflicted afloat were quite exceptional in the port of Liverpool and its seaward approaches.

During the week prior to the 6th January 1839, bad weather had delayed the sailing of a number of ships, but on that particular Sunday morning, and despite an ominously falling barometer, the wind was a light southerly and 60 ships left the port on the 3.00pm tide. Few could have been unaware that it was only a lull and that further bad weather was brewing, but presumably the short-sea traders were hoping to make their destinations or find shelter en route; and the deep-sea vessels to make an offing before it broke. None, however, could have envisaged what was to follow so swiftly and with such devastation within the confines of Liverpool Bay and its lee shores.

Looking at subsequent reports from ports around the UK coasts, there seems to be general agreement that during the latter part of Sunday 6th January the wind started to veer and freshen, increasing to a westerly gale. This progression continued until in the early hours of 7th January it was gusting up to hurricane strength. By then, those ships that were still within the Bay and

had not, or could not, find shelter were faced with a white-watered screaming banshee that carried away yards and canvas, and ripped furled sails from their bolt ropes. The blown spume hid both sea and land marks, and without position fixing reference the only certainty was that shoal waters lay down-wind to the south and east.

For the ships already inward bound for the Mersey, or attempting to return, the choices would be equally stark as before they could gain some comparative shelter in the River they would have to face the old Formby Channel (1) on a close lee shore, or the narrow dog-leg course between the violently covered North and Hoyle banks that lead to the Rock Channel. Even for the most skilled seaman on the most seaworthy ship an element of chance or luck would obtain. For some this luck was to run out early, whilst for others the grim fight was to continue for many hours.

Ashore, few were to venture out as roofs disappeared and chimney breasts and walls collapsed around them. Nevertheless, the following is a reported description of the River scene :

"The River from shore to shore fretted by the tempest into billows, the heaving crests of which, scattered to the wind, rose in immense crests of foam and were driven over the surface of the water as far as the eye could reach."

This was on the Monday morning, 7th January, and the short winter daylight was starting to reveal unidentified bodies, cargo and wreckage which was coming ashore on the beaches.

THE RIVER MERSEY AND THE DOCKS

From those brave enough to take in the scene, the following was reported:

The *Bridgewater* river steamer (ie. ferry), a total wreck at Brunswick Dock pier, her master and four crew saved, seven lost. Woodside steamer *Ribble* alongside and a total wreck. River steamers (ferries) *Admiral* and *Duke of Bridgewater* sunk in river. *Endeavour* and schooners *Susannah* and *Harriet* sunk in river. Runcorn steamer *Eclipse* sunk at George's Pierhead. The fine packet ship *Cambridge** (cargo valued at £300,000) had dragged her anchors and eventually brought up with her stern so close to Prince's Pierhead ("within a biscuit throw") that her captain offered £1,000 to any vessel that could drag her clear. There were no takers but three riggers were drowned attempting to row out and offer their services.

Within the docks themselves further chaos reigned as ships broke their moorings and were set down on others so that some fourteen ships and flats were either severely damaged or sunk.

THE ESTUARY, CHANNELS AND BANKS

"Between Rock Point and Hilbre, five fine ships stranded"

"Twenty vessels lost off Hoylake"

"In Bootle Bay, seven ships ashore"

Between 7th and 8th January, some idea of the scale of the marine casualties was becoming clear and the ships were being identified.

The New York packet *Oxford* (752 tons, built N.Y. 1836), inward, ashore near Bootle landmarks with masts cut away and "fills with each tide". Other ships ashore in Bootle Bay (2) included :

Elisha ex Bordeaux, *Jarrow* ex Demerara, *Pearl*, *Fortune*, *Alexander*, *Harlequin* all ex Glasgow, *Ailsa* ex ?, H.M.steamer *Redwing*.

* *Cambridge* - 798 tons, reported Black Ball Line.

Pennsylvania, New York packet outward (808 tons, 148' x 34'9" built NY 1836, Blue Swallowtail Line) wrecked on Hoyle Bank.

Brighton, inward from Bombay, wrecked on West Hoyle, seven crew and master saved; 14 missing.

Edward of Dundee, wrecked on Hoyle Bank

St. Andrew, New York packet outward (651 tons, built NY 1834, Liverpool Red Star Line) ashore on Burbo sands, crew saved..

Lockwoods (emigrant ship), outward to New York, ashore on North Bank, master and part of crew saved, "many on board in imminent danger".

Victoria, inward from Charleston, ashore near Leasowe Castle and ebbed out, 900 bales of cotton salvaged. (Not to be confused with steam tug of same name involved in rescues - see later).

Two small vessels - wrecked on Burbo Bank.

Harvest Home, outward to St. Thomas, wrecked on Mad Wharf, two saved.

Sarah, ashore near Formby.

Monkey, bound Gibraltar, wrecked off Formby, three drowned.

Reported that 15 ships ashore at Blackpool, some ex Liverpool *Favourite*, *Crusader* wrecked and cargo lost, *Ann Paley*,

Reported that North West Light Float (lead sea-mark for Rock Channel) off station, sheltering in River (3).

Reported that steam tug *Victoria*, steamship *Mountaineer*, assisted by lifeboats, are bringing survivors ashore. See later.

Numerous fishing boats and flats (un-named), sunk off Hoylake.

A schooner (*Thomas Nelson*) moored off Beaumaris and without her crew on board broke loose, and was discovered on the beach at Southport.

Whilst the hurricane force winds continued unabated from early morning on Monday until the evening of the same day, the 'moderation' can only be seen by comparison with the foregoing. The weather on Tuesday evening, 8th January with the wind in the NNW is described as "dreadfully severe, a boisterous and piercing wind, a keen frost, snow, lightning and thunder". Such inclement conditions continued until the Thursday, and so for those awaiting help or rescue the chances of survival were not good.

In the subsequent inquiries and inquests, plus published letters to the press, the evidence of survivors, particularly from the *Lockwoods*, and two of the New York packets, provides an awful picture.

LOCKWOODS. bt 1836, 872 tons, 3-masted ship, 137' x 30' Owned by Lockwood & Company, Liverpool. The *Lockwoods* left the Mersey on Sunday 6th January with 25 crew and 85 emigrants, and met the storm close to Lynas Point (Anglesey). The ferocity of the wind tore the fore and main topsails out of their bolt ropes and shredded them; the sea conditions became horrendous and visibility very poor with blown spume. Amongst the passengers, of whom 40 were women and children, there was considerable distress and sickness.

By Monday morning under minimum canvas, the dreadful weather conditions continued and the ship found herself to be off the Lancaster coast and in sight of Black Combe. On Tuesday morning the *Lockwoods* bore up for Liverpool. On arrival near the banks, the leading sea-mark, the North-West Lightfloat, could

not be located (off station, sheltering in the River), and soundings revealed shallowing waters. The starboard anchor was let go first, but parted the cable. The port anchor did hold, but in the high and confused sea, the vessel started shipping water and the cable was slipped. *Lockwoods* struck the bank 200 yards to the east of Spencer Gut Buoy, about two miles from Mockbeggar Light. Immediately the vessel started to pound heavily on the bank and lost her false keel and, with seas swamping the decks, the passengers were becoming hysterical. It was seen that two boats launched from the nearby similarly stranded *Pennsylvania* were both swamped. Rescue attempts by the steam tug *Victoria* and Pilot Boat No.5 did manage to take off 22 passengers and crew who were subsequently landed at Liverpool. A second attempt later on Tuesday evening proved abortive due to the weather, and during the early hours of Wednesday morning the ship broke into two pieces. During that night a great number of passengers perished from the cold and the continuous swamping by waves. Daylight revealed some thirty dead on the poop or in the rigging. On Wednesday morning the *Victoria*, assisted by the Hoylake lifeboat, took off the remainder of the passengers. The last man to leave was the Mate. Of the original 110 passengers and crew, 53 were lost; the passengers aged between a few months and 70 years.

PENNSYLVANIA Owned by the Blue Swallowtail Line. New York packet.

Prior to Sunday 6th January, the *Pennsylvania* had already been delayed in Liverpool by bad weather in the previous week. With the temporary improvement that Sunday morning, Captain Smith, an experienced and popular master and shortly due for retirement, boarded his ship at 10.30am "in good humour". He was anxious to sail on that afternoon tide to keep ahead of two New York steam packets currently berthed in Liverpool. The

outward run to Point Lynas was fine with southerly winds, but about 9.00pm there was a dead calm for ten minutes, followed by a freshening south westerly breeze. As the wind increased, sails were either taken in or close-reefed. By 2.00am on Monday morning a westerly hurricane was blowing and the vessel lost the fore and mizzen topsail yards, and the main topsail was blown out of its bolt ropes. The furled courses were blown to ribbons and the fore-yard badly sprung. Throughout Monday the spray was so thick that land and sea-marks were obscured and the vessel was "drifting at the mercy of the wind and waves, and it was impossible to set other sails as no man could stand on deck".

Tuesday morning found them off the Orme's Head and some sails were set and a course made for Liverpool. On approaching the outlying banks, and on a lee shore, they were unable to find the North West Lightfloat (the lead buoy towards the Rock Channel) and followed half a mile astern of the *Lockwoods* which was similarly searching. At about two to three miles off shore, the *Pennsylvania* put out an anchor and 30 fathoms of cable but it carried away. The vessel then struck heavily on the Hoyle Bank, half a mile to the eastward of *Lockwoods* and, swamped by the waves, quickly filled with water. The ship had left Liverpool with 35 crew and 5 passengers; and these passengers plus the First and Second Mates and five crew then launched the jolly boat over the stern. They made for the Wirral shore - about three miles distant - but within a mile from the beach the boat was swamped. One passenger was able to swim for the shore (and later proved to be a very credible witness at the Inquest). The others either clung to the upturned boat or were washed away. Two managed to swim to a sandbank nearby, but between them and the land lay a deep gutter, and although helpers from the shore waded out as far as they dare to help them, the two were overwhelmed. The bodies of those drowned were to be washed

ashore later and taken to Leasowe Castle for identification. Some were to be buried in Wallasey churchyard.

Meanwhile, back on the *Pennsylvania* attempts were made to launch the longboat, but this too was to be swamped. Immediately afterwards two successive waves rode over the deck, the second catching Captain Smith and washing him overboard to his death. He left a widow and two children in New York. All this took place at about 3.00pm on Tuesday, and with that second wave, the Third Mate ordered the crew into the rigging to save themselves. Wrapping themselves in sails for protection from the waves and biting cold they stayed there until rescued by the steam tug *Victoria* at 10.30am on Wednesday. By then, three of the crew had "starved to death in the rigging". Of the 40 who had started the voyage, 21 were saved and 19 were lost.

ST ANDREW New York packet, built N.Y. 1834, 651 tons Red Star Line.

Left Liverpool, at 2.00pm on Sunday 6th January, and like the *Lockwoods* and the *Pennsylvania* met the same atrocious conditions at approximately the same time. Even the new, previously unused, sails were torn to shreds and she remained unmanageable throughout Monday until the upper part of the masts were cut away and the vessel jury-rigged with a mizzen mast and a foresail. Early on Tuesday and in a crippled state she made for Liverpool. At about 10.30am she struck the Burbo Bank. By 1.00pm the steam tug *Victoria* was on the way and took off 26 persons. The inward steamer *Mountaineer* was in the vicinity and took off the rest of the crew. Later the *St. Andrew* was washed from the bank and up on to the shore, a total loss.

OXFORD Black Ball Line - New York packet.

Ashore in Bootle Bay and, although damaged as previously

stated, lost no crew or passengers (or their luggage) and was later re-floated. On survey the hull was found to be undamaged.

HEROISM, DERELICTION AND THE AFTERMATH

The newsgathering of 1839 depended very much in these difficult circumstances of initially publishing whatever could be gleaned from what might now be called 'unofficial sources'. There is no 'disaster supremo' to give an interview, and therefore any witness is given equal credibility and equal space. It takes time for the full truth to come out, usually at the Inquests. Praise and criticism tend to come in equal and immoderate terms, but eventually a reasonably accurate picture does emerge.

Heroes and heroic acts there were, and amongst these must highly rank the rescue services of the steam tug *Victoria*, the steam vessel *Mountaineer* and the assistance of No.5 Pilot Boat, and the Hoylake and Magazines lifeboats - although the latter did come in for some criticism. Between them they saved over 120 lives, mainly from the *St. Andrew*, the *Pennsylvania* and the *Lockwoods*. The captain and crew of the *Victoria*, including 16 volunteer pilots, took considerable risks in taking off survivors, not least from the poop of the *Lockwoods* when that part of the vessel remaining above the waterline was being washed by seas. Also the *Mountaineer* which went to give help when others passed by. There seems to be no criticism and only praise for the captains, officers and crew of the stricken ships, and some are singled out for special consideration such as the mate of the *Lockwoods* who, despite and ever worsening situation, insisted on being the last to be taken off.

On the debit side, there is criticism of the North West Lightfloat being off station, and thus contributing to the grounding and loss of a number of ships. This controversy eventually settled on the Lightfloat's moorings which had carried

away (and, after all, with no moorings, where else could she go?). The Magazines lifeboat was towed out to the scene by the *Victoria*, and after rendering some help suddenly put up sail and made for home despite the pilots offering to take over and man the boat themselves. Even worse, the Formby lifeboat was severely censured by the owner of the *Harvest Home*, wrecked on Mad Wharf sands, Formby, for not rowing out to the stricken vessel after two of the ship's crew had launched their own boat and rowed ashore to raise the alarm. According to the report, the crew refused to go out and seven of the *Harvest Home's* crew were left to die, overwhelmed by the bitter weather, lashed to the rigging from Monday midnight. Two were found still alive when the Formby lifeboat rowed out the one and a half miles on Thursday.

There does not appear to be any clear number for the total loss of life from ships - perhaps because of the widespread nature of the casualties, but a figure of 100+ is mentioned.

The loss of ships and cargoes was also of considerable concern to both owners and underwriters, particularly with the larger ships on the U.S. and Indian runs with valuable commodities. Some cargoes were washed out; for example, bales of cotton were washed up on the beaches of New Brighton and Otterspool. Other cargoes were saved and both at North Wirral and Bootle Bay, revenue, customs and police officers were out in force to prevent 'wrecking' (looting). Offenders were arrested and brought to court in Liverpool and Birkenhead.

Some cargoes were saved such as that of the *Crusader*, ex Liverpool and bound for Bombay, wrecked on Blackpool beach, with "a very valuable cargo". The tobacco on board the *Favourite*, ex Liverpool, bound Genoa, was washed ashore in the same locality.

An initial estimate of Liverpool losses varied around the £500,000 mark.

Whatever the actual strength the wind reached that night will never be known - the term "hurricane" (4) only indicating something above "storm" force, but there were reports of saline deposits on trees and leaves 70 miles inshore from Huddersfield and Leeds to Hebden Bridge.

NOTES

(1) The 'new' channel, forerunner of the present Queens Channel, had been surveyed by Denham, but not yet marked.

(2) Bootle Bay of that time roughly equates to the present position of Scaforth/Gladstone Docks.

(3) Small but stoutly built ex sailing craft were often modified for use as seamarks.

(4) In 1839 Admiral Beaufort was Hydrographer to the Navy, but it seems that his scale of wind forces had not yet been adopted. On the Beaufort Scale of today, "Hurricane" strength is Force 12, above 65mph (100 km/h)

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