

*James Nicol Forbes, by
Captain E. A. Woods.*

No. 12

James Nicol Forbes was born in Aberdeen in 1821, where his father was a distinguished advocate and public man. As a youngster, Forbes attended the navigation school of Mr. Milne, in Marischal Street, learning the rudiments of the profession in which he later rose to be a master known throughout the whole shipping world. For a number of years he served in the trade between Aberdeen and Canadian ports and, whilst still a young man, was persuaded to come to Liverpool. In Quebec one voyage, he was appointed to command of the new ship WILSON KENNEDY, of 1,129 tons, built there in 1849 for Martin Brothers, of Liverpool. He made a fast passage from Quebec to Liverpool and, through this, came under the notice of James Baines.

He was appointed to command of the barque CLEOPATRA, of 421 tons, which Baines had just bought. In 1851, Forbes bought the MARIA, of 1,014 tons, and immediately resold her to Baines and Thomas Miller Mackay, who were by this time launching out their Black Ball Line of Australian Packets. In 1852 he obtained his Certificate of Competency at Liverpool - No. 6,449. It is interesting to note that the first newspaper printed on board a Black Ball ship was published on the MARIA, whilst under the command of Captain Jackson, who relieved Forbes. This was in August 1852. They issued two papers, the Maria Times, and The Maria Weekly Chronicle, the first being published on Tuesday and the latter on Saturday. The first was written by the intermediate passengers, and the second by the second cabin. This was very likely the first time a newspaper had been published on board any vessel at sea.

On being relieved by Captain Jackson, Forbes was appointed to command the MARCO POLO, in which he held eight shares. Already known as a fast passage maker, the MARCO POLO gave him the chance of making not only his own, but the Black Ball Line's reputation for fast passages. On 4th July, 1852, the MARCO POLO left Liverpool for Melbourne under contract to the Government, and arrived out there in 63 days. She had a crew of 60 and carried 930 emigrants. Her best day's run on the passage out was 364 miles. On 11 October, she sailed from Melbourne and arrived in the Mersey in 76 days, thus making the round voyage in five months and 21 days, the quickest ever made up to that time. At the commencement of the voyage Baines gave a luncheon on board, whilst the ship lay at anchor in the river. Mr. Baines, in replying to the toast: "Success to the Black Ball Line of Emigrant Ships", said: "I rise with great

diffidence to return you my best thanks for having this day honoured myself and co-owners of the MARCO POLO with your company, and I may perhaps be excused in feeling some degree of pride in being one of the principal owners of this, the largest vessel, and carrying the greatest number of passengers, ever chartered by Government or despatched to Australia with passengers. That we shall endeavour to carry out our contracts with the Commissioners with satisfaction to them and the passengers and with credit to ourselves, I think I need not say, in which I am sure we shall be aided to the greatest extent by my friend, Captain Forbes, and all the officers of the ship, and I am much mistaken if the MARCO POLO does not earn for herself such a reputation for speed that, when on her return she takes her place as one of the Black Ball Line, she will receive for herself a bumper"

On three successive days she ran 316, 318, and 306 miles and, on several occasions, made 17 knots for several hours together. She succeeded in coming up to Baines' expectations and took her place, on her second voyage, as one of the Black Ball Clippers.

On her first voyage she had 53 deaths on the passage out. She left Liverpool with 350 married couples, 114 single men, 139 single women, 157 boys under 14 years of age, 136 girls under 14, and 34 children under the age of one. A splendid entertainment was given on board on the eve of her departure for Melbourne. There were 80 guests, which number included several ladies. Mr. James Baines presided, and Mr. Mackay, one of the owners, and Captain Forbes, were vice-chairmen. Mr. Baines proposed the "Town of Liverpool", to which Mr. Harrison, an African merchant, responded. Mr. Samuel Booth gave "Success to the Black Ball Line of emigrant ships". Mr. Baines responded on behalf of himself and the co-owners of the MARCO POLO and spoke of her sailing qualities. Various toasts having been honoured, Captain Forbes in conclusion said he hoped to be in the Mersey again in a little more than six months. He beat that "hope" by nine days.

On 13 March, 1843, Forbes again sailed with 648 passengers on board, arriving in Melbourne on 29 May after a passage of 75 days. He left Melbourne on 10th June with 40 passengers and £280,000 of Gold Dust, arriving in the Mersey on September 13th - a passage of 95 days. His best day's run homeward was 324 miles on 19th June.

On 8 April, on his outward passage, Forbes wrote to Baines from Latitude 1.30 North and Longitude 20.30 West:

"Dear Sir, We have got so far on towards our destination. We have had nothing but calms and adverse winds since we left Liverpool. I was four days in the Channel and from 5 North to 2 North I have had six days, nothing but calm and light airs from the Southward. All our passengers are well and in good spirits. We have boarded several vessels from London, with passengers, but my passengers say they would rather be on board the MARCO POLO than any of them. My passage will be made when I get South of the Line, which I expect will be tomorrow. I will get wind, which I have not had North of the Line. We have had one death, a child seven months old, and one birth, which makes our nukber good. I have got about 40 of the expertest thieves on board from London and, which is worse, two or three of them are in the first cabin. I will only add that I have not had one word of complaint against ship, provisions, master or officers, which is a great thing to say, and they are all going to write home to their friends to come out in your new ship. Last voyage we had 20 deaths before these number of days out, but then we were under Government orders. The jib made by Messrs Dixon & Co. is the finest cut sail and standing one I ever saw.

James Forbes."

After this voyage, Forbes was relieved by his chief officer, Charles Macdonnell, and Baines sent him to Boston, Mass., to superintend the fitting out of his new ship, the LIGHTNING. She was launched on 3 January, 1854, and Forbes saw her fitted out and then took command. Loaded at Constitution Wharf in Boston for Enoch Train's White Diamond Line, she sailed on February 18th and made the run from Boston Light to the Rock Light at the mouth of the Mersey, in 13 days, 20 hours. Forbes, as usual, drove her out to Melbourne in 77 days. Her homeward run was made in 63 ~~hours~~ days 16 hours. Only making one voyage in her, he was transferred to the new Aberdeen-built ship SCHOMBERG, named after Captain Schomberg R.N., the Chief Government Emigration Agent at Liverpool. Sailing from Aberdeen, Forbes brought her into the Mersey on 11th July, 1855, in 10 days, and sailed from Liverpool for Melbourne on 6 October.

During the early part of the voyage they met with light baffling winds, and they did not cross the Line until the 28th day after sailing. After that they had a detention of 10 days from calms. On Christmas day she first made land at Cape Bridgewater about 1 p.m., the wind blowing fresh from the E.S.E. During that night and the following day the wind continued from the same direction, compelling them to frequently tack ship. On Wednesday, then being about four miles off shore, they stood in again for land at six p.m., and about half past 10 the land became faintly visible and the wind fell off to a dead calm. Shortly before 11 p.m. orders were given to "bout ship" but, after partly coming round, the ship refused to answer her helm. They then tried to wear ship, but a current running westward from 3 to 4 knots and hour made their attempts unsuccessful, and the ship was carried on to a sandpit about 35 miles west of Cape Otway. Forbes kept very cool and collected, according to two of his passengers; all sail was taken in and rockets and blue lights let off and guns fired. The Passengers generally behaved well and officers and crew carried out all orders given promptly. Smoke was seen in the distance, and Forbes ordered the second mate, Mr. Laurie, to pick out his best boat'screw and intercept the steamer. The steamer QUEEN was stopped and Captain Doern took all the passengers off. She was a regular trader between Melbourne and Warrnambool.

At the subsequent inquiry into the disaster a few of the passengers sided with Forbes and said that he conducted himself as a thorough seaman and that he was always up night and day when in the neighbourhood of land. They said that the catastrophe arose from anxiety to bring his ship in a reasonable time into port. The "Melbourne Age" of 2nd Jany. said that "the sensation created in the public mind by the first intelligence of the wreck of the SCHOMBERG has not been allayed by the reports of the passengers. These reports are rather calculated to create suspicions wherever they have not already existed and to deepen them wherever they have." On the Friday and Saturday after the stranding, the steamers ADA, LIONESS and KEERA were employed attempting to save a portion of the cargo, but it was found impracticable to salvage anything from her with the exception of passengers' luggage and a few small parcels. Forty of the crew, headed by bosun Hodhe, went ashore, erected a hut and refused to return aboard when ordered to do so. They later went on board at the request of Mr. Matthews, Lloyd's Agent at Melbourne, and remained in her until she was finally abandoned and helped to save the passengers' luggage.

Although Capt. Forbes was acquitted at the inquiry, a number of sarcastic remarks were passed by various shipping papers of the day. One correspondent wrote: "I have always been at a loss to see what the SCHOMBERG had to do so close inshore as to have the baffling winds of the cliffs. You will observe that Capt. Forbes has been acquitted for the loss of that vessel. I apprehend, if the case had taken place with a vessel of the Royal Navy, the result would have been very different. But it is said that the SCHOMBERG was insured, so no doubt it was all right and shipshape." By January 2nd, the SCHOMBERG had gone to pieces and about two-thirds of the passengers' baggage had been salvaged. In a letter to the "Melbourne Age" Melbourne Age", in trying to clear himself of charges made, Capt. Forbes wrote: "Until arrival at 130 East Longitude, we had fine steady breezes from S.W. to N.W. the ship averaging six degrees of Easterly daily and her greatest speed during the distance being $15\frac{1}{2}$ knots. On Wednesday, at 10.30 p.m. the wind fell to a dead calm. Tried to wear ship but a current running westward from 3 to 4 knots, of which we were ignorant and of which no mention is made in any existing chart, rendered the attempt unsuccessful and the ship was carried into a sandspit 35 miles West of Cape Otway, not laid down in any of the charts. A cast of the lead just before shewed 17 fathoms. The vessel immediately after struck in 4 fathoms. The starboard anchor was immediately let go." (This was denied by a passenger in a letter to the Press the next day, in which he stated that 35 minutes elapsed).

The "Age" of 7 January had a very strong sub-leader regarding Capt. Forbes and his officers' nautical manners and morals. At a meeting of the passengers one Mr. Melville moved "That the conduct of the captain, surgeon and officers of the SCHOMBERG was ungentlemanly, discourteous, tyrannical and grossly immoral." During discussion one passenger said that he had seen the surgeon in bed with a certain female. Another said the soup stank, the meat was tainted, and the food was unfit to be eaten. One passenger claimed that they killed the pigs after they had died! The latter was a rather impossible thing to do, but that would not trouble the minds of passengers who were definitely out to injure Forbes and his officers as much as possible. Mr. Johnson, a mariner, and ~~also~~ also one of the passengers, said that if the anchor had been dropped in time, after she missed stays, the vessel might have been saved. The chains had been got up ~~four~~ or five days but they had not been bent on. Had the anchor been ready for dropping and been dropped in time after the ship missed stays she would easily have been saved. Many such slanderous accusations were made about Forbes and his officers. Naturally

one could expect that the emigrant passengers had lost many of their effects and were angry and sore about the dangers they had gone through. But the saloon passengers supported Forbes. At the inquiry the charge was "That the defendant had omitted to have anchor and chains clear." Forbes was acquitted. He booked his passage home in the OCEAN CHIEF, another Black Baller, and she arrived off St. Ives on May 10th, 1856. The BEEMAH, owned by Willis & Co., L'pool, was chartered to take home the passengers and gold destined for the SCHOMBERG's homeward passage. On his arrival home, Forbes wrote a letter to the Liverpool "Daily News", dated May 13:-

"I learned on my arrival here on Saturday night by the OCEAN CHIEF that the report of an indignation meeting held in Melbourne on January 13th last by some of the passengers who went out in the ill-fated SCHOMBERG appeared in your columns. As that report was entirely one-sided and did me a grievous wrong, I am sure you will have no objection to inserting the report of my trial and acquittal in the Supreme Court of Victoria. You will see that the Court and jury did not require to hear my defence, and you will see by the letters I enclose that all the cabin passengers but one expressed their sympathy for me and were pleased to testify to my conduct during the passage. There were two charges against me - one for immoral conduct and one for bad seamanship. There was also a charge against the ship for providing bad provisions. The first charge against myself and the charge against the vessel were dismissed instantly by the Court and in the report of the trial you will see that my character as a sailor remains unaffected. My moral character is still more dear to me than even my professional career and, unfortunately for me, my accusers coupled me in iniquity with the surgeon of the ship. That gentleman, as you will see by the report of the "Fifeshire Advertiser" of Saturday last, has been tried in an Ecclesiastical Court and, as might have been expected from his character and years, has been fully exonerated from the infamous accusation. I enclose a letter from the Rev. Mr. Ross, a Wesleyan minister, who was a passenger in the SCHOMBERG and who, I might say, would not have tolerated the gross immorality so vilely alleged against me. I confess to a large amount of mental affliction at the sad interruption to a voyage that so far I took pride in, but perhaps you will not refuse the consolation afforded me by reminding you that I was the first captain of a vessel that made a ~~very rapid~~ rapid passage from Australia to England, having on that occasion sailed round the world in 4 months and 13 days."

To end this sad episode in Forbes' life it is interesting to note that on January 14 the wreck of the SCHOMBERG with boats and all that had been washed ashore was sold on January 12

at Warrnambool by McDonald & Lascelles for £447. 18. 0.

Remainig ashore for some time, Forbes was appointed by Baines to the command of the HASTINGS in 1857. She had been bought by Baines the year before. In 1857 Forbes appears in the Register as being her sole owner. On a passage from Moreton Bay to Bombay the following year, the HASTINGS had to put back to Sydney in a sinking condition. She was finally lost off the Cape of Good Hope on December 28, 1859. This seems to have finished his career in the Black Ball Line, as we next hear of him in 1862 incharge of the EARL OF DERBY, owned by Stuart & Co. of Glasgow. She had been wrecked on the Irish Coast and Forbes was sent there by her owners to superintend salvage operations. From 1863 to 1866 he commanded the GENERAL WINDHAM, owned by Matthew Isaac Wilson, of Liverpool. In her he still kept up his reputation for speedy passages as, on February 5th, 1866, she arrived in the Mersey from Charleston after a passage of 18 days. Her passage outwards to Charleston was made in 23 days, against other vessels' 70 to 75 days. In 1867 Baines gave Forbes the MARCO POLO again, though she was now getting old and ready for the sale room. He retained her until Baines sold her in 1871, and then retired to 78 Westbourne Street, Liverpool, where he died on June 14th, 1874, at the age of 52 years.

It was stated by the Liverpool papers, after his death, that he was the first mercantile captain to use Maury's great circle sailing. "Aberdeen Forbes", as he was familiarly called, was lauded as the founder of a new school of navigation. This is hardly correct, though, as this system had been treated by Sebastian Cabot as early as 1495. In 1561 Cortez advocated the adoption of great circle sailing, but it was not brought into successful practice until Capt. Godfrey of the CONSTANCE made a voyage from Plymouth to Adelaide in 77 days. After him came M'Kay, of the SOVEREIGN OF THE SEAS, and Boyce of the EAGLE making shorter passages, until Forbes beat the lot by his astonishing runs in the MARCO POLO.

Both Forbes and his famous owner Baines had the natural instinct ~~xxxxxxx~~ for theatrical effects which invariably appealed to the public fancy. The term "publicity agent" had not been heard of in their time, being quite a modern innovation in shipping circles, but they both loved the limelight and were always well forward when there was any chance of being heard or of showing themselves. Numerous stories of Forbes have been related of his hoisting a canvas banner with "The fastest ship in the world" painted on it, and his announcements that he had astonished the world and now intended to astonish God Almighty. But none of these

tales can be found in the Liverpool shipping papers of the day, and surely such a performance would have been noted at the time. "Hell or Melbourne" in 60 days is another fancy story told about him, but these may be put down to the fertile imagination of writers who did not look on Forbes with a kindly eye, and their stories have been copied and handed down. A letter appeared in the "Liverpool Weekly Post" on 5 August 1939 from Professor J. Glyn Davies, formerly Professor of Celtic at the Liverpool University, in which he said he had heard the same story of "Hell or Melbourne" related about Captain Henry Jones of the LIGHTNING. The story was told to him by Edward Ellis, the overlooker for Thomas Williams and Co., Liverpool. Captain Thos. Williams was formerly overlooker for Baines. As Professor Davies remarked in his letter "No sailor in sail would have made so foolish a remark unless he was within a day's sail of Melbourne with a steady wind to count on." The nearest remark that can be found in the papers of the time of Forbes' alleged boastfulness is one he made at the reception given before the MARCO POLO sailed on her first voyage. He then said that he hoped to be back in the Mersey in a little over six months. As we know he arrived back in 5 months and 21 days, a record to be proud of, but hardly one that which suggest to Forbes the idea of astonishing God Almighty as he had astonished the world. There is no doubt that the reputation of the Black Ball Line for fast and safe passages was founded by Forbes, and he was very highly thought of by James Baines, inasmuch that he was grandfather to Baines' second daughter, Armie, born in 1855. In the advertisements of the Black Ball Line the usual additions to Forbes' name, after the ship he commanded, was "had great experience in the trade." Naturally, Forbes would be envied by other men who made slower passages and his attitude to his crew and passengers was disapproved of by many. But the man who could please all his passengers and drive his ship to make fast passages at the same time, would have had to have been an archangel. Forbes was a strict disciplinarian and no doubt trod on the toes of many of his officers a lot harder than they thought necessary. But he kept his ship in firstclass condition and made fast passages which pleased his owners and, in those days, that was the main idea of the Australian trade. Forbes was buried in Smithdown Road Cemetery, Liverpool, and his tombstone of Yorkshire stone near the Nonconformist Chapel, still stands as a monument to:-
"THE LATE COMMANDER OF THE CELEBRATED CLIPPER SHIP MARCO POLO.