



Issue 40

January 2014

News of the BSN company, its ships and staff, its history and *histoires*, of ships and sealing wax, nautical natters, maritime miscellanies and swinging of lanterns

FROM THE EDITOR...

Firstly, we have to thank the many readers who sent in fine representation of the Renault Megane School of Naval seasonal greetings to us all here in the "... calling BI" offices. Architecture. Obviously the disease is catching... ... They were much appreciated and reciprocated. We take In the meantime, please enjoy this smorgasbord of maritime this opportunity of wishing you all the very best for 2014. meanderings. We look forward to keeping you company over We would also like to thank the many contributors who the months to come. enabled us to print a worthwhile flurry of stories during the last year.

For this first issue of the year, we offer you our usual mixed bag which we now notice has a decidedly historical bent to it. We have a variety of people to thank for our reading pleasure, including David Mitchell, Bill Swan, Christopher Neil and Martin Cotsford especially for his description of deck passengers on the *Rajula*. It seems churlish to start off a new year with a moan, but just look at the "graceful" lines of this ship. As our correspondent rightly states, it is a



FROM THE HEADS....

We really regret having to use the front page for the following article. It's only here by virtue of the exigencies of the newsletter production schedule. We have to warn you that it deals with matters scatological and probably not suitable for polite company. We are, however, indebted to the excellent Julian Stockwin [blog site](#) for this very erudite discussion on matters functional.

Early warships featured a beakhead on the bow which was used to ram enemy galleys. Around the 900's, platforms for archers were built on either side of this beakhead. Known as 'heads', these platforms were slotted to allow drainage from breaking waves and became a convenient way to answer the call of nature. Since then lavatories at sea have been called 'the heads' in the British Navy. It was good manners to use the lee (down weather) side so that waste fell clear into the sea and the waves sluiced the area.

In Nelson's day, toilet accommodation for commissioned officers in a ship-of-the-line was in the quarter galleries adjoining the cabins in the stern. Some admirals had a personal portable commode, and there were some early adopters who even had primitive flush loos. Forward there were two small 'round houses', cubicles which gave some privacy, on the foremost bulkhead of the upper deck, which were used by petty officers. From 1801 one of these was reserved for the men in the sick berth. The crew's facilities were very sparse but it must be pointed out that ashore sanitary conditions were often far from what would be acceptable today; human waste was often just dumped on the streets. At least in a ship it was disposed of into the sea! In a ship-of-the-line like HMS Victory, 800 or so men had to make do with just a half dozen or so 'seats of easement'; adjacent seats with holes over a clear drop to the sea. The area was completely exposed to the weather.

Toilet paper was not invented in Britain until the late nineteenth century, but officers used old newspaper or discarded paper. The seamen had to make do with scrap fibrous material such as oakum.

Some Georgian navy ships had 'piss dales' at the side of the ship. These were a bit like modern urinals, with a pipe leading out into the sea and allowed men on watch to ease themselves without leaving post. Most captains were fastidious about sanitary arrangements and punished offenders sternly who relieved themselves in inappropriate places. Then there was the rag on a line. The line was cast over the side and hauled in to do the work of toilet paper, then cast back over the side to be cleaned. Hence if anyone was called a tow-rag it was as an insult. NOT Nice.

Now, of course, modern ships and submarines have lavatories very similar to those on land. You just have to be careful not to leave the sea-water valves open...

To send in your views, notes, photos, brickbats or spare gold bars, please click on any "...callingBI" logo



FROM THE DARKROOM...

Readers will recall this photo of BI's Manora from our last issue, battling through mountainous seas. Of course all was not as it seemed, as our good friend David Mitchell points out: "This is one of Monsieur Grimaud's party pieces. He was a nautical photographer in Marseille operating from about 1910 to the early 1920's taking images of ships either alongside or underway, then creating his stormy weather cards in the dark room."

In my collection I have similar cards of *Golconda*, *Jelunga*, *Mombassa*, *Mongara*, *Mashobra*, *Madura*, *Neuralia*, *Nevasa II*, *Rewa* and *Tanda* and there may be others yet to come to light. All these vessels worked UK to India or East Africa runs and he would sell his cards on board when in port. Several other

postcard publishers and photographers have produced similar cards."

And here's another one, this time it is the *Berbera* that gets the treatment! all done without Photoshop!



FROM THE SOCIAL SCENE...

We were delighted to hear from our friends in Britain's north-west region recently. When they are not zapping around on their motorbikes, they tend to meet up at the delightful Royal Oak pub in Appleby. The last mini-reunion was held on Friday, January 3rd. We hope for pictures in due course.



Those sociable staffers and partners in East Anglia, UK, also got together recently at their favourite local, the Thatchers Arms on the Essex/Suffolk borders, and a goodly crowd included Tom Allard; Barry Fleetwood; David Hammond; Lyndon Johnson; Mike King; Graham Meek; Alan Myers; John Prescott; Wendy Prescott; Bill Rigby; and Mike Wheeler. Between them, they reckoned to have sailed on no less than 41 ships in the BI and related group fleets.

FROM THE GLORY DAYS...

Your Editor is known to be an old softy at heart, but he defies anybody with a ounce of sea air in the blood not to issue a quiet "Aah, those were the days.....", after they have viewed this re-issue of the Oscar-winning documentary of shipbuilding on the Clyde, directed by Hilary Harris, treatment by John Grierson, made in 1960. Scenes in the drawing offices, steel mills and shipyards depict how the ships were constructed, launched and fitted out before starting out on voyages around the world. Sadly, your Editor could not spot any BISN ships, despite the many that came from there. <http://ssa.nls.uk/film/2230>





FROM THE WEATHER MAN...

I don't quite know why, but it seems that we always publish a link to the latest 'storm of the season' at this time of year. It certainly doesn't mean we would like to share the experience in actual fact - we live a placid life here. Anyway, here is this year's link - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ByGSMmenPDM#t=387>. As always, there is a bit of discussion as to the location, with some claiming that it is off Greymouth in New Zealand, but the main body of opinion is that this video shows commercial fishing boats returning from fishing off the coast of Washington and Oregon. They are crossing the Columbia Bar, which is the site the Columbia River meets the Pacific Ocean. Whatever, your editor is just glad that he's not out in it.

FROM THE 'WHAT IS IT?' BOOK...



This certainly had a few heads being scratched when we ran it in our last issue. Perhaps Christopher Neill came close when he suggested that the 'lobster claws' could be used in the erection of off-shore wind farms ...or do you have a better idea?

FROM THE HEART...

A SCOTTISH lifeboat team have been given a prestigious award - for saving a duck. RNLI crew members were returning from an exercise on the River Forth when they rushed to the rescue of the bird, which had been mistakenly hooked by a fisherman.

Lifesavers from RNLI Anstruther in Fife have now been honoured for saving the distressed duck by the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). A local fisherman shouted for help after finding the duck at the end of his fishing rod and spotted the crew's inshore boat coming into the harbour. Alex Purves, second coxswain at RNLI Anstruther, said yesterday: "This award has come totally out of the blue.

"The guys were just returning from an exercise and the fisherman started shouting for them. "They went over to him and he explained about the duck. "It took only a minute or so but the hook was in the duck and the line was wrapped around it.

"There are quite a lot of ducks in the harbour but this one must have been greedier as I think it would have been going for the bait." The crew were awarded the Hero to Animals award after a video of the rescue was uploaded onto YouTube and came to the charity's attention. In it, crew members can be seen slowly pulling up to the duck and gently taking it into the boat. The men get the hook out of the bird's wing and untangle it before placing it back in the water. It takes off immediately, drawing laughter from the crew. It is not the first time the lifesavers have come to the rescue of an animal.

Alex added: "There are times when dogs go into the water and owners go in after them. "A while back we helped rescue of some pilot whales which had beached. "The guys were doing their job and helped out but it is nice to be recognised." Mimi Bekhechi, PETA's associate director, said: "By remaining calm and determined, the crew saved the life of a terrified animal, who may have been within minutes of drowning. "Anstruther and the surrounding communities are fortunate to have public servants willing to put their own safety on the line." Footage can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrrysBah0RU> Aaah!



FROM THE AUCTION ROOMS...

We continue the model theme introduced in our previous issue with this delightful piece offered on eBay of BI's 1924-built *Tairea*. It is a 1:1250 scale metal model made in Germany by Navis, No. NM 904. It is 4.3in (11cm) long, highly detailed and in very good condition. It attracted a fair amount of attention with 7 bids and reaching £30.



FROM THE COMPETITION Dept...

Just possibly the easiest "Where are we now" competition photo that we have set you. Thanks to Bill Swan, who took the photo in 1972, when he was 5/E/O on the *Karanja*. As usual, send in your guesses to "...[callingbinews](#)" and our girl-wot-does, the divine Tracey, will no doubt reward you in her own inimitable way.



FROM THE BOOK OF IMPROBABLE USES...

The global Merchant Marine has developed in myriad ways to reflect technological improvements, changing economic structures and new cargo patterns. You could be forgiven for thinking there is not much further room for change.



But your editor was gobsmacked to read that five of these ships departed from Keelung on Tuesday, 3 December heading offshore to release 196,000 pigeons for a race that involved heavy betting. It is not recorded how many pigeons completed the course, but it could prove an interesting discussion as to whether they took a rhumb line or a great circle course or, of course, just flew along on a wing and a prayer.



FROM THE DECK...

The British India Steam Navigation Company (BISNCo) affectionately known as BI was formed in 1856 by two enterprising Scotsmen William MacKinnon and Robert MacKenzie to service the "Jewel in the Crown" ...India. Initially all passages radiated from Calcutta or Bombay with both passenger and cargo runs servicing the Empire

and its outposts, including ones as far away as the then colonies of Australia and New Zealand. By the 1870's BI had developed the concept of the Deck Passenger ship, a convenient but crude way of transporting large numbers of passengers without providing them with a private berth to sleep in. All these vessels had a small number of First and Second class cabins which were available at a far higher fare and in addition always carried cargo and mail, many gaining the title of Royal Mail Ship (RMS). In fact the original concept of all runs was to deliver the Royal Mail as the ships were run on a regular schedule to coincide with the arrival of mail originating from Passenger and Mail services departing from the UK. Deck passengers were mainly itinerant workers seeking subsistence from overseas countries, most eventually emigrated bringing their wives and children



they had left back home. Sometimes it took up to five years to establish themselves in the foreign country which meant trips back and forth once or twice a year in the interim. BI also commenced the annual Hajj run taking the Muslim pilgrims to Jeddah/Mecca by seconding a vessel from one of the regular services. These ships were unique to BI and their very existence from a historical perspective has slipped into obscurity.

The period of fifteen years from the late 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s was the last for BI Deck Passenger ships, cheap air travel eventually taking over the role that had commenced one hundred years earlier. Departing from Bombay, the two largest ships, *Karanja* and *Kampala*, serviced East Africa including the Seychelles Islands. Also the four smallest Gulf "D"s, *Dara*, *Daressa*, *Dumra* and *Dwarka* serviced the Persian/Arabian Gulf which took in 10 ports turning around in Basrah. From Calcutta, three intermediate size vessels, the *Sirdhana*, *Sangola* and *Santhia* ran to the Far East via Singapore, turning around in Yokohama. East and West Pakistan were connected by the *Aronda*. But the oldest lady of them all was the *Rajula* built in 1926 which ran from Madras to Singapore.

Rajula is the ship I know most intimately having sailed on her for nearly one year as third officer in 1966/67. Because of its longevity and reputation, the name *Rajula* became a household word in the ports it serviced. A fortnightly (14 day) service departing Madras and calling Nagapattinam, Penang, Port Swettenham (now Kelang) and Singapore returning via the same ports back to Madras. With the exception of the War years, 1940-46, she was continually on this run initially carrying 4,300 deck passengers, this being reduced to 1725 when coming back into service in 1946. A comparison with today's passenger/cruise ships for example say, *Dawn Princess* 77,000 gross tons, 2,000 passengers, 837 crew.... versus *Rajula* 8500 gross tons, 1725 Deck Class, 37 First Class, 135 Second Class, 195 crew... the difference is phenomenal!

The single adult Deck Class trip Madras-Singapore cost approximately 150 Rupees which represented 8.33 Pounds sterling in the 1960's. Madras (now Chennai) is India's fourth city and is predominately populated by Tamils although passengers came by rail from all over India to join *Rajula*. Madras has a man-made harbour with breakwaters and a passenger berth. Nagapattinam is a small port 326 kms south of Madras and when *Rajula* called

there it was an anchorage port, both cargo and passengers coming out to the ship in sailing dhows. When these boats were becalmed we used to lower our motor lifeboats /tenders and tow them alongside. The complete scenario was one back in the previous century (1800's) the place was so nostalgic. Communication with the shore authorities was by Morse code light signals despite VHF radio being used in most other ports. If weather conditions were too adverse, cargo and passenger handling had to be suspended and we weighed anchor and departed for the next port. Georgetown, the port of Penang Island, is situated on a narrow strait directly opposite Butterworth on the Malaysian mainland. While most cargo ships worked cargo in the Anchorage Roads we always went alongside to the only wharf

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FROM THE DECK ... (CONT'D)

at that time, Swettenham Pier. Port Swettenham, the colonial name for Kelang, is situated on the Malaysian mainland separated from the Malacca Straits by dense mangrove islands. It is the port for Kuala Lumpur. *Rajula* berthed alongside at a jetty in the Outer Harbour. Singapore, the busiest port in the world, was the turn-round port for *Rajula*. We berthed in what was then called Empire Dock which is now land filled and operates as a container terminal. Singapore has become such a large port due to several factors, namely its strategic geographical location and its reliable, efficient workforce. Ninety-five per cent of cargoes handled are for transshipment.

The living conditions a deck passenger had to endure on a seven day trip would be considered horrific by European standards, but by the lower socio-economic majority of Indians these conditions would in some cases be superior to what they experienced ashore. These passengers were accommodated on two decks, one being the main deck which forward of the bridge and aft of the accommodation was an open deck covered by awnings when underway, and the lower one an enclosed 'tween deck which in fair weather had scuttle ventilation openings which would be closed in foul conditions. Both decks were teak wood sheathed and passengers either slept directly on this or

on a limited number of hinged pull down platforms attached to the bulkheads which gave you the advantage if the decks became flooded, which sometimes occurred in cyclonic conditions. Showers were segregated but just rows of shower heads which were fresh water, not salt. Daily consumption would vary from 150 to 200 tons. Toilets were of the Asian type with continual running salt water. These showers were often very slippery due to oils being used when bathing. There were three galleys, offering different diets mainly to accommodate religious beliefs. Always meat and



vegetarian meals were on offer. No dining areas existed and passengers carried their own eating utensils. The meals were very basic and the meat (mainly goat) came aboard fresh but unfrozen and was curried up immediately as the ship's refrigeration was not sufficient to cater for the deck passengers. Decks were swabbed and hosed down daily and holystoned on a regular basis. Where the four cargo hatches came down through the 'tween deck a one foot coaming enclosed the hatch square and this was covered as usual with hatch boards and a tarpaulin. For safety reasons this square was caged off to prevent passengers falling down the hold when working cargo in port but at sea provided a secure area for "Unaccompanied Ladies" to be locked up in at night. We always jokingly referred to these areas as the "Virgins Cages". With this density of humanity it stood to reason that in hot still conditions there was always a stench coming up from the 'tween decks. This, coupled with the smell of onions, the major cargo on the Madras-Singapore leg, leaves nothing to the imagination re aromas. There are several blogs on the internet from Indians who have travelled Deck Class on her, none are complimentary and at least one has described her as akin to a slave carrying ship! (Editor's note: see, for example, <http://george-pereira.blogspot.co.uk/2011/11/ssrajula.html>)

The crew numbers totalled approximately 200 including officers. What was unusual in respect to other merchant ships was that *Rajula* carried what was referred to as a Supplementary Deck Crew, this crew carrying out duties all associated with the deck passengers. Their duties included assisting embarkation/disembarkation, cleaning and maintenance of passenger decks and general liaison with them. For instance two of the strongest crewmen stood either side of a narrow platform and lifted passengers aboard in and out of the sailing dhows in Nagapattanam. Occupational Health and Safety officers of today would be aghast at this way of loading personnel but to my knowledge no one was dropped into the sea. Others were known as Vishy Wallas and manned the Galleys as cooks. The Security Officer was a petty officer known as the Gunner. He was Indian and together with two assistants ensured that no fighting, arguing, robbery or rape occurred. We did have a lock-up cell aboard for extreme trouble makers. After the loss and sinking of the *Dara* in 1961 due to a terrorism act off Dubai, security was beefed up but no real problems occurred on board *Rajula*. The Gunner always accompanied the First or Chief Officer on rounds when every area of the ship was inspected and logged as secure. One obvious facet of security was fear of fire and one notice which was displayed *ad infinitum* was a picture of a portable kerosene stove with a large red cross which banned the use of these onboard.

There were three Medical Staff on *Rajula*. One three-stripe (Senior) Surgeon, a Nursing Sister and a Dispenser. The Surgeon was always of Indian nationality and usually stayed on board for spells exceeding ten years. The Nursing Sister had to be experienced as one of her main duties was assessing pregnant women passengers as to whether they were likely to give birth on board. This meant physically feeling them as pregnant women in saris are often hard to detect





FROM THE DECK ... (CONT'D)

(cont'd) just by looking. We could refuse passage if they were close to giving birth. This regulation came about because women passengers enjoyed a doctor when giving birth on board but more importantly the offspring could claim British Citizenship due to being born aboard a British ship. Mothers would only have a midwife or no help ashore. Despite these precautions there was an occasional birth, but what was quite regular were deaths aboard. We did not have adequate refrigeration to set up a morgue so all bodies had to be disposed of. Burials at sea involved sewing up the dead body in canvas with a weight, the last stitch being through the nose which was a seaman's double check that the body was stone dead. A short service according to religion was conducted then engines were stopped so that the propellers did not chop up the body which was then "Committed to the Deep". On the Hajj trips deaths on board were more numerous as some pilgrims left the once-in-a-lifetime experience too late in their lives, they were just too old. The Dispenser was a Pharmacist in reality, but without the qualifications. Despite this he was extremely experienced and had a pill that cured every ailment. Passengers and crew had no complaints.



Indian shipping companies introduced competition to BI commencing in the late 1950's by sailing a vessel called the *State of Madras* on the Madras-Singapore run. She carried a similar number of passengers to *Rajula* but despite being Indian and not foreign, never became as popular as the *Rajula*. Those who sailed on both always said that *Rajula* was the best, which considering everything did not say much for the *State of Madras* which we nicknamed "State of Chaos". It was always breaking down and messing up the schedule which was supposed to alternate with us.

Rajula finished service for BI in 1974 but this could have all finished with heavy loss of life in November 1966 when she was only minutes from grounding off Mahabalipur in one of the worst cyclones ever experienced in that area. The death toll that day was 22 Chinese seamen but could have been expanded considerably to over two thousand if *Rajula* had grounded. The description of what happened that day is the subject of a separate story written by myself who sailed as the most junior officer on board, the Third Officer.

During the 1960's young Europeans commenced to travel the world on the cheap by backpacking. Many opted to travel Deck Class on our various services and caused significant trouble and problems for the company by complaining about the food and conditions they encountered. They used to sneak up into Second Class areas where they were kicked back down again when discovered. The company through its agents actively discouraged booking Europeans to travel Deck Class as it became obvious that they could not live in this environment that was so different and foreign to what they had been used to. So if they travelled with us at all they had to take a cabin in Second Class and even this was roughing it as there was nothing luxurious about Second Class either! Second Class would be equivalent to what was known as Steerage Class on the Trans-Atlantic passenger ships, the only difference being that the cabins were above the waterline.

Mackinnon Mackenzie, the company's founders, were the shipping agents for BI in Calcutta and Bombay in fact Calcutta were Managing agents until 1960 when this transferred to One Aldgate London. Madras had a very reputable company as shipping agents for BI known as Binny and Co. This company had its origins in 1797 and eventually became the owner of large cotton mills and was always connected to BI in Madras and Nagapattanam. Singapore and Penang had equally famous shipping agents, Islay Kerr & Co, whose founder was another Scot connected with Mackinnon Mackenzie and Sir William Currie, chairman of P&O and BI. Information regarding *Rajula* would certainly be prominent in the archives of these two prestigious companies.

This article will be submitted to The Indian Heritage Museum in Singapore as my recollections of how many forebears of those Indians currently living in Singapore travelled to their present country or residence via *Rajula*, a ship which provided service and transport for 48 years, nearly half a century! This could be a record as most ships only last for up to fifteen years on average.

(Thanks to Martin Cotsford for this article)





FROM THE PAST...

We have now have two interesting commentaries on the sinking of BISN's *Vingorla* in February 1880. The first is an eyewitness account by a young passenger, one Gladys Mayne, who was reportedly 3 years old at the time. "It was the shouting that woke me, that and the thud of feet on the deck above our heads. It had been a wonderful February day. I had stood on the ss *Vingorla* with my mother among all the Indian deck passengers and crew, waving goodbye to the Bombay dock workers as we set sail on a calm sea with a warm light breeze. I watched the sails billow and the ship heel over slightly and felt the reassuring vibration of the engines beneath my feet."

"All the previous day we had been on the train from Neemuch, our home in Central India, 400 miles away. We slept that night at the Army base at Colaba and then went down to Bombay to catch the British India steamship *Vingorla* (578 tons) for Karachi where my father was waiting for us. His regiment, the 3rd Bombay Light Cavalry, were fighting in Afghanistan and we were to join him for his local leave. Despite the excitement of my first sea voyage, I was asleep almost as soon as we went below to the cabin which I shared with my baby brother Charles, just seven months old."

"It was dark when I was woken by the commotion on deck and soon my mother was there in her night dress. She looked worried, spoke to some other passengers and then we were all told to come up on deck

at once. There wasn't even time to get dressed and we all were in our night clothes just wrapped in blankets throughout the momentous events that followed."

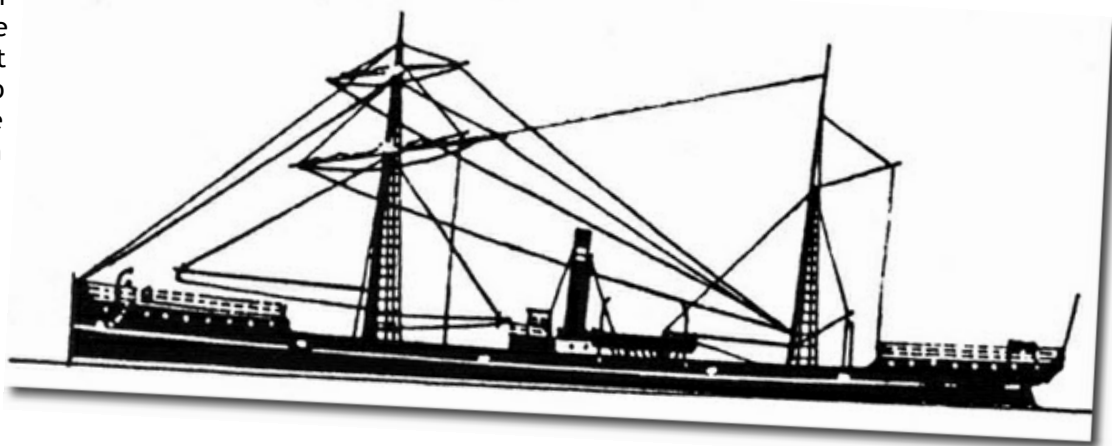
"The deck was damp and cold under my feet and bathed in eerie moonlight casting long shadows as the men worked. Some were raising the mail boat into its davits, others with lights were around the main cargo hold and I saw that the deck passengers had all been moved to the stern of the ship. We stood around in a group, the saloon passengers among whom I recognised Mrs Stuart, the Master's wife with her small baby, Major Greig, Lieut. Colborne, Mr. Cloete and the second officer Mr. Battersby Wood who was in charge of launching the mail boat. *Vingorla's* sails had been taken in and we seemed to be at anchor with engines stopped. The sea remained calm and nothing appeared to be amiss with our ship but I saw men dumping what looked like cargo over the side. Eventually I was lifted into the mail boat, in which there were about twenty people including my mother with Charles, and we were lowered jerkily down to the sea."

"It was only much later that I discovered what had happened. The ship had left Bombay at noon; by 9.30 pm she was about 70 miles out with her sails set and doing 8 knots in light winds on a smooth sea when she began to steer abnormally with the head down. It was found that water was leaking into the main cargo hold and from there the disaster developed. Efforts were made to save the ship by dumping cargo overboard but the water gained steadily over the next four hours and at 1.30 in the morning *Vingorla* sank by the head in 20 fathoms. Our mail boat had been launched soon after 10.30pm and two of the three remaining life boats got off shortly before the ship went down. The third was rushed by deck passengers, for whom no boats were provided, and broke in two in the davits, dumping them all in the sea."

"Our small boat continued circling the ship at a distance, but we could see little of what was happening on *Vingorla* until the awful moment when she sank with a dreadful hiss and we heard the cries of people in the water. The three life boats continued searching for survivors until about 4am at which time, overloaded with a total of 95 survivors aboard, the boats set course for Bombay. All that day, Sunday 29th February 1880 (leap day), we sat crowded into that mail boat with the sun beating down on us. Fortunately the sea remained calm and at 3pm when we were apparently still 45 miles from Bombay we were spotted by the ss *Malda* (1945 tons) and our ordeal was over. We had been in that little open boat for more than 16 hours. *Malda* then went directly to the scene of the sinking but after a two hour search found no more survivors. That eventful leap day ended early the following morning at 3.50 when we were landed back at Bombay and my mother was able to reassure my father at Karachi that we were well. He had known only that the *Vingorla* had sunk with heavy loss of life!"

"We learnt subsequently that four more survivors clinging to wreckage had been picked up by other ships late on the 29th, including Conroy, the Chief Officer. This meant that 75 people, nearly half the ship's complement, had drowned. Among those lost were the Master, Captain J W Stuart, the ship's clerk, Mr. Mowbray, and all three engineer officers, with most of the rest being deck passengers. The Court of Inquiry failed to discover the cause of the leak in *Vingorla's* hull. She had a good reputation as a well maintained and seaworthy vessel, was not overloaded and no impact or shock had been felt, either on leaving Bombay or afterwards.

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FROM THE PAST... (cont'd)

They found that the loss of life was due to the lack of provision of boats for deck passengers, although under Bombay legislation at that time, this was not a requirement and the ship had her full complement of life boats".

There was also local New Zealand interest in this disaster, as this extract from the Grey River Argus of Greymouth, New Zealand, Volume XXIII, Issue 3654, 12th May 1880 shows, some ten weeks after the event. We assume that a mis-print resulted in a change of the Chief Engineer's gender.

The wreck of the Bombay India Steam Navigation Company's s.s. Vingorla, briefly reported in our cable news appears to have been one of the most mysterious on record, and certainly not one of the least exciting. As already reported, it resulted in the drowning of the commander (Captain Stuart, Mrs J. Byrne, chief engineer; Mr T. B. Wilden, second engineer; Mr C. Knight, third engineer; Mr G. Mowbray, clerk; and 59 native passengers. Among those on board, but who fortunately escaped, was Mr H. Cloete, civil engineer, husband of a lady living at the Hutt, and an interesting narrative of the occurrence furnished by that gentleman appears in the Times of India. From the account in this journal, it appears that the vessel was only built in 1875, and had been overhauled only two months previous to the wreck. She started from Bombay for Kurrachee on Saturday, Feb. 29, with eight first class, eight second class, and 95 deck passengers on board. The weather was exceptionally fine, and all went well until about half-past 10 o'clock, when the officer on watch noticed that she did not obey her rudder. It was then discovered, on opening the main hatch, that the water was within five feet of the main deck. There had been no shock and no collision and how this happened will probably always remain a mystery, the nautical court of inquiry being unable to throw any light on the matter. Boats were lowered as soon as possible. The ladies and some of the male passengers, including Mr Cloete, were placed in the mail boat. Although the captain's wife was among the lady passengers, with her child, the brave officer never left his post, but bidding her a hurried farewell placed her in charge of a junior officer. One of the boats was "rushed" by a number of native passengers, as it hung in the davits and broke in two, all the passengers, except one dropping into the sea. A number of other natives, helpless with terror, lay on the deck and could not be persuaded to move. Captain Stuart ordered a quantity of loose timber to be thrown overboard so as to give them a chance of safety, and then seeing the peril in which the ship was placed, and determined not to quit her so long as there was a soul on board, shouted to the boat in

which his wife and child were to stand off the others being already free of the vessel. They last saw him on the gangway burning a blue light. "The last thing I saw says Mrs Stuart in her affecting narrative of the occurrence, "was his hand holding out the rocket. I only saw the hand, and could not see the face. I don't think the vessel was one minute going down. The bow dipped, with her screw out of water; there was a loud hissing sound, and it seemed that in less than a minute she was gone, and I saw nothing more." Other spectators say that in addition there was a "low moan" from the native passengers as the vessel plunged headfirst into the water. As the Times of India justly observes, the picture of the heroic captain standing at his post to the last is as grand as anything in the history of the merchant navy. With the captain, as we have said, perished the clerk and the three engineers, who remained working below in the engineroom till the last. Four only of those on the vessel when she went down were saved, though of these the men in the boats knew nothing. The chief officer and two Native passengers, after drifting about on spars till twilight on Sunday, were rescued by a passing steamer, and returned to their sorrowing friends like men from the grave. A third Native actually floated till Sunday midnight, and startled another passing steamer with his cries through the gloom, and was rescued. The passengers in the boats suffered great hardships from the broiling sun, but were rescued after about 16 hours at sea by a passing steamer. Altogether, the narrative which the survivors had to tell was one of the most thrilling in the annals of shipwrecks, and there is not an Englishman in any part of the world but will feel his pulse stirred as he reads of the heroism of Captain Stuart, of the steamer Vingorla.