



The Manchester Cruising Association

Sailing Through Time: 17 January 2008

Ruth, Bernie and Sue McDonald

The Royal Charter

Fortune and the Royal Charter never really shared the same berth. Building of the three-master at Sandy Croft Iron Works on the Dee was interrupted when the company went bankrupt. Gibbs Bright bought what there was of the hull, made it double-skinned, lengthened it by 60 feet to 330 feet and installed an auxiliary engine with a retractable propeller. She was built for the Australia run and was expected to do most of it under sail; being able to winch the prop up into a casing would reduce drag (it didn't reduce it enough to make it worth the effort). She was launched into the Dee in July 1856 but grounded and sat blocking the channel for a month. While under tow she ran onto rocks and needed dry dock repairs.

After that Fortune did move in for a while. The ship made four quick voyages from Liverpool to Melbourne and back with returns (where speed was of the essence because gold miners couldn't wait to get home and start putting their nuggets about) in 62, 63, 59½ and 65 days. This was good; no ship had done it quicker. Admittedly inspections found some cracks in the hull where the extension had been added to the bow but commercially she did well; 600 satisfied passengers travelled home in some style to explain to the wife where all the gold had gone and give her the fluffy kangaroo.

Fortune packed her bags, collected up her CDs, phoned for a taxi and left for good in October 1859. Returning from Melbourne the ship was sheltering from a violent gale when her anchor chains broke and she was driven stern-first onto the rocks at Moelfre, Anglesey. Although only 30 feet from the shore, all but 41 of the 452 passengers died. As Bernie explained, people jumped into the water as the wreck surged towards the shore, aiming to swim, but were sucked under and drowned (or worse). Only 200 bodies were washed ashore. In spite of there being no substantiation for the rumours that locals pilfered the corpses and even whipped out the odd gold filling, the folks thereabouts still look a bit sheepish if you raise the matter – allegedly.

By now readers of the literary inclination will be switching on their word processors and starting work on the screenplay: incompetent bosses, irresponsible builders, storm, shipwreck, gold, horrible death, predatory and savage wreckers and a passionate love affair between an exquisite mine-owner's daughter and a wan but lusty cabin boy (well it needs juicing up a bit). And, of course, it had mysteries: where did all the bodies go and what happened to the gold? The bodies, as we've seen, were trapped under the hull; all that's left of them is the average of eight coins they had in their pockets and their shoes. And the gold? Well Bernie thinks that the salvors recovered all the passengers' gold they could but not what was being carried as cargo. There were plenty of artefacts found though: cutlery, rings, antique pistols and ivory dentures all reminded us that this was not just a fascinating story about a good dive site but a place of enormous human tragedy.

Of course all this life wasn't just wasted. As a result of the Royal Charter wrecking, standards for testing of chains were imposed and the Met Office was set up. So, without it, no Michael Fish...

The Land Time Forgot

Before 543AD there was a great tongue of land sticking out from Bootle, blocking off the Mersey and making it just a tributary of the Dee. The Wirral was much the same (has it ever really changed?) except that New Brighton was under water. We know this, according to Ruth, from written records and the existence of a drowned forest. In 543AD something dramatic happened and the tongue of land slipped into the sea. We know this because of the non-existence of a Roman fort (there must have been one so it must have been swallowed up by the sea) and records of high tides swamping monks in nearby abbeys. Ruth could draw together several arguments to support this Atlantis theory of the Mersey's past and she gave us some real insights into the ways of Roman coastal trade.

So drop the Royal Charter screenplay! Try this one. Blonde and beautiful but effete, hessian-track-suited scousers flee for their lives hand-in-hand as wall of water inundates ...

So thanks to Ruth, Bernie and Sue for an entertaining evening. And they hardly mentioned that they had circumnavigated the world three times in a boat Bernie had welded up out of an old water tank from the Liverpool Garden Festival. That's next time.