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THE LOSS OF THE STEAMER ORION - JUNE 18th 1850

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The paddle steamer **Orion** of the Glasgow & Liverpool Steamship Co. (owners G & J Burns, Glasgow) was primarily a passenger vessel running between Glasgow and Liverpool, and had been engaged on the route since her delivery in 1847. Officially she had accommodation for 115 cabin-class passengers, divided between fore and main cabins, and some 50 steerage passengers, who travelled on deck during her summer sailings.

On this voyage she had a crew of thirty-eight comprised of: Master, first mate and second mate, eight seamen and three apprentice boys, plus two seamen who also acted as pilots, a First and 2nd engineer, eight firemen and four coal trimmers, a principal and three other stewards, a stewardess, a cook and a cook"s boy. She also carried a carpenter.

As well as passengers, **Orion** had hold capacity for about twenty tons of general cargo, which was usually separated into light and heavy goods. Heavy goods were carried in the after hold that ran back to the stern underneath the saloon and the steering position aft. On this passage she was carrying some eight tons of sheet iron, iron rods, and bags of iron nails, as well as machinery, which had been stowed by men called lumpers. Supervision of cargo loading was the province of the shipping clerk at Liverpool, Daniel McKellar, and outside the responsibility of the ship"s officers. The nature of her cargo and its location was later to be claimed as having a direct bearing on the ship"s subsequent fate.

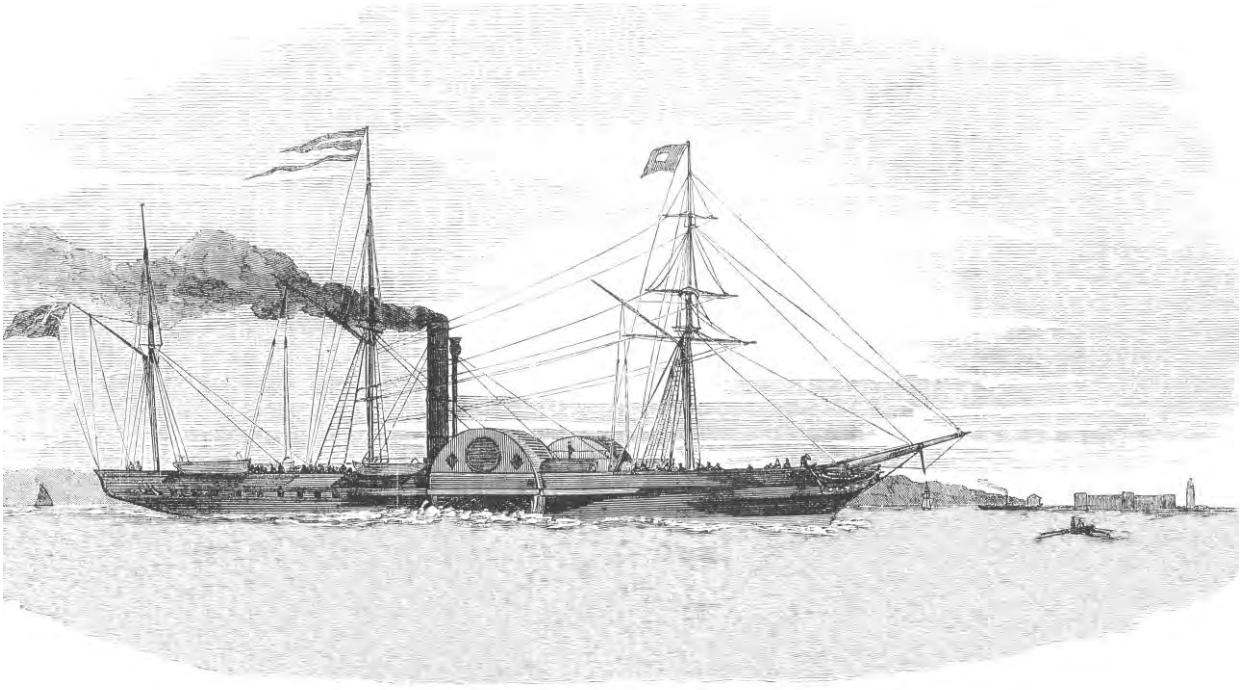
Orion was built by Messrs. Caird & Co. at Crawfordsdyke, Greenock (Yard No.14), and launched on 19th December 1846. She was an iron-built vessel of 899 tons burthen, with a length of 200ft on the keel and 210ft 6in. overall. Her breadth on the beam was 27ft 1in., depth of hold 18ft 6in., and her draught 11ft 6in. Propulsion was provided by a two-cylinder, side-lever engine of 460 nhp (1120 ihp), supplied by the builder, giving her a reported speed of up to fourteen knots. There is no evidence of her having utilised sails.

Orion"s master at the time of her loss, Captain Thomas Henderson, was a man of considerable experience, although not in steamers. He had been appointed by the company"s Marine Superintendent, Captain Walter Douglas, from a number of applicants, and took command of her in August 1849 in succession to Captain Hugh Main who had commanded her from when she commenced service. Captain Henderson had previously been master of the East Indiaman **Glenswilly** (Honeyman of Glasgow) since Spring 1844. The first mate was Mr. George Langlands and the second mate was Mr. John Williams, of Edmond Street, Liverpool, who had served on the **Orion** for eleven months, and who had served as a second mate for two and a half years in all. In addition he had several years experience in other capacities on this particular stretch of coast.

Although the number of passengers on board was said to have been 160 it is possible that there may have been somewhat more. On this voyage the cabin-class berths were overbooked, and a number of last-minute un-booked passengers were seen to board the vessel immediately prior to her sailing, but this informal passage taking was not uncommon at that time; indeed, the Rev. George Thomson and his wife were due to travel to Glasgow by rail that day, but finding that the ***Orion*** (then considered one of the finest vessels afloat) was scheduled to sail that afternoon, and the weather set fair, decided to sail with her. Second steward John McHaffie later said that there were 115 passengers [cabin-class] on board, but that the number of steerage passengers could vary between forty and sixty, and he did not know how many were on board that night but thought there were perhaps forty, although he had not made a list.

The fateful voyage of **Orion** occurred on the run from Liverpool, from where she sailed at 4.20 p.m. on Monday, 17th June 1850. She had been due to leave the Clarence dock at 3 p.m. but her sailing was delayed, due to precedence being given to three incoming ships entering the dock. On clearing the dock she sailed out into a very tranquil Mersey under clear skies - conditions that were to remain so for the duration of the voyage. Her passage to Glasgow under reasonable conditions usually took about fifteen hours, and she made three round trips per fortnight.

Orion passed Point of Ayre, I.O.M., at 10.25 p.m. that night, and at 11p.m., before the Galloway coast was sighted, the captain told the helmsman to, *„go nothing to the north*", which was taken as a hint to keep to the westward. At ten minutes before midnight **Orion** was abreast the point of the Mull of Galloway which was clearly visible, at about a mile distant, although the light on the head was not as distinct as the land. This was due to the altitude of the light, which was considered to be set too high at that point. [The light, set at an altitude of 325ft, presents the same problem to modern-day navigators when mist or low-lying cloud prevails, and as a result is often not visible, let alone brilliant, but when clear it is visible at some twenty-eight miles distant.]



Orion leaving the Mersey bound for Glasgow

The seaman who had the helm from 10 p.m. to ten minutes past midnight, David Walker of Glasgow, thought the vessel too close to the land - unusually so. Although the depth of water there is adequate his concern may have been due to knowing the danger presented by the very strong tidal race off the point; present-day advice is to give the point a three-mile offing. This concern was shared by a seaman, Donald McKinnon, on his way back to Glasgow as a steerage passenger having travelled down from Fort William on the sailing vessel **Commodore** as pilot as far as Mull of Kintyre, then as seaman from there to Liverpool. He was on the foredeck of the **Orion** when off the Mull of Galloway and said that she was „*almost shaving the rocks*".

Seaman John Kelly took over the helm from Walker at 12.10 a.m. as the **Orion** was just to the south of Dunman Head, some four miles NW of the Mull of Galloway. He also thought the ship to be too close to the land, as close as 200 yards, and he remarked that he had not seen her so close as that on previous voyages. She was then steering NNW, a course that was running her even closer to the shore. But abreast Dunman Head he was given a course of NW½W to steer, which took the ship the land and past the twin headland of Crammag Head (then, and still locally, variously called Cromart or Cromack Point) about a mile farther on, which she was off abreast of at about 12.15 a.m. and some 200 yards off. McKinnon, now standing in the bow, thought the vessel in danger of striking the outlying rocks off the point

From Crammag Head the course had been progressively brought round to N½W by the time the ship was nearing Dunskey Point, some 12 nautical miles farther on, and a half-mile south of Portpatrick. In charge of the deck on the midnight to 4 a.m. watch was the second mate, John Williams. This watch was known as the Captain"s watch, but the Company did not delegate any watch to its masters. Captain Henderson had, however, been about the deck for almost the whole of the 8 p.m. to midnight watch. On

this watch there were two look-outs on the paddle bridge forward of the paddle-wheel boxes: James Stewart on the port side (larboard as then called), and Robert Wilson on the starboard side, which was looking to landward. No look-out had been placed in the bow, although the paddle bridge look-outs reportedly had an unimpeded view over the bow.

Fig. 1: Mull of Galloway to Ardwell Point

Robert Wilson, the starboard look-out, was in fact the Clyde pilot (and had been one for eleven years) and had travelled with the **Orion** each trip for the previous two and a half years. When clear of the Clyde he acted as a seaman on board the ship until she returned to the approaches to the Clyde, when he took over her pilotage. In this capacity he was paid thirty shillings per week, the same as the second mate. Likewise, seaman George Williams was the Mersey pilot and employed on the same basis as Robert Wilson. When the second mate took over the watch at midnight the ship had passed the western end of the Mull at about a mile distant. Thereafter he had changed the course briefly to NNW½W (another half point off the shore), but soon afterwards

told the helmsman to go half a point more inshore i.e back to NNW. Then he changed it again saying, „*Keep her north by west*, *Jack*" - still more inshore. But when Kelly took the wheel, as she was approaching Dunman Head, he was given the course NNW as above. Captain Henderson came back on deck just after 12.10 a.m. and went aft and looked at the compass. He remained there for five minutes, but did not give any alteration of course to the helmsman. He said to the second mate, „*John, if it becomes any way thick or hazy, mind to give me a call*", and then went forward and below and Kelly did not see the captain on deck again. After the captain had gone forward the second mate told the helmsman to go N¼W. By then **Orion** must have rounded Laggantalluch Head and would have had plenty of sea-room until falling in with the land again, about four miles farther on, at Mull of Logan.

However, the captain had come on deck again briefly about 1a.m. and told the look-out men on the paddle bridge to keep a bright look out - presumably for other vessels they believed as the land could be clearly seen (the land about Ardwell Point) - before going below again. The **Orion** was now about halfway between Dunman Head and Portpatrick. As the vessel approached Dunskey Point (about half-a-mile south of Portpatrick), steering N½W, Wilson called out, „*A light on the starboard bow*". It was Portpatrick light. This old light[1] was situated 429ft to landward of the end of the south pier, and though sited thirty-eight feet above high water mark it was a poor that could only be seen at about four miles distant, but it was adequate in most circumstances for a vessel approaching Portpatrick to enable it to steer off the shore in good time as there is deep water up to the pier.

Wilson, thinking that they were perhaps only about 200 yards off the point, left his lookout station and went aft to where the second mate was standing by the helmsman and said to him, „*John, do you see no land there*?" The mate simply replied, „*Yes*", and Wilson returned to his station. However, she must then have been about 250 yards off the point for the light to have been seen sighted round the headland immediately to the south of Portpatrick, which distance is also consistent with her course and where she struck. Although an immediate alteration of course could have averted the disaster no action was taken to change it from N½W. Soon afterwards a sudden and startled call was heard from amidships, „*Hard-a-starboard*". Then, „*Land right ahead*". The calls were from Duncan Campbell, a seaman, who saw land a little on the port bow and perhaps a quarter-mile off. At this the second mate ran toward the skylight in the vicinity of the captain"s cabin (situated under the starboard lookout"s station), but then ran back to help the helmsman, Kelly, put the wheel hard-a-starboard.

As this occurred Wilson shouted to the port-side lookout, James Stewart, that „*she was never as near the land since she was a boat*". Stewart shouted him to go aft again and tell them to keep her off. Wilson ran to the helm where he found the second mate and the helmsman frantically trying to starboard the helm. He threw his weight to the wheel to assist them in putting the helm hard-a-starboard [i.e. to starboard the helm, which would have the effect of turning the ship"s head to port, and away from the land], but just as she began to answer the helm she struck on her starboard bow bilge.

It was at about 1.30 a.m. on the Tuesday morning that **Orion** was passing the south pier of Portpatrick harbour at about 80 yards off, and making about thirteen knots.

Momentarily a thin mist came down and the second mate, according to his own recollection, was about to call the master when **Orion** struck. She had run on to the top of Outer Ward Rock (always submerged, even at low water), part of the underwater extremity of Ward Head some 380 yards to the north of the then end of the south pier of Portpatrick harbour entrance, and 150 yards from the shore cliff. This was at 1.35 a.m., and when she struck the hull beneath the engine compartment was ripped open. She sank in five fathoms within fifteen minutes despite being fitted with four watertight bulkheads. The land that had been sighted on the port bow as the ship neared the south pier was in fact the Barnoch Rock - 270 yards NNW from the Outer Ward Rock.

Prior to the striking, the imminent disaster was first observed from the shore by David Adair, a fisherman whose house was on the seafront facing the harbour entrance. He was in an upstairs room baiting his lines for an early start that morning. He heard the steamer‟s approach and looking out was surprised at how near the end of the pier she was. He immediately ran down to raise the alarm knowing that she must strike on the Outer Ward Rock, but once in the street he saw that she had done so. Adair got into his boat, which was lying ready for the day‟s fishing, and was joined by John Oke, a neighbour, who had been sitting up reading when he also saw the ***Orion***‟s proximity to the end of the pier and rushed out. They rowed out to pick up whoever might be in the water. It took them five minutes to reach her, by which time she was well down by the head, and rescued fifteen of the swimmers.

Another onshore witness was David Armstrong, a fisherman who also lived oppositethe harbour entrance, and was walking about his room unwell. Startled by **Orion's** closeness and had his daughter run immediately to rouse Commander Edward Hawes R.N., the General Superintendent of Portpatrick harbour, three doors away, whilst he roused Alexander Hannay, the foreman of the harbour works. Between them they had eight more boats manned and turned out within ten minutes, but by the time they put off **Orion** had sunk.

When she struck the majority of the passengers, as well as the crew not on watch, were asleep below and not immediately aware of the disaster; many were not even awoken by the initial impact which was, reportedly, heard by some simply as a loud scraping sound. Some of the steerage passengers carried on the deck were, however, still wandering about, and probably helped to rouse those below.

According to Wilson‟s account, Captain Henderson appeared at his side soon after she struck and asked him where they were, and on being told immediately gave the order to clear away the boats. The other lookout, Stewart, also stated that the order to clear the boats was given immediately, but this version of Captain Henderson‟s response was to be found at variance with that recollected by a number of responsible and reputable passengers. Immediately after she struck, many on board were not unduly troubled, thinking that she had simply grounded and they would only have to wait for the tide to go out (in fact, low water had been 1¾ hours before, at 11.53 p.m.) then walk ashore. It was soon realised that was not the case and pandemonium broke out, which increased as the vessel began to dip by the head and list badly to starboard quite rapidly. Their fears were not quieted by the actions of Captain Henderson as reported by a number of passengers.

He had been asleep below rather than on deck during most of the passage along the Galloway peninsula (which, on its west side, is for almost its whole length bounded by very precipitous cliffs and jagged rocky outcrops) after Ardwell Point, and when roused came on deck in his „shirt and drawers" by the account of the Rev. George Thomson. Climbing onto a seat he shouted to the passengers, „*Keep to the ship - you are all safe if you keep to the ship*". To a man who said to him that the ship was quite near the shore, Captain Henderson said, „*We are too near the shore, that has been the cause of it*". He told the ladies to compose themselves, whereupon one of them pointed out to him that the ship was already listing badly and that the main cabin deck was awash. Shortly afterwards he was observed near the engine-house shouting that there was no danger and to keep calm, apparently under the impression that the ship would settle on the rock she had struck and remain above water. However, this was not to be as the vessel had rebounded after the impact and slid off the rock, probably helped by the southward flow of the tide (which commences its southward flow two hours before low water), and soon heeled over so badly that it was not possible to stand upright without a handhold.

A steerage passenger, Mr Adam Forbes of Stirling, later stated that he also saw the captain in his shirt and drawers standing near the engine-house shouting out that there was no danger, and to keep calm. He also said that a large number of passengers at first agreed with the captain"s initial opposition to the launch of the lifeboats - the captain calling on all to remain with the ship saying that there was no danger and threatening to, *„cut the hands off the first man that should touch the boats*". A cabin passenger, Peter Townsend, an accountant of Sherwood St., Liverpool, also attested to the master"s state of undress and his appearance of having just got out of bed, and to his reluctance to have the boats launched. Mr. Townsend was ordered out of a boat that he was helping to clear by the master. The previously mentioned Donald McKinnon also attested (two weeks later at Fort William) that he heard the master calling on everyone to stand by the ship and that he had delayed ordering the boats to be lowered.

Orion carried two full-sized lifeboats (approximately 25ft 6in x 7ft 6in x 2ft 11in deep), one behind each paddle-wheel box, in davits swung inboard. These were each capable, according to their builder, John MacDonald of Greenock, of carrying between seventy and eighty people. She also carried two smaller boats, one aft of each lifeboat, referred to as quarter boats (approximately 22ft x 6ft x 2ft 11in. deep), which could each carry up to thirty people. There was also a small boat hung over the stern, referred to as the captain"s pinnace. The latter was, reportedly, the first boat to be released. As it was being lowered, filled with passengers, the gearing on one fall jammed whilst the other end continued its descent to the water. Its occupants were thrown into the water and were swept away by the southward-flowing current.

However, as attempts were being made to lower the two boats on the starboard side in the early-morning light amid scenes of panic, grave problems were soon apparent. The first was that the boats were sheeted over with tied-down stout canvas covers to keep out the water. Initially, none of the crew went to the boats to remove the covers (possibly awaiting the master"s order to do so), nor were knives to hand to effect their removal. Passengers themselves were the first to try to release the covers, which

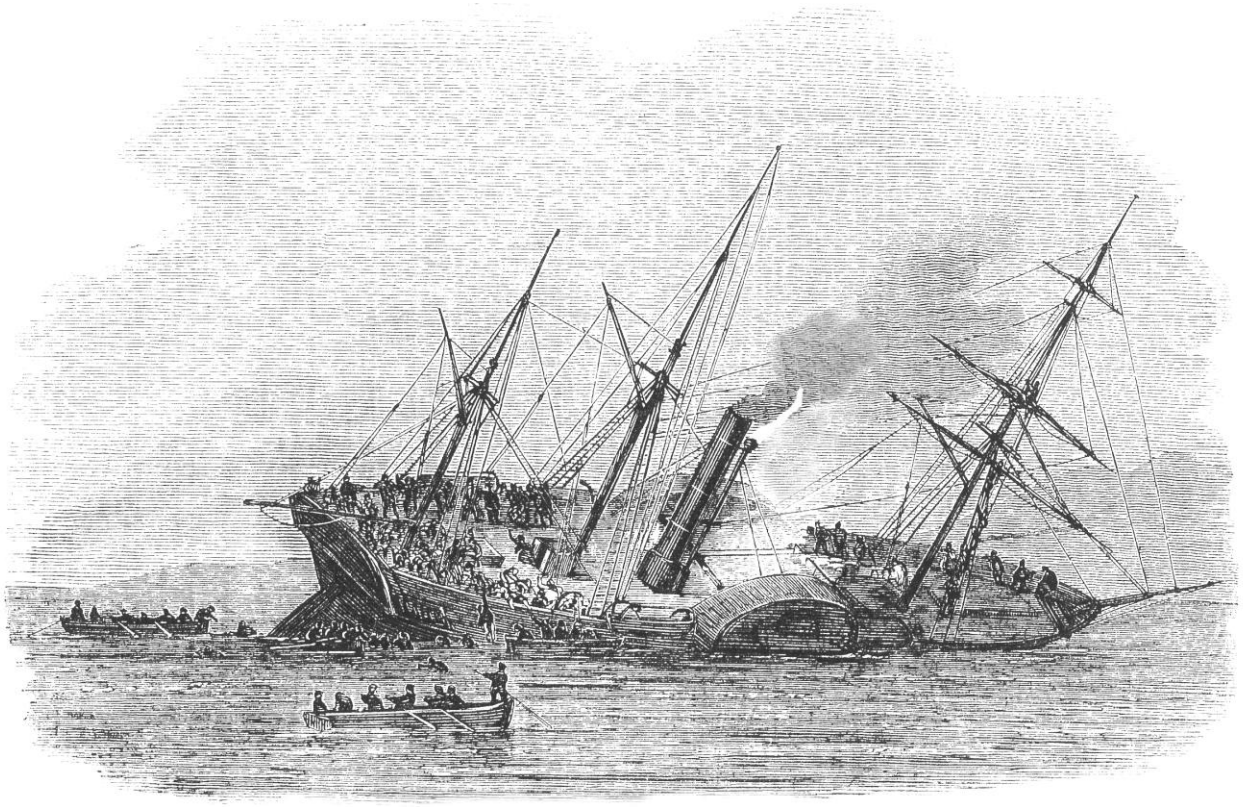
added to the panic that had now taken hold.

When the covers were removed another deficiency became apparent: there were no plugs to be found for the drainage holes in the bottom of the boats, which were normally left open to allow any ingress of water to drain away; these should have been on lanyards attached to the boat in the vicinity of the drainage holes - they were, unbeknown to those trying to escape, stored in the stern lockers of the boats. Also, there were neither rowlocks nor thowls attached on the gunwales for the oars, most of which were missing - apparently as a result of being taken out at Liverpool for cleaning and then left lying in the ship‟s gangway. It also emerged that each boat had a ring-bolt attached to the middle of its keel, which was fastened to the deck as an extra securing device, even though the keels rested in inch-deep notches in each of three chocks secured to the deck. The ring-bolt device had been Captain Henderson‟s idea and, supposedly, it would be wrenched out if the boat was hauled out of its chocks in an emergency. Kelly, who had sailed in the ship for twenty months, had only seen the boats swung out twice in that time - for cleaning.

Those trying to get the two starboard-side boats away now found that the davits and tackle were seized up, and also that the keel of the forward of the boats was wedged in the chock grooves. This boat was already filled with passengers who were ordered out while the carpenter, Andrew Walker, tried to free the keel from the grooves. When this failed he resorted to smashing the chocks with an axe, but doing so probably cost him his life: he injured himself so badly that he was unable to save himself when the time came, but the boat was now able to be swung out without passengers in it. As the boat‟s after end reached the water its bow caught on the platform at the after end of the paddle box, which by then was almost at water level, and people scrambled into it. However, as the ship‟s head dipped and heeled over to starboard the boat (already filling through the plug-hole) was completely swamped by the turbulence caused, and its occupants swept away. The quarter boat on the starboard side was then lowered, but so hurriedly that it too was completely swamped leaving all its occupants floundering in the water.

On the port side similar scenes of pandemonium and confusion prevailed with passengers crowding into the boats before they were freed and being ordered out. The quarter boat‟s stern fell into the water with its bow still suspended as a result of the after davit breaking off but was eventually freed and, with as many in it as could be safely held, reached the shore having had to be baled with the men‟s hats. The forward boat was got into the water at the second attempt and then only when the forward fall was eventually cut having failed to lower leaving the stern almost in the water and the bow in the air. The boat fortunately did not swamp when it fell, and about thirty people scrambled into it, including some of the crew - no „women and children first‟ ethic was observed.

In a deposition seaman David Walker said that the sheaves of the blocks had shrunk and the ropes would not run. He also said that each of the boats was fastened to the bulwarks by two belts, and that none of them had been uncovered let alone lowered in four months. The abysmal state of the boats and their tackle was confirmed by Lt. Maurice Jones R.N., a passenger, who helped to get the port quarter boat into the water.



Orion Sinking off Portpatrick

Patrick Horner, a labourer at Portpatrick, was at the rock-strewn bay[2] to the east of where she struck when the quarter boat came in. He said that it was occupied by about eighteen passengers (mainly men) and at least four crew members. The drainage hole had been plugged with handkerchiefs, and despite the baling with hats the water in it was almost knee-deep. On putting a proper plug in, and baling it out to send the boat out again, it was found that something was snagged on the bottom of the boat. This turned out to be a length of rope with the snapped-off davit still attached. It was this davit that 52-year old Captain Archibald McKecknie a passenger, and a shipmaster of some 20 years, noted as being rusted through when he tried to assist in the boat‟s launching. Of those saved the majority were rescued by the small flotilla of boats from the shore, although some managed to swim ashore. Not all of those who swam ashore survived the ordeal. In particular Alexander Graham, the principal steward who, on the point of leaving the ship, went below to retrieve the passage monies that he had collected on board from the last-minute passage-takers, then swam ashore. These amounted to £100 (an indication of how many un-booked passengers were on board) and were found on him when he died soon after making the shore. He had been with the company over twenty-four years. The captain, the mate, and a boy remained clinging to the top of the rigging, which was still above water (as was the funnel) long after everyone else had either been swept away or rescued; the captain being the last to let go because, he said, he was directing the rescue operations!

A notable casualty was Dr John Burns, Professor of Surgery at Glasgow University, a brother of the ship‟s owners. Other casualties included passengers from all parts of the country, but many from Merseyside, including Thomas Gladstone, the ten-year old nephew of William Gladstone, the future Prime Minister. Although every life lost that

day was a tragedy, one of the most poignant stories of the disaster was that of Mr John Splatt, a farmer from Kenton, Devon. He and his wife, Betsy, aged 68, and their four unmarried daughters aged between 38 and 22 were to join a ship at Glasgow to take them to settle in Australia. It seems that he believed that his daughters might have greater prospects of marriage there than at home. His wife and all four daughters perished. He also lost his life savings of £700 in the wreck. In addition to the principal steward and the carpenter (who had joined the ship only two weeks previously), two other members of the crew were lost: the stewardess, Mrs McBain, and an apprentice, James Dunn. The total number of lives lost was not actually known but was eventually thought to be fifty-four, and for some days after the tragedy boatmen went out to search for bodies down the whole western coastline of the peninsula, from Corsewall in the north to the Mull of Galloway in the south. Eleven of the victims are interred in Portpatrick old kirkyard.

As is usual in such disasters there were unsung heroes, and some whose conduct was less than worthy. Among the latter, as noted above, many of those in the two boats that reached the shore were either crew members or male passengers. Most praiseworthy was the unfailing and prolonged rescue efforts of the eighteen men who crewed the nine shore boats and rescued some one hundred of the passengers and crew, and many of the bodies of those who perished - as was the great care and hospitality shown to the survivors by the people of Portpatrick.

At 5.30 a.m. on the morning of the disaster Captain J.J. Wheeler of the steamer **Fenella**[3] on route from Fleetwood to Troon, when passing Portpatrick, learnt of the disaster and took her into the harbour to see what assistance he could render. Captain Henderson of the ***Orion*** went on board the **Fenella** at six a.m. where he wrote a short note to ***Orion***"s owners informing them of the loss as follows:

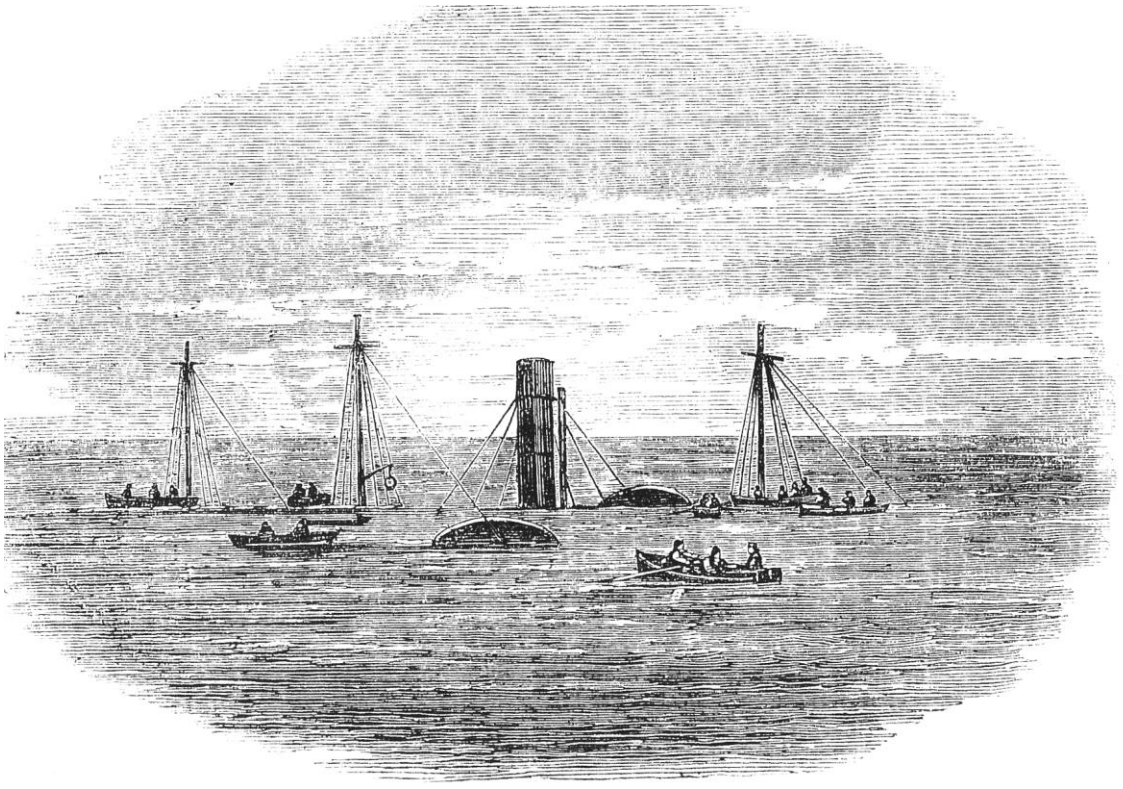
„*Portpatrick, June 18th, 1850*.
Messrs. J. & G. Burns
Gentlemen, - It has become my painful duty to announce to you that the Orion struck the rocks a little to the northward of this place this morning at about a quarter past one, and immediately filled, and sunk in seven fathoms water. From the moment she first struck, the engines became useless, and I found it impossible to run her on shore to save the lives of the passengers. I very much fear the loss of life is great, but at present I cannot ascertain the particulars.
I have forwarded those passengers who are in a fit state to be removed, via Troon to Glasgow. I am exceedingly sorry to state that Dr. Burns is among the drowned. His body is now in safekeeping till I know your wishes, I send this to you by Mr. Langlands, my chief officer, to whom I beg to refer you for particulars. Captain Dalzell [agent for the underwriters] *is on the spot, and has written to the underwriters, ...*"

This he sent by the chief officer, Mr G. Langlands, who left on the ***Fenella,*** along with nineteen of the survivors, before mid-day.

Of course, Captain Henderson had neither the time nor the means to try to run his ship on shore; nor would such a feat have been possible at that location; nor is there any testimony that he tried to despite implying in his note that he had. Indeed, the Rev. J. Clarke, a passenger of Stretford, Manchester, was to publish a somewhat discursive

account of the tragedy in 1851, in which he noted Captain Henderson‟s lack of presence, let alone control and leadership, at the time, and which he had voiced the day following the event, as did many others. The only recorded level-headed attempt to avert a greater catastrophe was that made by the engineer on watch, 2nd engineer James Pattison, who immediately stopped the engines and released the steam pressure from the boiler, thus possibly preventing it exploding. Before she sank what was thought to be an explosion was heard, but this was the air that had been compressed by the rising water blowing out the saloon skylight.

On the morning that **Orion** sank, William Ross, superintendent of police at Stranraer went to Portpatrick to supervise accommodation for the recovered bodies. Later in the day he borrowed diving gear and went onto the wreck site to determine the exact location where she struck. First he examined the Outer Ward Rock and found many pieces of iron and fractured rock. He then went out to the Barnoch Rock but found that undamaged. This was confirmed some days later by William Knott, a seaman and diver from Portsmouth, who found an estimated ton of newly fractured rock at the Outer Ward Rock location. On 25th June, a diver from Liverpool, William Carter, was sent down to examine the vessel‟s starboard bilge. He found a rent some four feet wide and twenty feet long, six feet above the keel, and the iron plating *„hanging over like a flap*‟. He also found and brought up three bodies from the cabin.



The sunken ***Orion*** at low water on the day of the disaster

On 19th June, the day following the ship‟s loss, declarations were taken from Captain Henderson and second mate Williams before the procurator-fiscal of Stranraer, A. M‟Neel Caird, at Portpatrick. Due to the nature and the scale of the disaster, the Government immediately had Captain Henry Mangles Denham R.N. dispatched to the

scene to collect as much evidence as possible from the survivors and crew members before they dispersed (many had already left, and how many were still there when he arrived is not known as Captain Denham‟s report has not been located), and from witnesses on shore, and to prepare a report regarding the conduct of the officers in control of the vessel at the time of the accident. Captain Denham, a representative of the world‟s arbitrating authority at that time (and acting under the auspices of the Board of Trade), arrived at Portpatrick on Sunday, 23rd June 1850 and started work immediately by going out to the scene of the wreck and examining the immediate area. On 25th June Captain Denham took depositions from the two lookout men, Wilson and Stewart, and Walker the helmsman who was at the wheel between 10 p.m. and ten minutes past midnight. His report was apparently completed and delivered to Whitehall by 26th June, as a result of which a decision was taken on 28th June by the Lord Advocate for Scotland to institute prosecutions against all three of the ***Orion***‟s officers. For the following six weeks many steamship captains, mates, and pilots navigating that coast and the estuary of the Clyde (none of whom were on the ship at the time of the disaster) were questioned by the procurator-fiscal‟s office to determine where culpability for the disaster might lie.

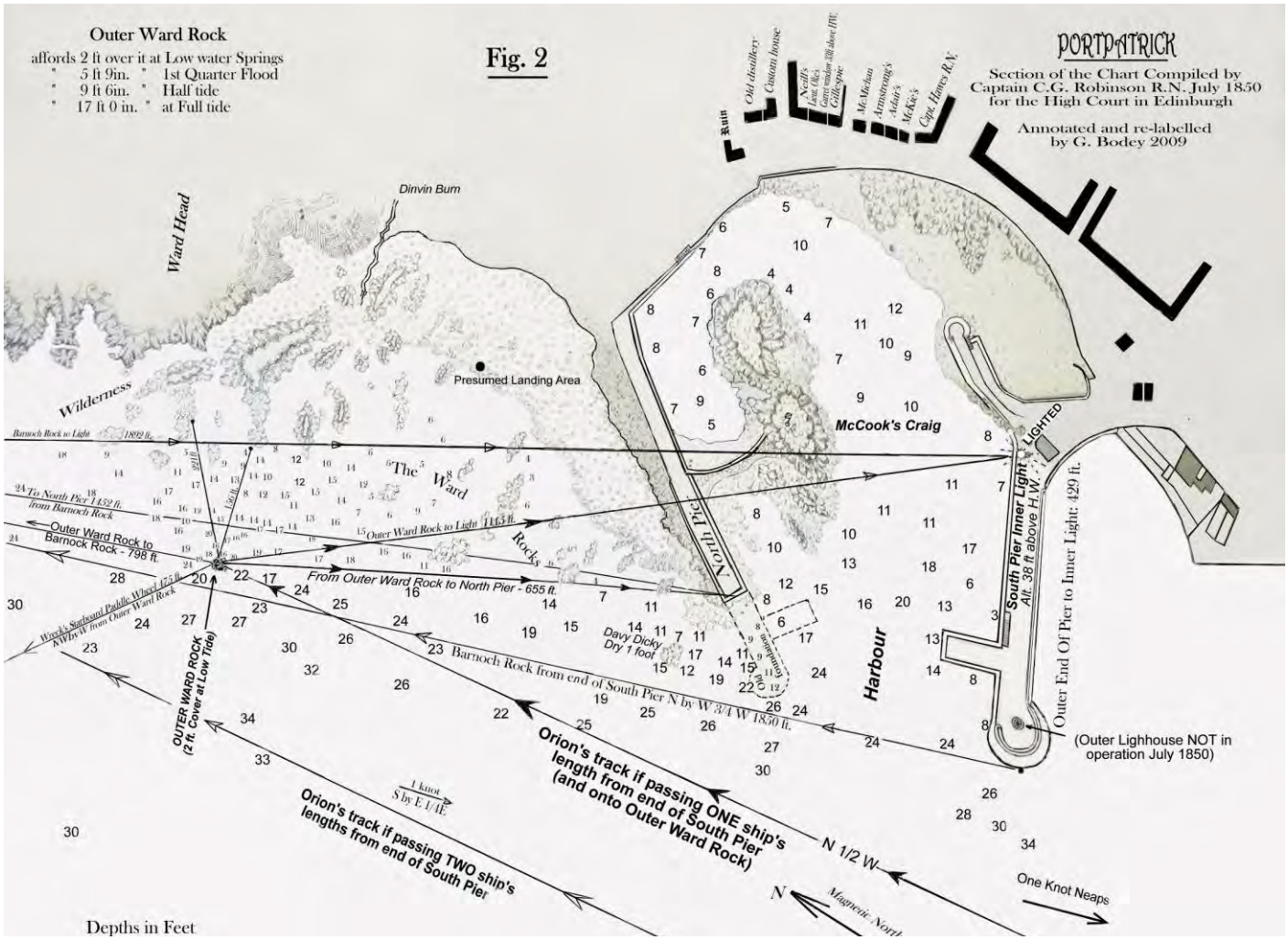


Fig. 2

For the guidance and understanding of the Court, Captain C.G. Robinson R.N senior Admiralty hydro-grapher who had made extensive surveys of the Wigtownshire coast, took accurate measurements of the approaches to the disaster scene; the sizes of Outer Ward Rock and Barnoch Rock and their coverage at various states of the tide; also the behaviour of the tidal flow and its effects on vessels close in to the land. He found the wreck with its bow pointing north, lying in 30ft at the bow and 36ft at the stern, with the starboard paddle 475ft NWbyW of the Outer Ward Rock [Fig.2], having apparently been moved by successive tides. He also prepared large-scale charts, with courses marked to show the safe and proper navigation of that coast. [It is not known if such accurately detailed information was generally available in chart form to masters at that time, although by 1857 it was.] He was to elucidate further in court, and be questioned by both sides. Also, a model of the ***Orion*** was made at Greenock for illustration in court. Meanwhile Captain Henderson and second mate Williams had been arrested and lodged in Stranraer jail, but were later to be freed on bail. On Thursday, 29th August 1850 all three officers were arraigned at the High Court in Edinburgh before the Lord Justice-Clerk and Lords Wood and Ivory, and a jury, and each charged with culpable homicide and culpable and reckless neglect of duty. All three pleaded “Not Guilty”. The trial was to take three full days, including Saturday, each lasting from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Some fifty witnesses were called in court to give evidence, explanations and opinions, and to be questioned by the prosecution, the defence lawyers, and by the Court. Only one of the passengers was called to testify to the events that took place after the ship struck, which was later a cause of great dissatisfaction to many of those not called. However, as the main, and more serious, charges on which the prosecution hoped to secure conviction only concerned events leading up to the grounding, those occurring in the aftermath, not being of an indictable nature, were of less relevance to the prosecution‟s case. George Langlands, the first mate, was early dismissed from the bar because he had gone off watch before the event. The Solicitor-General had sought to implicate him in the charges as one who had independent responsibility for the good order of the lifeboats, the lack of which contributed greatly to the loss of life, but the Crown was unable to find this to be so, and withdrew the charges. However, on the morning of the disaster, and before he left for Troon, Langlands, possibly believing that he might eventually have to face a charge with respect to the unseaworthiness of the lifeboats, had the entire remains of the boats carted away to Glasgow.

According to Captain Henderson‟s declaration of 19th June, which was read to the Court, he was asleep on a sofa in his cabin when the ***Orion*** struck. He had not considered it his duty, in the state of the weather and position of the ship, to be on deck at the time. He said that he had been in a state of fatigue and had required rest. Also, he was aroused by the shock when the ship struck and rushed on deck. At the end of his declaration, however, he said that his state of undress on deck was due to having stripped himself [in his cabin] when the ship struck in order to swim ashore! He also said that he thought the accident happened by the miscalculation of the second officer of the distance of the ship from the land, and that he exerted himself as much as possible to save the lives of the passengers.

The second mate‟s declaration was also read to the Court. In it he said that the fog had come down thick off Portpatrick and he was going to call the master, as he was earlier instructed, when she struck. He could not understand how the accident had occurred, unless the current had swept the vessel inshore against the helm. He also said that he kept the vessel near the shore to shun the tide. It would seem that it is this item of his statement that indicates the reason for the disaster.

Captain Robinson had told the Court that the tide was flowing southward at about two knots near the shore off Portpatrick at the time of the disaster, and its effect there would be to take the vessel inshore; also, said Lt. A. Parks R.N., commander of H.M. steam vessel ***Dasher***, advantage could only be gained keeping close to shore if a strong spring tide was running which, at 1½ miles off the shore in that area, is indicated on the chart as 4½ knots, but no advantage would ensue at neap tide. The moon having been full on June 10th it was, in fact, a neap tide at the time of the disaster: spring tides occur 36 hours after the full moon or a new moon. Not only were they mistakenly trying to shun the tide but were also trying to „run the tide‟. This was confirmed by the helmsman, John Kelly, who said that they had had a good run and were alongside Portpatrick sooner than their usual run, and would have made Greenock by 8 a.m. This would have enabled the vessel to be there before the tide to take her to Glasgow, which would otherwise have been missed. Running the coast close was successful until near Dunskey Point when, for reasons unknown, recklessness got the better of second mate Williams.

With regard to the above practise the Lord Justice-Clerk made the following observation:

“*It was much to be feared that captains often ran close to the shore to avoid currents and tides, in order to save time; and having escaped disasters on repeated occasions by such courses, they become over confident, and at length adopt a course which at first they would have thought it insane to attempt. That was the great occasion of accidents of all kinds; but the leading principle to be adopted in judging of such cases, was not how near the coast a captain might venture without danger, but how far off he ought to keep in order to avoid all risks...*”

Exculpatory evidence was given by a dozen or more highly experienced mariners who testified to the practises, courses steered, and onus of responsibility etc. when travelling that coast, some of whom were questioned on their evidence by the defence, the prosecution, and by the Court. Williams‟ counsel, Mr Penney, contended that the accident was occasioned by a deflection of the compass by which the ship was steered, caused by the location of the iron in her cargo (and not known about by Williams), and which was sufficient to account for the orders given by Williams. The steering compass was otherwise reading correctly, as testified by John Gray, nautical instrument maker of Strand St., Liverpool, who had supplied it in July 1847, and had tested it on May 20th 1850, at the behest of the master, and found that all the compasses[4] „*were quite right*‟. In his summing-up to the jury on behalf of Williams Mr Penney attributed the whole cause of the accident to such compass deflection, although no such concern had been raised prior to the disaster.

The validity of Penney‟s contention was scorned by the Lord Justice-Clerk who pronounced as follows:

"*As regarded the case of the mate* [Williams]*, the case that had been principally made for him, as to the deflection of the binnacle compass, entirely failed. It was proved beyond doubt that the land was visible the whole way from the Mull of Galloway northwards. It was in vain, therefore, to talk of a deflection of the compass on a coast so well known as that of Wigtownshire; and the jury would consider whether or not it was consistent with innocence that he did not keep further out at sea, when the land within sight was a rocky shore, more especially after receiving warnings from the seamen who were on watch, and who admonished him of the fact; and more especially after passing so close to Portpatrick harbour, the light of which was seen and recognised".*

Mr Crawfurd, counsel for Captain Henderson, in his summing-up to the jury contended that the master‟s sojourn below on his sofa whilst the ship was heading for disaster was perfectly legitimate in view of the fact that the 2nd mate was considered sufficiently experienced to run the coast without the master‟s presence. With regard to the captain‟s fatigue, and his delegation of duty to a junior officer, the Lord Justice-Clerk observed that:

"*This took place in a voyage which, on ordinary occasions, did not exceed 15 hours, and which, on the occasion in question, commenced at Liverpool, at 4 o‟clock in the afternoon of a beautiful summer day, when the vessel was steered down the Mersey by the river pilot, thus, for that portion of the voyage, lessening the captain‟s responsibility. Could it be said, then, that the captain was not bound to have started fresh from Liverpool, so as to have enabled him to remain on watch during so short and easy a voyage ...? It was not pretended that the captain‟s duties required him to superintend the loading of the vessel, and this still further left him without excuse on the score of physical inability to maintain the watch throughout the night".*

His Lordship also issued a stern warning to masters and owners with reference to lifeboats:

"... from the state in which the boats were at the time of the accident, and their original construction, was most important, as shewing the consequence of inefficient boats in the case of accidents. Should it be found, on any future occasion, that life was lost in consequence of inability to launch or navigate the boats, arising from such impediments as the coverings which had been spoken to in this case, or any other devices resorted to for the purpose of economy, either of the boats themselves or the vessel to which they belonged, grave criminal responsibility would arise, as well as to the captain who neglected to use all appliances in his power to keep them in proper order, or the proprietor who should fail to have supplied sufficient boats in the first instance, or refused proper allowance to have them maintained".

His Lordship charged the jury and then recapitulated and explained the relevant details of the evidence to it over a period of some four hours. After retiring for half-an-hour the jury, by a majority verdict, found Captain Henderson guilty of culpable, but not reckless, neglect of duty. Williams, by unanimous verdict, was found guilty of culpable and reckless neglect of duty as charged. Both were unanimously found not guilty of culpable homicide.

Lord Wood, in proposing sentence on Williams, said that any other sentence than that proposed would be inadequate. He said Williams would be transported for seven

years. Because Henderson"s guilt had not been adjudged reckless, a lesser sentence, but „*one that would bear severely on him*" was proposed - eighteen months" imprisonment. Lord Ivory concurred, and the Lord Justice-Clerk pronounced sentence accordingly.

As to the **Orion** herself, her remains lie more or less where she came to rest. Two days after the disaster William Finlay Johnston, clerk to the Messrs. Burns, arrived at Portpatrick to supervise the recovery of the heavy cargo. Within the week the wreck was purchased by the local salvage firm of M^{c}Clure which proceeded to recover the sheet iron (some 12ft x 4ft in size), and whatever fittings could be removed. How much of the carcase was able to be salvaged is not known, but sufficient still remains for amateur divers to explore from time to time.

Notes:

[1] In evidence given by the Admiralty hydrographer, Captain Robinson (and recorded by him on a specially prepared chart of one inch to one hundred feet), he stated „...*the South Pier on which* [at the seaward end] *is a lighthouse unfinished and unlighted...*" However, Captain Robinson was in error with regard to the lighthouse being unfinished. The lighthouse at the seaward end of the south pier was completed and lit in 1836. In 1839 a violent hurricane that affected the whole country undermined the pier at the base of the pier head lighthouse. The Commissioners of Northern Lights would not then use it and it was unlit thereafter, hence the use of the old landward light which, fortunately, had been left standing. The now unused end-of-pier lighthouse was taken down in 1869 and eventually shipped out to Colombo where it was re-erected on the breakwater there and was, until recently, still in use. The old unused lighthouse now standing at Portpatrick was commissioned in 1883 and stands almost on the site of the 1850 landward light. When in use it was lit by acetylene gas generated in a small adjacent building. It was superseded in 1900 by the electrically-lit Killantringan lighthouse built some two miles to the northward.

[2] The landing area denoted in Fig. 2 now lies under the stepped concrete sea defence at the north end of the village.

[3] This **Fenella** was an iron-built paddle steamer built in 1850 by Tod & McGregor of Meadowside, Glasgow for the Fleetwood & Glasgow Steam Packet Co. to run from Fleetwood to Troon. In 1851 she was transferred to Kemp"s to operate on their Londonderry service.

[4] Reliably accurate magnetic compasses did not come into use until after Sir W. Thomson"s patent (No.1339) of 29th March 1876. A modified version was patented (No. 679) on February 20th 1879.

Acknowledgements and Sources consulted:

LNRS member H. Hignett	who suggested the ***Orion***"s loss worthy of investigation
Iain MacKenzie,	Curatorial Officer, The Admiralty Library, Portsmouth
Accounts by passengers	John Archibald and Rev. George Thomson, National Archives of Scotland, Ref. AD58/236

Admiralty charts

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Original attestations sworn by some of eighty-nine witnesses prior to the trial; Captain C.G. Robinson‟s original charts; and the full reports of the trial published by the *North British Mail*, and the *Caledonian Mercury* at Edinburgh; all kindly made available at the Ewart Library, by the Dumfries Libraries, Information & Archives Centre.

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Reports of Cases before the High Court in Scotland, 1848-1852, compiled by John Shaw, advocate, published 1853, made available by courtesy of Google, A copy of the original Court transcript of the trial of the Orion‟s officers from the book

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Astronomical data by Texas A&M University Physics Observatory

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