

MARITIME RESCUE INSTITUTE

COASTAL NOTES – 8 APRIL 2008

Good communication is something we take very much for granted these days; whether on land or sea it's usually possible to maintain a link with the rest of the world. Mountain tops or open seas are no barrier – remember Ellen McArthur's daily reports on her epic round the world race. We were able to see, hear and almost feel her exhaustion, her exhilaration, her good days and her bad days.

This is very recent of course, and it's not so long since being over the horizon meant being completely out of touch. Ships could run into trouble, founder, and no-one ever knew their final resting place. Occasionally, there would be cases like the Marie Celeste, where the ship survived and continued to sail the seas. This was almost the fate of the Glasgow ship, 'Marlborough'.

The 'Marlborough' was a well founded ship of almost 1200 tons, who had done the run to New Zealand for a number of years, carrying passengers out and cargo home. On January 11th 1890, she left New Zealand for London with a cargo of frozen meat and wool; two days later she was seen by a passing ship, but from that day onwards nothing was ever heard of her again. Eventually she was posted as 'missing' at Lloyds of London and remained just another 'lost at sea with all hands' statistic for the next 20 years.

However, a story about her loss appeared in a Glasgow newspaper in 1919. A ship seeking shelter from bad weather was running close inshore near Punta Arenas. It was a wild and rocky coast with numerous deep inlets; they rounded a headland into quiet water and there, no more than a mile away, lay a ship, with tattered sails fluttering in the wind. Signals went unanswered. With their eyeglasses they could see that the masts and spars were green with decay and that the vessel lay between rocks where she was held fast as if lying in a cradle.

The mate and a number of the crew decided to board her. The sight that met their gaze was unbelievable. Below the wheel lay the skeleton of a man. Treading warily on the rotting decks, which cracked and broke in places as they walked, they encountered three more skeletons. In the messroom were the remains of ten more bodies; six others were found elsewhere, and one alone, possibly the captain, was on the bridge. There were mouldy, dank smelling books in the cabin and a rusty sabre sword. The name 'Malborough' was still faintly legible at her bow.

There's nothing to indicate how they died – whether starvation, exposure, or illness we'll never know. She was carrying meat as part of her cargo, so perhaps starvation is less likely than illness or exposure. We don't even know if all the deaths occurred at sea and the ship did do a 'Marie Celeste' in the southern oceans before finally coming to rest. That does seem a quite likely supposition though.

These days, ships do still go down with all hands, but it's usually only a matter of days, if not hours, before they're missed and searches can begin. There isn't the same slow realisation that a ship is never going to come back to harbor, that a family member is gone forever, that tragedy struck perhaps many months ago, but nobody knew.

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