



R.M.S. Windsor Castle, 2,672 tons—record-breaker of 1873

FROM A WATER COLOUR BY JOHN W. JURITZ

90 Years Ago

The "Windsor Castle"

THE MAIL STEAMER *WINDSOR CASTLE*, one of Messrs. Donald Currie and Co.'s Line, sailed from London on 20th September, 1876, and called at Dartmouth 3 days later to take in mails and passengers for the Cape. She was wrecked on 19th October on Dassen Island, halfway between Saldanha Bay and Table Bay on the west coast of the Cape.

Dassen Island is a small guano islet a mile or two off the mainland, about 50 miles north from Table Bay. It lies in the direct route to England and was always considered a dangerous spot. It is only 60 feet above sea-level at its highest point and its chief dangers to shipping are the long ledges of reef which radiate in all directions, the sharp jagged rocks being certain destruction to the mariner who ventures too near.

On 19th October the weather was fine; the passengers and crew were expecting to berth at Cape Town the following day but at 2 a.m. in the morning they were all awakened by the sudden stopping of the ship. The general impression was that the ship had anchored sooner than expected. However, they were soon warned that the vessel had gone aground, impaled on a reef of rocks, one of which had penetrated some 7 feet between the fore and midship. Within 15 minutes the engine room was flooded to the waterline. Fortunately, there was no sea running and the steamer lay as quietly as if at anchor. For the next two hours distress signals were sounded and the boats were lowered.

At daybreak it was soon discovered that there was no possibility of her being refloated, and the Master, Captain Hewat, decided to land all the women, children and men, which was accomplished without loss of any kind; provisions were landed and every effort was made to ensure their every comfort until rescue arrived.

The ship went to pieces after a few days, but not before some £50,000 worth of her cargo had been salvaged. The passengers were eventually landed at Cape Town by the steamer *Florence*.

It was said that the *Windsor Castle* was steering too near to land and that she was some 30 miles too much eastward—by the chart of this period it would seem that there was no light on the island and it was not the first time a ship had been wrecked off the island.

The *Windsor Castle* was the first loss suffered by any mailboat of the Currie Line. She had been carrying mails to the Cape for 18 months, previously having been on the Indian run where she had made the fastest passages on record. In 1874 she had been saved from burning by the judgment and skill of her then Master, Captain Howson.

by A. E. C. LAMBTON

The vessel was an iron screw-steamer built at Glasgow by Messrs. Napier, in 1872. She had five bulkheads and was classed 100 A1 at Lloyds in 1875. Her net tonnage was 1,732 tons, gross tonnage 2,672 tons. She had three decks, was 334 feet long, 37 feet broad and 28 feet deep. Her engines were rated by the makers, Napier, at 270 horse power.

When she was wrecked she was valued at about £60,000 and was fully insured.

The above information came from contemporary reports of the wreck appearing in *The Illustrated London News* October–December 1876.