

Captain G. H. Griggs (retired) recalls . . .

“The Last Days of the Berwick Castle”

FORTY-FIVE years ago — October, 1919 — the *Berwick Castle*, in which I was serving as Third Officer, anchored in Kilindini Harbour close to the port and commenced discharging her cargo into lighters. There were, of course, no quayside berths in those days.

When No. 2 Hold was opened up fire was discovered in the after part of the lower hold, caused by the bulkhead separating this hold from the lower coal bunker, having become heated, as the coal bunker was also found to be on fire.

The fire in the hold quickly became out of hand and the vessel, in spite of all our efforts, soon became well and truly ablaze forward.

We got her across to the far side of the harbour and beached her close inshore. The stokehold fires were drawn, the vessel flooded, and we were forced to abandon ship as the flames spread aft. Decks fore and aft became red hot and collapsed, the Saloon House, Captain's Cabin and bridge disappeared and all superstructure amidships gutted out.

The crew were encamped under canvas on shore and shortly sailed for home, but the Second Officer (the late Captain R. T. Smailes) and myself remained behind.

When the burnt-out hull had cooled down, “accommodation” was erected in the remains of the Engineers' Mess Room and this consisted of a rough bunk, a table and a wooden bench. The bulkheads and deckhead were bare and red with rust.



The foredeck of the Berwick Castle, viewed from amidships, showing the collapsed saloon house, Captain's cabin and bridge in foreground

Here the Second Officer and I kept alternate 24-hour watches (as “Caretakers”, I presume), coming over by launch from Kilindini every other day to relieve.

The nights on that burnt-out wreck were the weirdest I have ever spent in my life. It was unbearably hot, the mosquitoes swarmed aboard in their thousands from the adjacent shore, and the deadly silence of that deserted spot was broken throughout the night by eerie groans, rumblings and occasional avalanches of metal work sliding down the steep angle of the collapsed decks.

Eventually Smailes and I sailed for home in the *Dunluce Castle* and the last I saw of the old ship she was hard and fast on the beach, a forlorn and sorry sight.

I never heard of the ultimate fate of the *Berwick Castle* and I never visited Mombasa again.



The author's last view of the Berwick Castle, beached at Kilindini in November, 1919