**Captain Armstrong Church Higher Section A Grave 22 Row 5**

This is a strange tale which made front page news of the local newspaper – The Western Daily Mercury – for 10 days in early 1885.

**The events leading up to the death of Captain Charles ARMSTRONG**

The barque, Wellington, registered in Windsor, Nova Scotia, was owned by Mr Albert Armstrong of Liverpool (brother of Captain Charles Armstrong). It left Havre on 20th January 1885 bound for New York with a crew of 16, the cargo being empty oil barrels with iron ore ballast. A Channel pilot was taken on board at Havre to guide the ship into open waters. The pilot appears to have expressed concern over the state of Captain Armstrong’s demeanour and departed the ship on bad terms with the Captain.

The events that happened between the departure of the pilot and the sighting of distress signals off the Mewstone, at which time the Plymouth lifeboat and the Government tug Scotia were launched, were related by the crew members at the magistrates court hearing as three of their number were being tried on a charge of manslaughter.

By that time Captain Armstrong had already been found guilty of the willful murder of Martin Nest, one of his crew on the fateful voyage.

**The trial at the Exeter Assizes in April 1885**

The trial commenced at Exeter Assizes on Monday 20 April 1885. On trial were Adolphi Haase, 23, ship’s carpenter, John Andrew Somerindale, 46, seaman and Jorgen Madsen Jorgensen, 25, ship’s cook.

This is what the jury heard:

On the evening of the 25th January 1885, Captain Armstrong sent for Petersen, the first mate, and caused the steward and boatswain to be put in irons and lashed to the rigging and caused the carpenter to be secured in the lazarette (a storage locker). The Captain complained that some of the crew were trying to poison him by means of drink and ordered two cases of liquor to be thrown overboard. He then gave several irrational orders regarding the sails.

At 2.00am the following morning, after the men had been released from their captivity, Captain Armstrong sent for Petersen and the boatswain and, following heated discussions, produced a loaded revolver and began to run around the ship firing at his crew. At this time, Martin Nest was shot through the eye (he later died of his wound) and the ship’s carpenter was shot in the neck.

Whilst the captain was chasing Nest on deck, Haase, Jergensen and Somerindale armed themselves, including a belaying pin, with the intention of securing the captain and stop him from causing further harm. When Captain Armstrong came down over the companion ladder from the poop deck, revolver in hand, he was set upon by the men and Haase struck him on the head with the belaying pin. The blow stunned the captain and the men grabbed the captain and tried to secure him. The captain and the men then struggled and the captain was finally secured with great difficulty. He was then put in irons and even then became violent, struggling hard to release himself. However the head blow was fatal and over a period of three hours the captain sank into unconsciousness and died.

The jury heard that, although Captain Armstrong had been previously of good character, on this trip he had shown signs of irrational behavior, beginning with an altercation with the pilot who had guided them from Havre on the first leg of the journey.

The Judge then made a statement to the effect that whether Captain Armstrong was mad because of drink or illness, it was quite clear that at the time he was mad. So the jury needed to consider whether the crew took proper and legitimate care to secure the Captain or whether they had used unlawful and excessive violence.

Both Somerindyke and Jorgensen had admitted that they hit the Captain but neither admitted to striking the blow with the belaying pin, this blow was struck by Haase. However, consideration must be given to the circumstances that Nest had been shot in the eye and Haase had been shot in the neck by the Captain and that they were trying to secure the Captain. Also the boat was pitching and the crew were afraid for their own lives so the Judge stated his own opinion that “it is not much wondered at that events proceeded as they did”. At this the prosecution was minded to agree with the Judge, as was the Jury and all three men were acquitted.

**Sources:**

**The Western Daily Mercury, copies of which are held at Plymouth Reference Library.**