

= SS Gothenburg =

The SS Gothenburg was a steamship that operated along the British and then later the Australian and New Zealand coastlines . In February 1875 , she left Darwin , Australia en route to Adelaide when she encountered a cyclone @-@ strength storm off the north Queensland coast . The ship was wrecked on the Great Barrier Reef north @-@ west of Holbourne Island on 24 February 1875 . Survivors in one of the lifeboats were rescued two days later by the Leichhardt , while the occupants of two other lifeboats that managed to reach Holbourne Island were rescued several days later . Twenty @-@ two men survived , while between 98 and 112 others died , including a number of high @-@ profile civil servants and dignitaries .

= = Description and history = =

The Gothenburg was commissioned in 1855 following her construction at Lungle 's building yards in Millwall , London . She was a 501 @-@ ton , 197 @-@ foot @-@ long (60 m) vessel , with a 120 @-@ horsepower (89 kW) , coal @-@ burning engine . She was rigged as barquentine , with her funnel set well aft between the main and mizzen masts . She was fitted with four lifeboats , two port and two starboard .

Her first owner , the North of Europe Steam Navigation Company , operated her between Irongate Wharf , near the Tower of London , and Sweden . In 1857 , she was acquired by the Union Castle Line and renamed as RMS Celt . In June 1862 , McMerkan , Blackwood and Co. of Melbourne purchased her for the Australian trade and in that year she made a protracted voyage from England to Australia by sail . She was one of the most modern vessels working around the Australian coastline in the 1860s , and became a popular ship as she was considered reliable . After many years on the Australia @-@ New Zealand run , her owners transferred her to the Australian coastal service .

In 1873 , she was lengthened and refitted in Adelaide to enable longer distances under steam and greater passenger and cargo capacity . Following her modifications , her name reverted once again to Gothenburg .

In November 1874 , several shipowners were contracted for two years from the South Australian government to provide ten round trips between the colonial capital of Adelaide and its furthest outpost , Port Darwin . Port Darwin was feeling the effects of a gold rush at Pine Creek and growing quickly as a trade post with the Dutch East Indies . However , all the local banks sent their money , together with government paperwork and the Royal Mail , around the east coast to Adelaide . On successful completion of each voyage , the South Australian government would pay the owners £ 1000 sterling .

When the Gothenburg left Port Darwin on Wednesday , 17 February 1875 , Captain James Pearce was under orders to make best possible speed . Pearce had been her captain on the Adelaide @-@ Darwin run for some time and had built up a solid reputation . He was a man of the sea , a man of sobriety and kindness and was well respected by his fellow sea captains .

Amongst the approximately 98 passengers and 37 crew (surviving records vary) were government officials , circuit court judges , Darwin residents taking their first furlough and miners . Also aboard was the French Vice Consul Eduard Durand and James Millner , the medical officer in George W. Goyder 's 1869 expedition to found the first colony at Port Darwin . There were also several prisoners aboard , bound for the Adelaide jail . Locked in the Captain 's cabin was approximately 93 kilograms (3 @,@ 000 ozt) of gold valued at £ 40 @,@ 000 consigned to the ES & A Bank in Adelaide . (approx US \$ 2 @.@ 6 million in 2008) . Durand reportedly also carried a tin box with him containing gold sovereigns and coins worth in excess of £ 3 @,@ 000 .

In three days of fine weather , the Gothenburg travelled 1 @,@ 500 kilometres (900 mi) from Palmerston (Darwin) to Somerset on Cape York . The weather began to worsen so the ship stopped to take on ballast at Somerset . While she was anchored , conditions deteriorated to a point where both anchor chains parted . After the loss of the anchors , the Gothenburg was forced to prematurely steam out 13 kilometres (7 @.@ 0 nmi) because of strong currents ; at that point , she

brought up for the night .

Two days later , Tuesday 23 February , the Gothenburg passed Cooktown at about 2 : 00 pm . The wind and rain severely increased and cloud cover became so thick it blocked out the sun . Despite this , she continued the journey south into worsening weather , in a deep water passage between the North Queensland coastline and the Great Barrier Reef , known as the inner route . Although taking this route provided some protection from the open sea , captains had to navigate and thread their way through a number of then uncharted reefs . All passengers and crew expected to be in Newcastle on Sunday evening for a scheduled stopover .

= = Shipwreck = =

On the evening of 24 February 1875 , the ship was still heading south in almost cyclonic conditions with fore , top and mainsails set and the steam engines running at full speed . Flooding rains lashed the entire Queensland coast and Captain Pearce reportedly could not see land or sun . At approximately 7 : 00 pm , and for reasons undetermined , he altered course and shortly afterwards , at full speed (11 to 12 knots) , hit a section of the Great Barrier Reef at low tide 31 miles (50 km) north west of Holbourne Island . The Gothenburg struck with such force that she was left high up on the reef . Immediately , an order came out to lower the sails . At first , there was no panic and many passengers returned to their cabin bunks expecting the Gothenburg would come off the reef at high tide .

In an attempt to refloat her , Captain Pearce ordered the Gothenburg to be lightened forward . Water casks used as ballast and passengers were positioned aft in an endeavour to refloat her as the tide rose , but without success . Finally , a fatal attempt was made to refloat her , by reversing the engine hard . The vessel came half off the reef , but holed herself badly and then slewed broadside to the waves , in a much worse position . However , with the tide rising and some cargo now being dumped overboard , all aboard still expected the Gothenburg to float free . With strong winds changing direction and seas increasing , the boiler fires were extinguished by water rising through the damaged stern . Around midnight , the chief engineer came on deck to report that the engine room was flooded and the engine was of no further use . With heavy seas now rushing down hatchways and into the cabins , the Gothenburg was doomed and Captain Pearce was forced to admit that the situation had become desperate .

The storm made launching the lifeboats almost impossible . At about 3 : 00 am , Captain Pearce ordered the two port lifeboats lowered , each with four crew on board . While being passed astern one of the boats broke the painter and became adrift . Its crew tried hard to pull up to the ship 's side , but it was impossible in the heavy squall . The other was accidentally let go and both boats , in heavy seas , were unable to be retrieved .

At about 3 : 30 am on Thursday , 25 February , the Gothenburg continued to heel over . The deck became so steep that passengers and crew had to climb over the rails to get on her side . At about 4 : 00 am , the two remaining starboard lifeboats were lowered and were rushed by the passengers . One starboard lifeboat , crammed with women and children , capsized when others tried to board it . Some half dozen men righted her in the water , but , damaged and without oars , food or water , it quickly drifted away and was never found . The second starboard lifeboat also capsized when the sea crashed over , washing all the occupants into the sea . One passenger recalled the sea on the downwind side of the ship being covered with human heads bobbing up and down like corks . Five or six men and one woman climbed onto the upturned hull . The boat was still connected to its painter , but it was unable to be recovered from the heavy sea and wind which swept the woman off and drowned her . A passenger , John Cleland , swam to the connected , but upturned lifeboat and further secured it with a rope tied to the Gothenburg . In less than fifteen minutes , nearly 100 people had drowned ; washed away or trapped in their water @-@ filled cabins . By this time , several sharks were circling the wreck .

Those still on board the Gothenburg tried to cling to the rigging , but throughout the early morning of 25 February , several more people were drowned after they were swept overboard by large broadside waves . Many passengers associated with the gold diggings were unwilling to let go of

their gold and money belts , as it was probably their life savings , insisted on keeping them tied and once overboard reportedly drowned very quickly .

= = = Survivors = = =

By morning of the 25 February , only the masts were visible protruding from the water , with 14 people clinging to the rigging , where they remained for the next twenty four hours in cyclonic weather . At low tide , the Gothenburg ground and twisted and broke her back between the fore and main masts . However , the remaining starboard lifeboat , which had capsized , was still held by her painter and the rope attached by Cleland . At first light on 26 February the weather eased and the survivors managed to right the boat and bail it out ; they prepared a makeshift sail and paddled for the mainland . About seven hours later they realised they could not make mainland , so they altered course for an island that could be seen in the distance . When they arrived , they were met by four of the crew from one of the port lifeboats . Their lifeboat had been severely damaged on the rocks on the opposite side of the island in an attempt to land there the day before .

The other port lifeboat , with four crew on board , was picked up by the steamer Leichhardt at an island at the entrance to Whitsunday Passage two days after the disaster . The steamer immediately reversed course back towards the wreck , which she reached at approximately 3 @.@ 30 pm on Friday , 26 February . Gothenburg was a complete wreck ; the funnel was gone and she had sunk to the eyes of the lower rigging . The Leichhardt 's Chief Officer and four hands went alongside , but nothing other than her masts could be seen above the water except for the body of a naked man floating nearby . They assumed the other victims had been taken by sharks . The Leichhardt searched for survivors until last light and then made way for Bowen where the alarm was raised .

At Holbourne Island , the other 18 survivors were living off raw bird 's eggs and rain water that had pooled in the island rocks . Because rescue was uncertain , they engraved ship details and their names on the concave side of a large turtle shell , in the hope that it would be found in the future . On Sunday , 28 February 15 of them set off in the starboard lifeboat for an island about 20 miles away to the south , which appeared to be closer to the main shipping lane . A rescue ship , sent looking for survivors , picked up the group and took them safely to Bowen . Another rescue ship called the Bunyip from Townsville subsequently returned to Holbourne Island and rescued the three remaining survivors .

= = Aftermath = =

Although reports vary , records show that between 98 and 112 people drowned . Most records state the death toll at 102 . Only 22 people survived (12 crew and 10 passengers) . All 25 women and children aboard and all the officers died .

Edward W. Price , Magistrate and Commissioner Circuit Court of the Northern Territory , who remained behind in Darwin , lost his wife and six children . Devastated by the news , he was given six months leave on full pay by the government . The retired fifth Premier of South Australia , Thomas Reynolds and his wife , Anne , both drowned as did Eduard Durand , the French Vice Consul .

Other notable passengers who died were Dr James Millner and his family , Justice William A. Wearing QC , Circuit Court Judge ; Joseph Whitby , acting South Australian Crown Solicitor ; Richard Wells , NT Times & Gazette editor ; Lionel Pelham , a senior public servant ; Commander Andrew Ross of the Royal Navy ; C. J. Lyons , Justice Wearing 's senior assistant ; William Shoobridge , Secretary to several mining companies ; A. L. McKay , Government Surveyor ; and several Overland Telegraph employees .

Never before in Australian history had so many high @-@ profile public servants , dignitaries and diplomats died in a single tragedy . Many passengers who died were Darwin residents and news of the tragedy severely affected the small community , reportedly taking several years to recover . Most of Gothenburg 's crew were from Melbourne and as a result of the shipwreck , 11 widows and 34 children were left destitute in Victoria .

At Bowen , twelve survivors left with Captain Lake on the ship Victoria headed for Sydney . They all got free passage from McMerkan , Blackwood and Co , the owners of Gothenburg . The four survivors from the second port lifeboat that were picked up by the steamer Leichhardt , remained with that ship and subsequently made way for Brisbane .

Two weeks later a hard @-@ hat diver , sent down to recover the gold and other valuables , found the bodies of two women at the foot of the saloon staircase , one with her arm around the other . The diver tried to reach them to take a lock of hair or some other personal item that could be identified by their loved ones , but the restriction of the air line made it impossible . The gold in the Captain 's cabin was recovered after much difficulty . While recovering the gold , several sharks that were caught near the wreck were found to contain human bones , remains and jewellery .

There were three heroes identified that tragic night , all attested to by all the other survivors , for their attempts to save other passengers . In recognition of their bravery , on 26 July 1875 , the Governor of South Australia , Sir Anthony Musgrave , presented passengers James Fitzgerald and John Cleland and crewman Robert Brazil with gold medals and a gold watch . The Gothenburg Relief Fund Committee also presented each of them with a gold chain .

= = = Report = = =

The report of the Marine Board of Queensland determined that :

= = = Lifeboats = = =

There was also much speculation at the time in the Adelaide and Melbourne press on why the lifeboats had not been launched earlier . Survivor James Fitzgerald pointed out in his recollection that , had the lifeboats been filled to capacity , no one would have survived the severe weather conditions experienced . He also commented that passenger vessels were not required to carry enough lifeboats , concluding that there were insufficient places for all Gothenburg 's passengers and crew . It was not until RMS Titanic sank some 37 years later in 1912 , that it was made compulsory for all British registered ships to carry sufficient lifeboats for everyone on board .

= = Present day = =

Today , only parts of the deteriorated iron hull and the coal fired square boilers of the SS Gothenburg remain . The wreck lies between 9 and approximately 16 metres (52 ft) of water on the western side of Old Reef , 130 kilometres (81 mi) southeast of Townsville . The Gothenburg shipwreck is registered on the Queensland National Estate (place ID # 8923) as a Heritage site , and is protected under Section 7 of the (Commonwealth) Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976 , which requires that divers have a permit to enter the 200m protected zone that has been declared around the wreck . Its official location is : Old Reef , Great Barrier Reef , 75 kilometres (47 mi) north @-@ east of Ayr , at 19 ° 22 ' 06 " S 148 ° 03 ' 21 " E. The reef around the wreck provides good diving with an extensive coral garden . A strict non @-@ disturbance policy applies to marine flora and fauna as well as to the fabric of the wreck . Pelagic fish and reef sharks are common .

= = = Legacy = = =

The northern Darwin suburb of Millner was named after Dr James Millner who , together with his family , lost their lives on the Gothenburg . Most streets in the northern Darwin suburb of Coconut Grove and some in the adjacent suburb of Millner , were named after local Darwin residents , interstate visitors and crew who lost their lives during the shipwreck . Gothenburg Crescent , in the inner Darwin suburb of Stuart Park , was named after the ship .

The large turtle shell , which was engraved by the 18 survivors at Holbourne Island , is displayed at the South Australian Museum , on North Terrace in Adelaide .

= = Survivors = =

In 1875 , a detailed list of all passengers and crew was published by J.H. Lewis , Printer & Publisher , albeit with several errors and spelling mistakes . That document was used as the main source of the following survivors ' table .

The survivors ' surnames have been reconciled against rescue ships ' log books , other records and a photo of the engraved turtle shell . Known discrepancies have been clarified , where possible , in the comments section .

= = = Full known passenger list = = =

= = = Full known crew list = = =