

## HMS “Birkenhead”

On Sunday February 24, 2002, a Service of Remembrance was held at The Royal Hospital, Chelsea to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the “The Wreck of the Birkenhead” on February 26, 1852.

H.M.S. Birkenhead, a paddle steamer of 1,400 tons, had been launched hardly more than two years, and was considered ‘the latest thing in ships.’ She was conveying drafts for the regiments in the Cape Colony, and after coaling at Capetown sailed at 6pm on February 25, 1852, for East London, with – as nearly as possible 643 on board. In the early hours of February 26, the Birkenhead was nearing a rocky out-crop called Danger Point. Just before 2 am the vessel suddenly struck an uncharted rock with such force that it sliced into the hull just behind the foremast and ripped open the compartment between the engine-room and forepeak. The inrush of water was so great that the forward compartment of the lower troop deck filled instantly and a hundred or more soldiers were drowned, almost literally in their hammocks as they slept.

All the surviving officers and men went up on deck. Being the senior officer on board, Lt Colonel Seton of the 74<sup>th</sup> Foot took charge of all military personnel and immediately summoned his officers around him and stressed the importance of maintaining order and discipline. Distress rockets were fired, but there was no help at hand. At this stage the Captain of the Birkenhead made a grave mistake in ordering the ship to be put astern, an action which caused the hull to rip open further. (It will be remembered that when, nearly half a century later the Warren Hastings was wrecked, the Captain ordered “full speed ahead” and thereby kept the water from entering the hole made by the rocks, and saving the lives of all on board).

The Lifeboats were launched; but it would appear that during the whole voyage boat drill had not been practiced. Three boats were successfully launched and the 13 women and 7 children who were on board safely embarked; but in the case of the paddle-box boat the pin of the davits was rusted in and could not be extracted, and in two other instances the ropes or tackling broke while the boats were being lowered. All the men on board had ensured that the women and children were rescued first, in the sure and certain knowledge that it was reducing their chances of survival. The discipline was splendid to behold. At 02-25am the vessel, which had again broken into two parts, went down, but 40 or 50 men remained in the rigging, which was out of the water. Some were gradually overcome by the cold and dropped into the water, but the majority were subsequently taken off by a schooner. A certain number on rafts or wreckage landed at Danger Point, but the surf was high and a species of weed, known as ‘sea bamboo,’ about a quarter of a mile from the shore proved an insurmountable obstacle to men already exhausted by hours of immersion. Almost all consequently perished. Some were killed by sharks, which for the most part attacked those who were naked. Col Seton and the ship’s captain were drowned, and of all on board not quite two hundred were saved.

Of all the regiments represented aboard the ship, the 60<sup>th</sup> Rifles contingent numbered 1 Sgt and 39 Riflemen. Those who perished were:

### Corporal

F. Curtis

### Riflemen

J. Brown	P. O’Brien
J. Brookland	T. Peacock
J. Callaghan	J. Rees
W. Chapman	W. Russell
E. Elliot	H. Scutts
T. Frost	J. Story

A. Hamilton	P. Stokes
M. Kelcher	J. Thompson
W. Kelly	W. Wilkins
C. Lucas	W. Wilkinson
J. Maher	J. Wilson
J. Moore	W. Woolward
I. McAcy	J. Wallis
D. McQuade	S. Jacobs
J. Ladd	

Those Saved:

Sgt David Andrews

Riflemen

W. Burlow	H. Voss
T. Nuttall	J. Hanlon
T. Smith	H. Maltier
W. Sooter	J. Stanfield
A. Laskie	

Of the ten Riflemen saved, four were picked up by the boats and six either clung to the rigging or swam ashore. Such an instance of steady discipline and unflinching self-sacrifice (which ensured that the women and children were first off the ship) created a sensation of appreciation far beyond the limits of the British Isles; and, by order of the King of Prussia, its story was read three times to his troops on parade.