

The Turret Ship "Captain"

The Loss of the Turret Ship "Captain"

One or two persons connected with Wiltshire have, we regret to find, gone down with the ill-fated turret ship "Captain." Among them, one of Lady Herbert's sons, the Hon. W. Reginald Herbert, who was a midshipman on board her; also an assistant engineer, named George F. Gardiner, son of David Gardiner, an old inhabitant, and for many years past a workman in the railway factory at New Swindon.

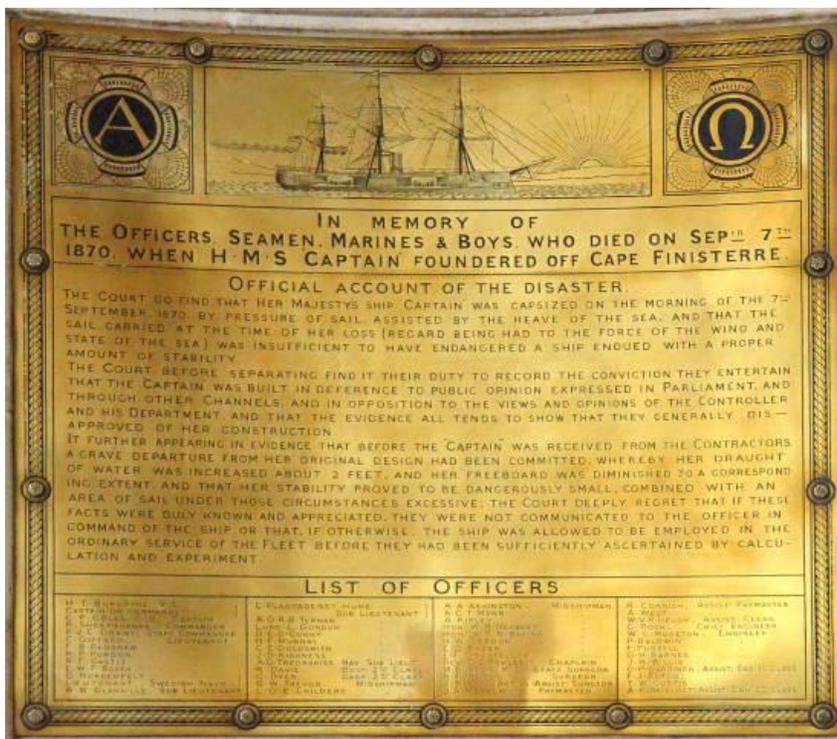
Among the survivors of this turret ship "Captain," is an able-bodied seaman named Heard, brother-in-law of Sergeant Croucher of the Wilts Militia staff. Heard, who was in Devizes yesterday, but has returned to Portsmouth, is a smart intelligent fellow, and appears to have stuck gallantly by Capt. Burgoyne, and would fain have saved his life. After the ship had gone down, Heard, with his Captain and others, were fighting for life with the sea, saw the ship's steam pinnace lifeboat some yards off, keel upwards. They swam with considerable difficulty to the pinnace, the captain, Mr. May and Heard reaching it together. Heard had held on the captain by the collar of his jacket. With assistance, the captain succeeded in getting on to the pinnace with the rest of the party, and caught sight of a ship not a great distance off, which they believed to be either the Bellerophon or the Lord Warden. At this time the ship had disappeared altogether. Urged by the gallant Captain, the men shouted as loud as they could, "ship ahoy!" for a considerable time, but got no response. So frantic were their cries for help that the men became perfectly hoarse, and the majority lost their voices altogether for a time, and endeavoured to prepare themselves for what they conceived to be their fate, namely, a watery grave, with the rest of the unfortunate crew. All this time the pinnace was being tossed heavily, and the men were frequently washed from its keel into the seething waters around them, but succeeded in getting on again, with what little assistance their fellow-sufferers were in a position to render them. After being tossed about for some time in this way the men saw the ship's second launch floating towards them with two men in, and raised feeble shouts to attract their attention. When the launch came to within a short distance of the pinnace Captain Burgoyne shouted out, "Hold to your oars, my men! Hold to your oars!" which order was, as far as possible, carried out, and the launch got close to the pinnace, the men leaping joyfully on board her. The sea frequently parted the two boats, and ere Capt. Burgoyne and Heard could get from the pinnace, she was some little distance off. Heard stuck by the captain, who remained, sad looking, but calm, and as firm as if on board the ill-fated ship he had commanded. Heard took hold of him by the hand, and said, "Come, sir, let's jump!" to which he replied "Save your own life, my man." Finding that the distance between the launch and the pinnace was rapidly increasing, the seaman said, "Will you come or not, sir?" when the captain replied, "Jump and save yourself. I shall not forget you some day." The seaman jumped, and with difficulty reached the launch and was hauled on board, and within a few minutes the pinnace and the captain were lost sight of. Heard and his wrecked shipmates appear to have been infamously treated on the Spanish coast, upon which they ran their boat – the Spaniards actually robbing them of their clothes. With regard to the ship, Heard says he and those saved had perfect confidence in

her, and that they would readily sail on another of the same kind. Others, however, who have been over the vessel have always contended that she was overmasted.

Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, 15 September 1870

Memorial Plaques

Both St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey have memorials to commemorate the loss of HMS Captain.

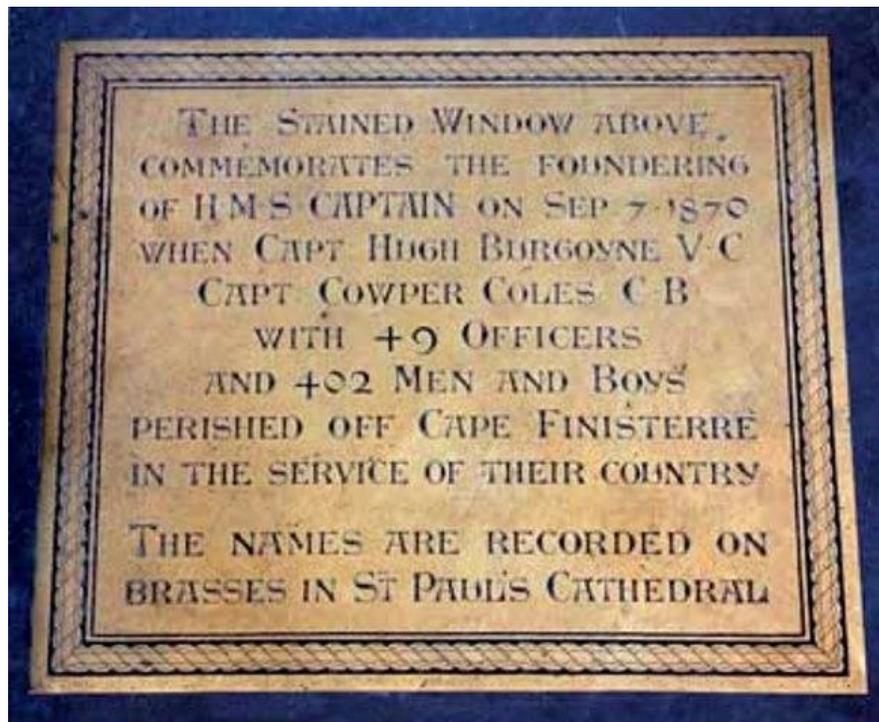


The Memorial in St. Paul's (above) names the officers who perished and the events of the disaster on one panel and the names of the other ratings on the other. The two plaques hang either side of a carved panel which is guarded by two carved free standing angels. The area in which the memorial is housed is recessed and has a black and white tiled floor.



The second panel commemorating those who lost their lives

The Westminster Abbey memorial does not name as many of the victims but makes reference to the memorial in St. Paul's.



OPC Notes:

A turret ship was a masted ship with its guns mounted on a revolving gun turret, instead a broadside arrangement.

HMS Captain, an experimental ship, built and designed by a private contractor, was completed in April 1870 and capsized shortly after midnight on 6 September 1870 with a loss of nearly 500 lives whilst part of a convoy crossing the Bay of Biscay of the Cape of Finisterre. Only 18 of the crew survived.

A subsequent court martial investigation concluded that the ship was insufficiently stable, especially with a large area of sail.

John Heard, AB, of Devizes was one of the eighteen survivors and is included in the photograph below which was taken after they had been rescued. The clothes they are wearing are the same as those that they were wearing when pulled from the water. Sadly where on the photograph John is located is not known at the present time.

