

Dover Sharks: Heroes or Hovellers?

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In the earlier article *Thirteen Dover Boatmen in Maidstone Gaol*¹ an account was given of the High Court of Admiralty investigation into salvage claims made regarding the brig *Aureo*. This was grounded on the beach near Guilford Battery at East Cliff Dover on the 13th March 1858. Right from the initial grounding the Captain of the *Aureo* made it clear that he was in great fear of "**Dover Sharks**". However, the thirteen gaoled boatmen, led by Benjamin Burvill, rescued his brig from becoming a wreck on the beach by taking it into the safety of Dover Harbour at considerable risk to themselves.

In 1860 Burvill and two of the *Aureo* rescuers were awarded bronze Board of Trade Gallantry Medals for their actions in rescuing the crew of the schooner *Reynard* when it was wrecked at East Cliff.

A Board of Trade enquiry report in The Dover Express of 15th January 1875 sheds further light on the character of the alongshore boatmen of Dover. This enquiry, held in the Dover Council Chambers, was concerned with "the stranding and wreck of the barque *Mary A. Way*" on the 11th December 1874. It was held before the Mayor and R. H. Jones Esq., assisted by Admiral Powell and Captain Oates, the nautical assessors of the Board of Trade. James Stilwell Esq. administered the oaths and took the evidence whilst Mr C. J. Cottingham attended as counsel for the Board of Trade. Counsel for the *Mary A. Way's* American Captain Lewis

Anderson was Mr. Worsfold Mowll. The barque's owner Richard Duckett also attended the enquiry.

The six-year-old ship *Mary A. Way* was on a journey from Rotterdam to the West Coast of Africa with a cargo of spirits. The rum belonged to the ship's owner Duckett whilst the gin was cargo. The lengthy newspaper report of the enquiry proceedings contains the depositions made by several people and, as a consequence, there are contradictions regarding several matters such as the names of people and particularly the timing of events. Because of these inconsistencies authorial judgements were necessary to record what seems to fit best with all the evidence presented. For example, it is assumed the terms "captain" and "master" both apply to Captain Anderson as owner Duckett seems not to have been on the barque during the "stranding".



Barque

The events that were the subject of the enquiry unfolded as the *Mary A. Way* was anchored near the Roar Bank that starts at Dungeness Point and heads eastward roughly parallel to the shore.

The first to offer evidence was Michael Murphy, the chief boatman in charge of the Littlestone Lifeboat Station (New Romney on Dungeness), and coxswain of the lifeboat *Dr Hatton*. He stated that having seen distress rockets around 11 o'clock at night the lifeboat crew of 12 was called out and reached the barque about one o'clock in the morning. The craft was about three miles off the shore "just on the leeshore edge of the Roar Bank". The gale-force wind "had been blowing hard from the SW, bringing a heavy SW sea on to the Roar Bank." The captain reported that the ship's crew was working the pumps but the ship was sinking fast. Murphy also stated that a Dover lugger "was cruising about" with two members of the lugger's crew on board the barque. Later two more boats arrived to provide help, replacing the barque's crew on the pumps. "At about two o'clock in the morning I suggested to the master that with a steam tug he would save the ship and cargo. The master approved of it. A tug came about a quarter to three, and took the ship in tow."

Some 22 coastguard men were helping with the rescue, manning the pumps and such. At about 8 o'clock in the morning, as the tug made its way towards Lydden Spout, the barque capsized onto its starboard side. Murphy reported that, apart from the ship's boatswain, all the men were sober and, with one exception, all survived the incident by getting in boats or climbing on to the port side of the ship. The exception was Thomas Brice, a lifeboat

commissioned man, who drowned. The report made it clear that some thought the man's demise was due to the tug not being asked to slow down its towing-rate when Brice got caught in the barque's rigging. Others suggested that taking off his cork life-jacket to more effectively man-the-pumps could have been the major factor in his death as he was a strong swimmer who had a letter from the Royal Humane Society for saving life.

Given the exhaustion and sufferings of the lifeboat crew they left the wreck and sailed to Dover and the comfort of the Sailors' Home, passing the *Palmerston Tug* making its way towards the *Mary A Way*.

Mr. Worsfold Mowll stated that he was the one who suggested the aid of "steam power", in the form of a tug, rather than the Captain (or Murphy). The circumstances of the making of this suggestion by Dover-based Mowll are unclear.

Mr Cottingham requested that the court was adjourned as the hovellers^{2, 3} who were on the *Mary A. Way* before the coastguard arrived, would not attend the hearing without a summons. The hovellers duly attended the following day when Benjamin Burvill began his evidence by stating "I was out with our craft *Spartan*" in the area where, at about 5pm on the 11th December last, the *Mary A. Way* was anchored about half a mile off the land near the Roar Bank. "It had been blowing heavily There was no signal but I boarded her because I thought she was in a dangerous place... I told the master she was in a dangerous place and we would lay by her. He made no arrangement with us.... The captain would have

nothing to do with us. We took our boat and cruised inside". The *Spartan* obviously stayed in the calmer waters between the Bank and the shore.

The lugger *Spartan* returned to the ship at about 7pm as the tide was falling and the ship was nearly aground on the Bank but the Captain still would have no dealings with Burvill. "When the barque showed signals at about ten minutes to twelve" Burvill reported that he boarded the craft again and, with the barque then afloat at high tide, he "offered assistance, and the master wanted us to fetch a tug boat...My lugger went off for the *Cambria* steam tug and she came down. We wanted the captain to employ us but made no agreement with the master. Two of our men besides myself were on board. We made an agreement with the coastguard. We were there before the coastguard who came up at about one o'clock in the morning. The barque was then nearly sunk and I should think she was nearly full of water. I did not remain on board the barque against the wish of the master."

On board the *Mary A. Way* when she capsized, Burvill stated "I saw Brice in the water and tried to get him. I saw

him under a spar... he appeared to be dead... I think some of the men were a little the worse for liquor". Cross examined by Mr Mowll, Burvill stated that the *Spartan*, with its crew of six including himself and George Potter, was in the Dungeness area having approached a large ship that "did not want us". On the *Mary A. Way* "The captain offered us £15 to go for a steam boat" but "the captain would not employ us.... We did not work the pumps because we were not employed".

Captain Anderson reported that having gone down the English Channel past Beachy Head a gale forced him "to make to Dungeness for shelter". Whilst anchored near the Roar Bank the ship dragged her anchor and "She shortly afterwards struck the ground". Following the deployment of a jib sail "She swung out into deeper water, and I found she had sprung-a-leak. I sent up rockets for assistance, and the Coastguard came to my assistance. A tug came towards morning, I agreed with the tug to be towed to a place of safety for £500". Following statements regarding the trip to Dover and death of Brice, the Captain went on to say "I had frequent conversations with Burvill. He continued on board contrary to my orders. He called me to the other side of the deck and said, 'In this you will require some one to stand by you'. I asked what he meant, and his answer was 'You will have to go to court at Dover for losing this ship'. I asked what it had to do with him, and his answer was 'With a little understanding I am your man'. I ordered him to leave immediately, and he replied 'You will not speak in such terms tomorrow'."

The following day the Court gave its judgement that the Captain was correct



Three Masted Lugger

in seeking shelter at Dungeness but anchored too close to the Roar Bank (echoing Burvill's warning), and that the death of Brice was accidental.

What are we to learn from this account of a ship in distress? Obviously the *Spartan*, a three-masted 39 feet long lugger of 16 tons, and its crew were on the sea during a gale primarily to find employment but also to help fellow men in danger. As Burvill stated "We should not have come up to the Roar Bank had the ship not been there" – a dangerous place to be in a gale. The "agreements" referred to in the evidence were (mostly verbal) employment contracts to carry out assistance to those concerned. Certainly Burvill, who was born and raised in a cave at East Cliff⁴, and his five fellow boatmen, put their lives and boat at risk by going to sea in a gale, as did the lifeboat men and coastguards. One has to admire the skill and fortitude of these men who, unlike those on the steam-driven tugs, went to sea with only sail-power to assist their muscle-power.

Opportunism is not limited to the maritime zone. The Dover Express of 12th March 1875 reported that: "Thomas Burville was charged with stealing a bottle of gin", valued at 15d, part of the cargo from the stranded barque *Mary A. Way*. The plea that "the gin was given him by a boy" did not impress the magistrates who sentenced Thomas to "one month's imprisonment". It looks as though Thomas, who was a town-savenger (street sweeper etc), had been caught doing some personal scavenging. Thomas and Benjamin were first-cousins.

Finally, another aspect of Benjamin's life and character is revealed in reports of his death aged 78 years in the Dover press. Doubtless his association with the local Conservative Dover MP, Mr Wyndham, was a significant factor in the coverage. The Dover Chronicle of 15th January 1910 reported:

"Death of 'Old' Ben Burville

A very old and staunch supporter of Mr. Wyndham, whose one hope of late had been that he might live to vote once more for our Member, passed away on Wednesday night in the person of 'Old' Ben Burville, known to a great many of us as 'Grandpa'. A very great pleasure to him was last polling day, when Mr. Wyndham and Lady Grosvenor came to fetch him to the poll, and afterwards drove him up and down the Parade. A service in Old St. James' Church has been arranged, at 1.45, this Saturday, at which both Mr. Wyndham and Countess Grosvenor will be present, a piece of sympathy that has touched many of 'Old Ben's' friends."

This article's title questions whether these alongshore boatmen, the "Dover Sharks", were "Heroes or Hovellers?" The evidence suggests they were "guilty on both counts".

References

1. The Dover Society Newsletter, No. 65 August 2009, pages 26-31
2. Oxford English Dictionary regarding hovellers: Those boatmen, especially of the Kentish coast, who go out to wrecks, sometimes with a view to plunder.
3. Peter Burville, *An East Kent Family: the Burvilles*, 2011
4. Peter & Julie Burville, *The White Cliffs of Dover*, 2nd edition, Triangle Publications Dover, 2003