

1805

Narrative of the Loss of the Earl of Abergavenny, East Indiaman, Captain John Wordsworth, which drove on the Shambles, off the Bill of Portland, and sunk in twelve fathoms Water, February 5, 1805

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NARRATIVE OF THE LOSS OF THE
EARL OF ABERGAVENNY, EAST INDIAMAN,

CAPTAIN JOHN WORDSWORTH,

Which drove on the Shambles, off the Bill of Portland, and sunk in twelve fathoms Water, February 3, 1805.

Introductory remarks—The Earl of Abergavenny unfortunately separates from the convoy in going through the Needles—Proceeds under moderate sail, and bears up for Portland Roads—Driven furiously on the Rocks, and beats incessantly—Clears the Rocks, but makes a quantity of Water—Signal-Guns of distress fired—Melancholy situation of the Crew—All hands employed at the pumps—Great confusion on board—Noble conduct of the Officers—The Water above the orlop deck—A sudden shock—The Ship sinks—Some of the Crew cling to loose spars, rigging, &c.—Number saved—Character, &c. of Captain Wordsworth.

THE universal concern occasioned by the recent loss of the Earl of Abergavenny, has induced us to lay before our readers an accurate statement of this melancholy disaster, chiefly collected from the accounts which were given at the India-House, by Cornet Burgoyne, of his Majesty's 8th regiment of light dragoons, who had the command of the troops on board the above vessel, and by Mr. Gilpin, fourth officer of the ship, (who were among the few who fortunately escaped from the wreck,) and from the best information afterwards received.

On Friday, February the 1st, the Earl of Abergavenny, East-Indiaman, Capt. Wordsworth, sailed from Portsmouth, in company with the Royal George, Henry Addington, Wexford, and Bombay Castle, under convoy of his Majesty's ship Weymouth, Captain Draper.

The Earl of Abergavenny was engaged in the Company's service for six voyages, and this was the fourth on which she was proceeding. Her company consisted of

Seamen, &c.	160
Troops, King's and Company's.....	159
Passengers at the Captain's table.....	40
Ditto at the Third Mate's.....	11
Chinese.....	32

Total	402
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In going through the Needles they unfortunately separated from the convoy. The fleet, in consequence, lay to nearly the whole of the next day; but seeing nothing of the Weymouth, proceeded under moderate sail towards the next port, in hopes of being joined by the convoy. On the 5th, the convoy not appearing, it was deemed expedient to wait her arrival in Portland-Roads, particularly as the wind had become rather unfavourable, having shifted several points from the N. E. Captain Clarke, of the Wexford, being the senior commander, and consequently commodore, made the signal for those ships that had taken pilots on board to run into the Roads.

The Earl of Abergavenny having at about half past three P. M. got a pilot on board, bore up for Portland Roads with a steady wind, when on a sudden the wind

slackened, and the tide setting in fast, drove her rapidly towards the Shambles. The nearer she approached, the less she was under management; and being at last totally ungovernable, was driven furiously on the rocks, off the Bill of Portland, about two miles from the shore. She remained on the rocks nearly an hour, beating incessantly with great violence, the shocks being so great, that the officers and men could scarcely keep their footing on the deck. At four P. M. the shocks became less violent, and in about a quarter of an hour she cleared the rocks. The sails were immediately set, with an intention to run for the first port, as the ship made much water; but the leak increased so fast, that the ship would not obey the helm. In this situation, it was considered necessary to fire signal guns of distress. Twenty were fired: the danger did not, however, appear to those on board sufficient to render it necessary for the ship's boats to be hoisted out at this moment, as the weather was moderate, and the ship in sight of the fleet and shore.

The leak increased fast upon the pumps at 5 P. M. Soon after striking, the hand pumps started above six inches, and shortly after the water increased from six to eight feet in spite of every exertion at the pumps. All endeavours to keep the water under were found in vain, and night setting in rendered the situation of all on board melancholy in the extreme: the more so, as it was then ascertained that the ship had received considerable damage in her bottom, immediately under the pumps. All hands took their turn at the pumps, alternately baling at the fore hatchway. At eight o'clock their situation became still more dreadful, when it was found impossible to save the ship, which was eventually sinking fast and settling in the water. Signal guns were again discharged

incessantly. The purser, with the third officer, Mr. Wordsworth, and six seamen, were sent on shore, in one of the ship's boats, to give notice to the inhabitants of the distressed state of the ship and crew. At this time a pilot boat came off, and Mr. Evans, with his daughter, Miss Evans, Mr. Routledge, Mr. Taylor, a cadet, and Miss Jackson, passengers, embarked for the shore, notwithstanding a dreadful sea, which threatened them with almost instant loss.

For a few moments the general attention of the crew was diverted in observing the boats leave the ship; but these unfortunate people were soon reminded of their own approaching fate, by a heavy swell, which baffled almost every attempt to keep the ship above water. Every one seemed assured of his fate, and notwithstanding the unremitting attention of the officers, confusion commenced on board, as soon as it was given out that the ship was sinking. At 10 P. M. several sailors entreated to be allowed more liquor, which being refused, they attacked the spirit-room, but were repulsed by the officers, who never once lost sight of their character, or that dignity so necessary to be preserved on such an occasion, but continued to conduct themselves with the utmost fortitude till the last. One of the officers, who was stationed at the door of the spirit-room, with a brace of pistols, to guard against surprise in so critical a moment, at which post he remained even while the ship was sinking, was much importuned by a sailor, while the water poured in on all sides, to grant him some liquor. The man said he was convinced "it would be all one with them an hour hence." The officer, however, true to his trust in this perilous moment, had courage enough to repulse the man, and bid him go to his

duty with his fellow comrades, observing, "that if it was God's will they should perish, they should die like men."

At half past ten the water had got above the orlop deck, in spite of the endeavours of the officers and crew, who behaved in the most cool and exemplary manner. All on board were now anxiously looking out for boats from the shore, many wishing they had taken refuge in those that had already left the ship, as their destruction on board appeared inevitable. The utmost exertions became necessary to keep the ship above water till the boats came off from the shore. Unfortunately, in the general distress and agony of the moment, the ship's boats were not hoisted out, when every soul on board might possibly have been saved. At eleven o'clock, a fatal swell gave the ship a sudden shock: she gave a surge, and sunk almost instantaneously, two miles from Weymouth beach; with scarce five minutes warning, she went down by the head in twelve fathom water, after a heavy heel, when she righted and sunk with her masts and rigging standing. Many clung to loose spars, and floated about the wreck, but the majority took refuge in the shrouds. The severe shock of the ship going down, made several let go their hold, whilst others, by the velocity of the ship's descent, had not power to climb sufficiently fast to keep above the water. The Halsewell East Indiaman was wrecked within a few miles from this spot.—See Vol. II. p. 1-16.

When the hull of the ship touched the ground, about one hundred and eighty persons were supposed to be in the tops and rigging: their situation was beyond all description wretched: the yards only were above water, and the sea was breaking over them, in the dead of a

cold and frosty night. In about half an hour their spirits were revived, by the sound of several boats beating against the waves at a short distance; but, alas! how vain their hopes, when on hailing the boats, not one of them came to their assistance. The sound of them died away, and they were again left to the mercy of the rude waves. By twelve o'clock their numbers had much decreased: the swell had swept some off, whilst others were, from the piercing cold, unable longer to retain their hold. Every moment they perceived some friend floating around them, for a while, then sinking into the abyss to rise no more.

About this time a sloop was discovered; she had fortunately heard the signal guns, and came to an anchor close by the ship. The weather was moderate, and those who had survived were now promised a speedy delivery. The sloop's boat was immediately manned, and proceeded to the rigging that remained above water, when every person was taken off. The boat returned three times, taking twenty each turn. Nothing could be more correct than the conduct of the crew on this occasion: they coolly got into the boat, one by one, and those only as they were named by their officers. When it was supposed that every one was brought off, and the boat was about to depart for the last time, a person was observed in one of the tops: he was hailed to but did not answer. Mr. Gilpin, the fourth officer, (whose extraordinary exertions on this occasion, as well as throughout the whole of this unfortunate affair, entitle him to the highest commendation) returned to the wreck, and there found a man in an inanimate state, exhausted from the severe cold. He most humanely brought him down on his back, and took him to the boat; the man proved

to be serjeant Heart of the 22d regiment. Every possible care was taken of him, but to no effect: he died about twelve hours after he was landed. The sloop having now, as was supposed, taken on board all the survivors of the ship, returned to Weymouth. She had not, however, proceeded far, before it was perceived that Mr. Baggot, the chief officer, was close astern. The sloop immediately lay too for him; but this noble spirited young man, although certain of securing his own life, disregarded his safety, on perceiving Mrs. Blair, an unfortunate fellow passenger, floating at some distance from him. He succeeded in coming up with her, and sustained her above water, while he swam towards the sloop; but just as he was on the point of reaching it, a swell came on, and his strength being totally exhausted, he sunk and never rose again. The unfortunate Mrs. Blair sunk after him, and this generous youth thus perished in vain. It was nearly two o'clock before she weighed anchor from the wreck, but the wind being favorable she soon reached the port. On mustering those who had landed, it appeared that only 139 persons had reached the shore out of 402 who had embarked!

The greatest attention was paid to the unfortunate sufferers by the mayor and aldermen, as well as the principal inhabitants of Weymouth; and the purser was immediately dispatched to the India House with the melancholy intelligence.

At day-light, February the 6th, the top-masts of the ship were seen from Weymouth. During the time the passengers and crew remained in the tops she appeared to have sunk eight feet, and was considerably lower in the morning; it was therefore conjectured, that she had

sunk on a mud-bank. The Greyhound cutter was immediately stationed to guard the wreck, and the boats from the Rover succeeded in stripping the masts of the rigging. On the 7th her decks had not been blown up, and she appeared to remain in exactly the same state in which she had sunk. Her sinking so steadily is attributed to the great weight of her cargo, her floorings consisting chiefly of earthen-ware. The cargo of the ship was estimated at 200,000*l.* besides which she had on board dollars to the amount of 275,000 ounces, and is supposed to have been one of the richest ships that ever sailed for India. She was of the largest tonnage, and inferior only to the Ganges in the service, being at least 1500 tons burthen, and built for the China trade.

About 80 officers and seamen were saved, 11 passengers, 15 Chinese, 5 out of 32 cadets, and 45 recruits. The captain was drowned. He was nephew to the Captain Wordsworth, who formerly commanded the Earl of Abergavenny, and was considered one of the first navigators in the service. He was on his third voyage as captain, and painful to relate, perished with his ship, disdaining to survive the loss of so valuable a charge: his conduct, throughout the distressing scene, has been spoken of in terms of the highest praise. It is an extraordinary fact, that he felt such an unaccountable depression of spirits, that he could not be persuaded to go through the usual ceremony of taking leave of the Court of Directors on the day appointed; and it was not till the Wednesday following, which was specially fixed for that purpose, that he yielded to the wishes of his friends, and reluctantly attended the Court! He was a man of remarkably mild manners: his conduct was, in every

instance, so well tempered, that he was known, among his shipmates, by the title of "the Philosopher." As soon as the ship was going down, Mr. Baggot, the chief officer, went on the quarter-deck, and told him, "that all exertions were now in vain; the ship was rapidly sinking." Captain Wordsworth, who, no doubt, expected it, steadfastly looked him in the face, and, at last, with every appearance of a heart-broken man, faintly answered: "Let her go! God's will be done." These were the last words he uttered—from that instant he was motionless. In a few moments the ship sunk, and many who were climbing the shrouds endeavoured to save him, but without success. In this endeavour Mr. Gilpin was foremost, and made several unsuccessful attempts, at the evident risk of his own life.
