



The Penguin

The *Penguin* was an inter-island steamer built in 1864 by the T.B. Seath & Company in Glasgow, Scotland. The vessel was built of iron and had a reputation for speed and reliability. From 1875 she was bought and sold a few times until the New Zealand Union Steam Ship Company bought her in Scotland in 1879.

At one time the Union Steam Ship Company wanted to change the vessel's name from *Penguin* to *Tarawera*, but because of complicated regulations the decision was made to keep her original name.

Over the years the *Penguin* served on several different routes until 1895 when she started regular sailings between Wellington and Lyttelton. The *Penguin* had served the Union Company faithfully for over 25 years.

On the evening of 12 February 1909 the *Penguin* left Picton with 64 passengers and 41 crew onboard. As she entered Cook Strait the weather was starting to worsen and by the time she was halfway through the strait, the sky had turned grey and a south-east wind met the vessel as she came through the Sounds. This type of weather was not uncommon for this unpredictable stretch of water. Visibility was limited and Captain Naylor had set an outside course to keep well away from the rocky coast. He was searching for the harbour entrance when at 9:45pm there was a grating noise. The *Penguin* had struck Thoms Rock on the starboard side near the outfall of the Karori Stream.

The vessel started taking water on fast. As soon as it became clear the ship was sinking, the boats were lowered. The *Penguin* had enough boats and rafts to accommodate all 102 aboard. Safety provisions had exceeded government requirements but the weather was so fierce that launching lifeboats in such conditions was extremely difficult. The old maritime adage of 'women and children first' applied and many were loaded into the first boat. The boat was immediately struck underneath by the sea and capsized. Because of the weather conditions, others also capsized after being lowered into the water. Three of the five lifeboats reached the shore, but only a few survivors remained.

One of the survivors from one of the first lifeboats was a woman called Mrs Hannam, a steerage passenger travelling with her husband and four children. The three older children were lost in the water almost instantly. Mrs Hannam with a boy named Matthews managed to cling to one of the rower's seats of the lifeboats while it was overturned. Eventually they were washed ashore, still underneath the boat. Her baby, who she tied to the seat, died. They were found by one of the survivors and helped to the home of a nearby farmer.

Two life rafts were launched but both rafts were overturned and the occupants managed to reach to shore without further casualty. Just a short time after the ship had been evacuated, the cold water reached the engines and the boilers burst. The explosion sent the ship to the bottom but fortunately the rafts were far enough away to escape being dragged down. Captain Naylor, was the last man to leave the ship and was swept ashore clutching a piece of wreckage.

On reaching the shore some collapsed in the scrub and tried to keep warm, while some of the stronger survivors set off for a nearby farm. The farmer, Mr McMEnamin, did his best for them and sent men along the coast to search for more survivors. Except for the men from the rafts, only six others were found.

In the next few days a search of the coastline discovered sixty-one bodies, though only half were ever identified. The unclaimed bodies were buried in separate graves in the Karori cemetery.

The verdict of the inquest, by the Court of Inquiry, found the cause of the wreck to be an exceptionally strong flood tide and Captain Naylor's 'failure under existing circumstances to put to sea when he had run a course of 18 miles'. The captain's certificate was suspended for twelve months.

This event was Wellington's worst shipwreck, with a loss of seventy-five lives.

This tragic event helped to confirm the need for the Karori Rock light, so this loss will not happen again.

Acknowledgements: *The Wreck of the Penguin*, Bruce E. Collins, Steele Roberts Publishers. (available at the Museum of Wellington City & Sea Shop).