



CAPTAIN FREDERICK BRACEGIRDLE

MASTER MARINER

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(1831 – 1916)

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**Assistant Harbour Master in Sydney and Nautical Assessor to the
Department of Navigation at the Admiralty Court.**

No finer type of the true British sailor ever sailed into Sydney Harbour than Captain Frederick Bracegirdle, who for many years sailed all round the world in some of the finest of the old sailing ships. He had many a close call to death in some of the worst storms and hurricanes on record, but such close calls seemed only to strengthen his love of the sea, and deepen his faith in his maker.

He was of a quiet, unassuming, gentle nature and a sincere Christian with a humility and modesty rarely found in these days. With an ideal sense of honour, outspoken and just almost to a fault, he feared no man. If a thing was wrong, then it was wrong, there could be no compromise, and he said so, unafraid of what the consequence to himself might be, in fact, he realised the ideal expressed most aptly by Tennyson, viz

'because right is right, to follow right were wisdom in scorn of consequence.'

From Emerson's standpoint he could be accounted a great man, who says

'I count him a great man who inhabits a higher sphere of thought into which other men rise when they converse with him, our receptivity is unlimited, and thoughts and feelings contagious. His influence is still at work after his death, and, sooner or later, unseen forces urge some other soul to proclaim what they have felt and known of him'.

Tall and thin, with a wonderful vitality and activity of mind and body, he retained his mentality right up to the time of his death at the age of eighty-five years.

As an instance of this, the writer recalls the fact that on his eightieth birthday, Captain Bracegirdle went down to Sydney Heads in a rowing boat on a cold winter's morning in June to meet the P and O steamer "Beltana".

When he reached the vessel he refused to have a proper ladder let down for him in order to board her, but quickly climbed up the pilot's swaying rope ladder, which is, even for a young man, no easy task, he then piloted the "Beltana" up to the wharf.

He was never happier than when afloat, and the wilder the weather, and the greater the need of sou'wester and sea-boots, the more he revelled in it.

The Captain had a perfect mania for figures, his brain was never still, and even up to the end of his life, he was always working out some problem or another. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that his charts show all his voyages, with every day's run recorded, and the ship's position marked clearly thereon, nor that his Log Book contains a full and detailed account of peril and adventure that would in themselves make a thrilling narrative.

Captain Bracegirdle, who was born in Surrey, England, in the year 1831, left London in 1849 in the ship "SAMUEL ENDERBY". This vessel was sent out with a large number of passengers and officials with the object of colonising the Auckland Islands. Prior to this young Bracegirdle had made several voyages in the P. & O. Company's "ARIEL", which ran from Plymouth to Gibraltar, Malta and Alexandria. While in the ship "SAMUEL ENDERBY" at the Auckland Islands, young Bracegirdle had some exciting hunting after whales.

On one occasion in the ship's boat, having harpooned a whale which was tearing along dragging the boat after it, the line suddenly jammed, causing the boat to fill and turn turtle, and all were hurled into the sea. By some means they managed to cut the line attached to the whale and were thus enabled to cling to their upturned boat until assistance was sent from their ship, which, by this time was quite a few miles distant.

Between the years 1849 and 1865 the captain sailed in many well-known ships including the "AMAZON", "LA HOGUE", "ABYSSINIAN", "LIGHT OF THE AGE", "STAR OF ENGLAND", "BANGALORE", as well as the barques "BENGAL", "S{JRGE", "FANCY and "FANNY FISHER" trading to Amoy, Mauritius, Bombay, Kurrachee, Calcutta, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Point de Galle and many voyages from London to Australia and New Zealand.

The following incident is typical of the fearlessness of Captain Bracegirdle in doing what he considered his duty, despite the consequences to himself.

During one voyage of the ship "LIGHT OF THE AGE" from London to Moreton Bay, Queensland, a young apprentice fell from aloft overboard. Young Bracegirdle was First Officer, and, as the ship had a good way on her, without a second's hesitation, he ordered a boat to be lowered and himself went away, picked up the exhausted boy and returned to the ship.

Immediately the Captain appeared on deck he ordered young Bracegirdle off duty for rank insubordination owing to his not coming first to the Captain who was in his cabin, and asking for permission to lower the boat.

The absurdity of this can be understood when it is realised that every second wasted would have decreased the chances of effecting a rescue. Young Bracegirdle was kept off duty for three weeks, the Captain never deigning to speak to him.

When the ship arrived in Moreton Bay the passengers presented the First Officer with a testimonial, expressing admiration of him as an officer, and their sympathy with him in the injustice with which he was treated by his Captain.

One of Captain Bracegirdle's worst experiences was during a voyage in the ship "ABYSSINIAN" in the year 1859. Leaving Sydney on November 23rd he ran into a terrific hurricane when thirty eight days out, and to those who go down to the sea in ships the following extracts from the Captain's Log Book will probably prove of interest.

December 30th. Strong winds from the S.E. and squally, showery weather, steering N.W., took in main-sail and cross-jack. At 4 p.m. Barometer 29.76, furled the main-sail and cross-jack. At 6 p.m. took in all studding sails. At 7.30 p.m. took in main royal and fore and mizzen top gallant sails and two reefs of mizzen top-sail and re-stowed the head sails. Pumped ship at 33

inches. At midnight strong winds and squally with rain. Barometer 29.70, ship running 12 knots.

December 31st. Strong gales and weather threatening, took in top gallant sail and one reef of fore and main topsail. Barometer 29.70. Wind S.E, At 1 a.m. hard gales with a tremendous sea on. Barometer 29.60. At 2 a.m. the wind increasing to a heavy gale. Took in the mizzen topsail and stowed it. At 2.30 a.m. took in the foresail and sent all hands aloft to furl it, but the gale increased so rapidly that it blew the sail away from them after being partly stowed. At 3.30 a.m. it blew a complete hurricane. Barometer 29.20. Ship scudding under a close-reefed fore topsail and main topsail lowered on the cap. At 4 p.m. saw a fearful luminous appearance in the sky, took in the top foresail and sent all hands aloft to furl it. But the sail blew away from them.

At 4.30 a.m. the ship broached to on the port tack and split the main topsail all to pieces.

At 5.30 a.m. the hurricane increased, ship lying on her beam ends and the seas washing clean over her mast heads. Barometer 28.90, wind S.S.E.

At 6 a.m. the main top gallant masts carried away and took top gallant and royal yards with them, the royal yard blowing straight out, the same as a vane, for nearly an hour. Pumps at work all the time.

At 6.30 a.m. sounded pumps and found 7ft of water in the ship. Sent all hands to the pumps.

At 7 a.m. wind S., barometer 28.60.

At 7.30 a.m. the hurricane blew with fearful violence, ship on her beam ends and the seas washing over her, the crew were lashed to the pumps and sometimes they were completely under water.

At 8 a.m. the cross-jack and mizzen topsail blew away from the yards although they were stowed before the hurricane commenced.

At 8.20 a.m. the mizzen topmast blew away, took the st. quarter boat and davits with it, broke the rail on fore part of poop, unshipped one of the stanchions, completely demolished the Chief Officer's cabin, filled it with water and all the other cabins.

At 8.40 a.m. wind S.S.W. blowing with dreadful fury, found it quite impossible to stand on the poop, Barometer 28.20.

At 9 a.m. tiller ropes, relieving tackle and blocks carried away, the rudder flying from side to side, striking the stern post very much, and with great difficulty and danger got it secured with tackles, two seamen bruised badly with the wheel.

At 9.30 a.m. the main topmast blew away and took the topsail yard with it and broke the mainmast head just above the rigging. Crew lashed to pumps. 8ft of water in the ship at 10 a.m.

At 10.20 a.m. it fell calm suddenly as the ship reached the centre of the storm. Barometer 28.00, the sea up in pyramids. The hurricane returned with dreadful fury, ship on her beam ends, all expecting to go down every minute. No one could believe the fury of the storm except they had seen it, everyone dreadfully bruised with falling about, and all nearly blinded with the drift.

At 11 a.m. found the wreck of the topmasts and topsail yard ripping up the main and mizzen channels, and two of the side ports being stove in, the Captain and his officer deemed it advisable to cut away the wreck to try and save the ship.

At 11.20 a.m. Barometer 28.20.

At 11.30 a.m. hurricane moderating. Barometer 28.76, wind N.W. The ship a complete wreck, only the bowsprit, jibboom, fore, foretop mast, mizzenmast and part of mainmast left. Over 8ft of water in the hold and all the crew completely exhausted.. Lat. By Acc. 15.42 S. Long. Acc 91.23 E"

Two days later, when the hurricane had moderated, a group of bruised and exhausted sailors led by young Bracegirdle, held Divine Service on that wreck-strewn deck, returning thanks to the Almighty for preserving them throughout such terrible danger.

Although they did not arrive in Bombay until the 3rd of February, 1860, they pumped ship every two hours from the time the hurricane started on the 30th of December, 1859.

In October 1866, Captain Bracegirdle severed his connection with his much loved sailing ships, and left Sydney in the R.M.S. "KAIKOURA" of the Panama Mail Company. She was the second mail steamer to cross the Pacific Ocean, and he made seven voyages in her between Sydney and Panama via Wellington, New Zealand.

After this Captain Bracegirdle was for fifteen years and eight months in the Clarence & Richmond River Steamship Company's service in command of the steamers "GRAFTON", "BALL[NIA]", "AGNES IRVING", "NEW ENGLAND", "CITY OF GRAFTON", and "WOODBIJRN" and had many narrow escapes in some of the worst gales experienced on the New South Wales coast.

On July 1st 1875, while in command of the steamer "NEW ENGLAND", with many passengers on board, he was forced to take shelter in Port Stephens from a heavy gale, when the word came that the steamer "BOOMERANG" was in grave peril on the Coast a few miles away.

Captain Bracegirdle immediately went out in the "NEW ENGLAND" to render assistance, he found the "BOOMERANG" drifting helplessly in the breakers, her fires out, one man killed at the wheel and the ship in a sinking condition. It was with the utmost difficulty and danger that he approached the hapless steamer close enough to get a line aboard and so was enabled to tow the steamer, with its exhausted crew and passengers, into safety at Port Stephens. For this courageous act, Captain Bracegirdle was presented with a testimonial and a very handsome silver Tea and Coffee Service suitably inscribed. The writer cannot do better than quote from the account of an eye-witness, published in the papers a few days later, which reads:-

"I had an opportunity of witnessing a display of coolness, courage and good seamanship that I gladly bear testimony to. Nothing but first class seamanship prevented us from colliding with that helpless "BOOMERANG". The difficulty of getting hawser on board her, and after doing so to tow her through a dark night to the safe waters of Port Stephens - with an exhausted crew and the lives of about sixty passengers to study - was a sight that made me feel proud and thankful that we have such a manly Christian sailor as Captain Bracegirdle sailing out of the port of Sydney."

Captain Bracegirdle retired from the sea in the year 1884 entering the Government Service as Assistant Harbour Master and Pilot of Sydney in the year above mentioned.

On reaching the age limit in November 1901 he retired from the Public Service, and was then appointed Nautical Assessor to the Department of Navigation at the Court of Marine Inquiry, and was frequently called upon to give a much valued assistance into the cause of collisions and wrecks.

Captain Bracegirdle was one of the oldest members of the League of Ancient Mariners in Sydney, and right up to the time of his death, took a keen and active interest in all shipping matters, but, like so many of the real, old sailing-ship men, he had a deep love and reverence for the old sailing ships, and with a quiet humour, voiced contempt of the method in which the present generation are forced to gain their experience at sea behind "smoke and a funnel".

In the year 1867, when Captain Bracegirdle was in the Panama Company, he married and brought his bride to live at Balmain East, and from then till 1916 - over forty-nine years - they resided there with their family, closely associating themselves with the Church and many charitable movements, and in fact everything that was for the betterment of the suburb in which they made their home. During this long period they, necessarily, saw many changes take place.

The writer has frequently heard them tell of having to use a lantern at night in order to see their way through the thick scrub it was necessary to traverse in order to get to their church, or when visiting friends. This is very difficult to imagine now, as their old home "Kaikoura" is in the east end, near Darling Street, the centre of a thickly populated area, lighted by electricity and surrounded with all the evidence of modern civilisation.

Captain Frederick Bracegirdle died, full of honour, at the age of eighty-five, on the 21st February 1916, and as a testimony to his good and useful life one cannot do better than quote the words of Judge Backhouse, on taking his seat on the Bench at the Marine Court on the day after the Captain's death, he said:-

"We have all heard with the greatest regret, since the last sitting of this Court, of the death of Captain Bracegirdle. He was certainly the oldest of the Nautical Assessors in years, and had been connected with this Court from shortly after its inception.

He was a good friend and one of our finest and most capable of Seamen.

His vast experience and knowledge were of the greatest assistance To the Court and he helped materially in very many difficult cases.

We are deeply sorry he will assist us no more.

He lived a good and useful life and never failed to keep his watch Faithfully, and we can rest assured that all is for the best, and feel Such confidence as is expressed in the words of those who wove The sailors garland:-

*The watch is set, and through the night
We hear the seamen with delight
Proclaim - "All's well!"*

This is a copy of a typewritten manuscript, with a handwritten inscription by Captain Frederick's son Leighton, on the first page, 'From official record in Public Library, Sydney'.

It is at this time the only example we have of Captain Bracegirdle's Log Books, Maps and Diaries to outline the life and career of a very extraordinary man, and the founder of a line of brave and courageous men who have served their country with distinction.

Captain Frederick's log books, charts and diaries have vanished. We hope they are being cared for as old documents should, and look forward to someday finding and studying their full contents.

Until that time, here is a small eulogy on his life as written by an unknown friend.

It is written in the style of those times. I make no effort to change anything in this essay, trusting that you will be as amazed as I on my first reading and be proud of Australia's own history.

*Julie Tadman
Brisbane 1999*