



Woollahra Library Local History Centre



The Loss of the Dunbar – August 1857

Time:	about 12:00 midnight, on the evening of 20 th – 21 st August, 1857.	Details of the ship:	- wooden, three masted square rigged ship of 1,321 tons. - waterline length : 201feet (59m). - beam (width) : 35feet (10m). - built in the yards of James Laing, and launched in 1853.
Place:	on the rocky reef below the Outer South Head of Port Jackson, about 500m south of 'The Gap'.	Command:	Captain James Green
Survivors:	one, Able Seaman James Johnson	Owner:	Duncan Dunbar, of London
Victims:	121		

Voyage : Departed Plymouth, 31st May, 1857.
Wrecked just short of her destination (Sydney) 81 days later.

The clipper *Dunbar*, on the eighty-first day of her second voyage to New South Wales, arrived off Botany Bay in the early evening of 20th August 1857. The weather conditions were already bad and worsening as the *Dunbar* made her way northwards up the coast towards her destination – Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour).

Many of those on board the *Dunbar* were residents of the colony of New South Wales, returning after spending time in England. They were within hours of being reunited with their families, friends and homes after almost three months at sea – or so they believed.

The weather, by nightfall, was extreme. Fifty years later, Henry Packer, a former signalman who had been stationed in 1857 at the South Head Signal Station, could still recall the force of the wind, rain and seas on the night when the *Dunbar* was lost. Packer described the seas as 'mountainous', and the sky hung with 'dirty, leaden clouds, the sort that mariners dread'.

As night closed in, heavy rain fell, which would have made it all but impossible for the sailors on the *Dunbar* to see their way. The storm continued all that night, and Henry Packer spoke of seeing sea-spray rising higher than the top of the Macquarie Light-tower on the following morning. By that time, however, the *Dunbar* had been reduced to wreckage, and the lives lost of all but one of the 122 who had sailed on her.

What had happened to the *Dunbar*? The details of how this disaster occurred have been disputed since August 1857, despite the fact that the only survivor, James Johnson, was a sailor, and so was able to provide a useful account of the ship's final minutes.

What *is* agreed is that Captain Green and his crew could not see the land and its features, and that Green had miscalculated the position of his ship in relation to the land.

Ships such as the *Dunbar* were not able to change course quickly. By the time that 'breakers' (breaking waves) were sighted by the ship's watch, warning of the rocky reef off Outer South Head, it was too late. The ship was already too close to the hazard, and the crew did not have time to successfully turn the ship and steer away from danger. Just about midnight, the ship was smashed against the rocks, losing her masts, and then breaking up in less than 15 minutes. The huge seas swept her passengers, and all but one of her crew, to their deaths.

It was not until the big seas receded that James Johnson, the sole *Dunbar* survivor, was sighted in a precarious position on the cliffs below, just out of reach of the waves. Thirty-six hours after his ordeal began, he was rescued through the heroic efforts of a young Icelander, Antonie Wollier, who climbed down the cliff to Johnson, so that he could be winched to safety.

The tragedy gripped the colony. Newspapers carried lengthy and detailed reports, and there was an outpouring of public grief when, four days after the event, a funeral procession wound down George Street, which was lined by crowds. Over 100 carriages followed the hearses to what is now Camperdown Cemetery, where a mass grave provided a final resting-place for the many unidentified bodies recovered from the sea. The fact that many Sydney residents were among the victims would have intensified the mourning in what was still a relatively small, colonial township.

Many people had their own stories to tell about the tragedy. Among the more interesting is the tale of Mrs Graham, wife of the South Head Signal Master, who claimed to have dreamt of the tragedy as it unfolded on the cliffs below the Signal Station. Three times during the night she woke, begging her husband to rescue a poor man trapped on the rocks in the storm, and after James Johnson's rescue, she identified him as the man she had seen in her dream.

More than a century later, the name *Dunbar* remains a household word in Sydney. It is undoubtedly the most well-known shipwreck on the coastline of New South Wales, the story kept alive by regular commemorations and the establishment of a monument at The Gap, Watsons Bay, featuring an anchor recovered from the site of the *Dunbar* wreck.

Why did the story of this disaster lodge so firmly in the minds of Sydneysiders? Perhaps it was the fact that so many perished so near to their destination, having safely weathered the long sea journey from the other side of the world. Perhaps it was the heroic story of Johnson, and his gallant rescuer. And no doubt the wild and lonely setting of the South Head in stormy weather has added to the impact that the wreck of the *Dunbar* has made on our local history.

Sources

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* **Photograph of the Dunbar anchor by Bruce Crosson, 1986.**



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