

Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of the Shipwreck of the *Royal Charter*, lost off Anglesey, Wednesday 26 October 1859 – a Personal Story Yet Unpublished

Rosemarie A Searle, August 2009



Little did we know as children tiptoeing cautiously among the graves and tombstones of the quaint churchyard at St Mary's Hagley, Tasmania, what lay behind the words, "That's John Loone's grave!" Our seniors would stand in reverent solemnity looking at the mossy tombstone angled in the ground, framed against the outline of the picturesque church and spire.



St Mary's Hagley, Tasmania

When I stood as an adult on the rugged Welsh coastline of Anglesey, looking to where the sea crashed relentlessly onto the rock platform below, I, too, stood in awe. With youth behind me, and now greater knowledge, I revisited the past with incredulity, marvelling at the events which brought my forebears to Australia. Our future was determined in this location.

Storm of All Storms

On the night of Tuesday 25 October 1859, Britain was whipped with storms of such fury and intensity which resulted in one hundred and thirty three ships being sunk. Another ninety ships were badly damaged and a lighthouse keeper was killed by flying debris. Within the space of two days twice the number of people perished at sea than in the whole of the previous year. Hundreds died around Great Britain. Admiral Fitzroy of the Meteorological Office described the storm which arose as a "complete horizontal cyclone". At that time, there was no advance warning for shipping.

The Royal Charter

The *Royal Charter*, originally a sailing vessel, was built on the River Dee for Gibbs, Bright & Co., of the Australian Steam Navigation Co. With three tall clipper masts, and a single funnel, the iron-hulled ship was transformed into a screw steamer with an auxiliary steam engine. Being 336 feet in length, 2749 tons in displacement, and averaging 300 miles a day, she afforded, not only luxury, but also a rapid passage from Liverpool to Melbourne in an unprecedented 60 days.



<http://www.agius.com/family/ancestor.htm>

The *Royal Charter* and its passengers were within reach of home port as they passed by the Skerries and around the Isle of Anglesey to line up to bring them safely into Liverpool. Presentations had been made to Captain Taylor and fifty nine days of journey were nearly over. The hope and expectation in every heart were about to be dashed. Most passengers did not arrive.

The ship was launched in 1855, the same year Great Britain granted responsible government to Van Diemen's Land. In 1856 the name of the colony was changed to Tasmania, after Abel Tasman, the first European to reach there. Convicts had been offloaded there since 1803, but transportation ceased in 1853. As Great Britain and Ireland struggled to cope with the rising poor and the social disruption of the Industrial Revolution, many viewed Van Diemen's Land as either a place of horror or of new opportunity.

John Loone



John Loone

Eliza Loone with grandson, Gilbert Deeley

1854, John Loone, a pardoned convict in Van Diemen's Land, received a long awaited letter from home bringing bad news. His brother, William, my great grandfather, in Birmingham had died leaving his wife, Eliza, and dependants without support. John was troubled about their fate. Both he and his brother had worked at the brass foundry in Bartholomew Street, Birmingham belonging to Timothy Smith Esq.

As a twenty one year old, John was convicted of housebreaking. He received a life sentence at Stafford Assizes on 12 March 1830. After time in the hulk, he was transported to Van Diemen's Land on the *John*, arriving on 29 January 1831. His disposition and behaviour were noted as good, but he received seventy five lashes for stealing five potatoes from a farm. Was he just hungry? A conditional pardon was granted to him on 17 February 1842. John set himself to work hard. He purchased tracts of land west of Launceston at Quamby and Hadspen. He was now in a favourable position to assist his family in Birmingham.

Eliza Loone received a letter from John dated 7 August 1855 offering condolences and enclosing a cheque for £10. In it, John promised lifetime provision for Eliza and all her family. The original letter is still in existence. The decision was made to bring her and her family to Australia so that he could look after her, and it was thus that John embarked on a journey from Launceston in Tasmania to Liverpool to escort the large family out to Australia.

The *Royal Charter* Leaves Melbourne for Liverpool

Returning from Britain to Australia, the *Royal Charter* travelled via Fremantle to Hobson's Bay, Victoria, and picked up some 400 people as well as great wealth in gold from the goldfields and other cargo. The gold bullion was valued at £322,440, and passengers also carried their personal fortunes in sovereigns and gold bars. Most were Australian families who were able to revisit their former homeland because of the wealth made in the goldfields of Victoria and Western Australia. John Loone boarded the ship in Melbourne and occupied a second class steerage. Others were men returning to their families in Britain and maybe, like John Loone, hoping for a betterment in the situations of their families. Captain James Taylor commanded the *Royal Charter* as it departed from Melbourne, Victoria, on 26 August 1859, bound for Liverpool.

The Voyage

The ship made good progress, and on the fifty eighth day out of Melbourne, Australia, thirteen passengers disembarked in the Irish Sea into the pilot boat *The Petrel* to be taken to Queenstown, Ireland. Now the *Royal Charter* was on the home run to Liverpool.

Passing Holyhead at 4.30 pm on 25 October, a strong breeze from the east-northeast sprang up. At 7.45 pm as they rounded Anglesey past the Skerries the northerly wind strengthened, pushing the ship toward land. By 10 pm, the tide nearing high water, the ship was put under steam. At 11 pm, the captain received eleven riggers from the steam tug *United Kingdom* to transport them to Liverpool. As the storm increased, the port anchor was let go in sixteen fathoms and then the starboard anchor. The small size of the steam engine and the screw compared to the size of the ship meant that it was unable to hold the ship from the coast. Rocket and gunfire signals were shot into the darkness to no avail, and when the anchor hawsers parted, the stern struck land. The masts and rigging were cut away, but they fouled the screw and the ship was left unmanageable. Between 3 am and 6 am it drifted and hit against the sand and rocks with the high seas pounding it furiously.

False Hope of Safety

The foremast was cut away at 3.45 am, but the ship was already broadside to the land. At



daylight, it was hoped that the passengers might be able to land safely on the shore some ten yards away. At 6 am, a brave Portuguese seaman, Joseph Rogerson, later honoured for his bravery, jumped overboard. With a rope tied to his waist, he fastened a hawser to the cliff and a boatswain's chair was attached. Twenty six people were taken to shore. It was hoped that at daylight all the passengers could be taken to safety, but it was not to be.

Shoreline at wreck site near Moelfre

The Ship Breaks Up

Mountainous waves crashed over the ship relentlessly during the predawn hours. Suddenly, at 7 am, the ship broke longitudinally and then midship. The ship's chaplain, Rev. Hodge, was leading a prayer meeting below. As the ship broke open, timber and machinery as well as people fell into the gaping hole. Those below were crushed and others were washed overboard against the ship and the rocks. The majority of those saved on deck were aware that the ship had broken in two. Hazardous debris and timber cluttered the sea. Passengers jumped into the sea with their gold in bags around them and perished as they sank in the storm-tossed water.



Photo of Painting of the *Royal Charter* in the Moelfre Museum

At 8 am, the villagers of Moelfre, who gathered on the cliff and below, saw the terrible sight of mutilated bodies washed ashore and the broken ship lashed by the fury of the sea. It was said, "Iron is paper when it comes to the rocks of Moelfre." Of the close to five hundred people on board, only forty one were saved, which makes John Loone's survival even more amazing.

Bodies were hauled from the sea and taken over the cliff tracks to the tiny church at Llangello where they were laid on straw for identification. The mangled living were cared for by the locals in their homes. Our John Loone was one such. I remember my grandmother, Ada Loone, tells how her father had said that John's hands bore the scars from those rocks till the day he died. She also retold the story of his being tended by Welsh women on the stone floor of a Welsh cottage. Some people later accused the residents of Moelfre of being more interested in the gold and booty than in the people, but we can thank them for their care of our John Loone.

The Llangello Church

When my husband and I visited the Llangello church, it was an eerie feeling to stand where so much death and pain had been so visibly displayed. So many people's dreams had been dashed and the destinies of families changed. Many bodies were so badly mutilated that they could not be identified. No superior officer, or female, or child was saved. The stories of many of the passengers have been recorded in detail and portray a microcosm of life in the colonies and on the goldfields. The inquests and reports of the shipwreck furnish much fascinating insight at various levels.



The lives of not only the passengers, but also of those involved in the rescue were deeply impacted. Llangello's vicar, the Rev. Stephen Hughes, committed himself tirelessly to assist the relatives of the dead and communicate with them. The trauma of such mass burial and the tragic sight of bodies along with the task of letter writing seems to have taken its toll on him in an early death a couple of years later. In the Llangello churchyard, a large obelisk was erected in memory of the unidentified passengers. After he visited the site, **Charles Dickens**, the famous writer, contributed to this memorial by sales of his book, *The Uncommercial Traveller* in which he immortalised the shipwreck. Other bodies were buried in various churchyards on the island of Anglesey.



On the windswept cliffs above the rugged rock platform near the town of Moelfre, stands another monument recording the fateful events of Wednesday 26 October 1859.

One can only imagine the grief and shock as relatives gathered on the Liverpool docks to welcome their loved ones' arrival, only to learn that they had perished. Newspaper articles of the day recorded graphic stories. Captain Taylor's wife and two little children awaited his return in vain, as did so many others. It was not until 27 October that London received news of the wreck, and much later in January 1860 that the colonies of Victoria and Tasmania heard of the disaster. Many of the personal stories of the passengers have been recorded, but that of John Loone is little known.

Memorial to Wreck of *Royal Charter* near Moelfre

After being cared for and revived by the Welsh villagers, John, along with the few remaining survivors, was conveyed to Liverpool a day or so after the shipwreck. I have no knowledge of what took place in the intervening time between John's next movements. My conjecture is that his sister-in-law, Eliza, occupied with the care of her family, would have been awaiting John's arrival in Birmingham. Having packed for herself and her children, she would have been

farewelling her loved ones, especially her elderly parents, knowing that she might never revisit her homeland. Her family were principled people who had already suffered for their beliefs. Of Anabaptist persuasion, they were Nonconformists. They did not baptise their children, but encouraged baptism as adults when personal faith was espoused.

Back to Birmingham and Return to Australia

After disembarking at Liverpool, John Loone still had a lengthy journey to Birmingham. What were his thoughts as he returned to the home town and family he had left ignominiously in 1830? Twenty nine years of pain, shame and purpose were wrapped up in this journey and by the grace of God, he had survived an horrendous event in which so many had died.

The next record of John's movements were three months later when on 26 January 1860, he embarked in London on the small barque *Lady Milton* bound for Melbourne, Australia. What courage it must have taken to embark on a small ship again after surviving such trauma! The travellers of those days were well familiar with the perils of the sea. The journey to Melbourne, Australia would take 140 days, compared with the much shorter time of the slick clipper, the *Royal Charter*, and no doubt not nearly as comfortable. But they arrived safely on 2 May 1860.

His sister-in-law, Eliza, accompanied him, along with several of her children and other nieces and nephews, the children of his brother, Thomas. Eliza's younger son, Alfred, was my great grandfather. He had his tenth birthday as they arrived in Melbourne in May 1860. On the same voyage there was also a widow, Mary Harriss, with her two year old son, Arthur. An older brother, John, son of William and Eliza, married the widow, Mary, possibly on the voyage from Britain to Australia, and Arthur took on the name of Loone. He would later become known as the author of one of Tasmania's early histories, *Tasmania's North East*, by the Hon. A. W. Loone.

Young John, together with his wife and ten year old Arthur, remained in Melbourne, Victoria, after their arrival, and a son, William Charles Loone, was born. In 1862 they travelled to Launceston, Tasmania, aboard the steamer, the *Black Swan*, as A. W. Loone records in his history. He slept out in the open at Nine Mile House, now Dilston on the Tamar River, before going to Scott's New Country.

However, our John Loone took Eliza and her children from Melbourne to Launceston, and then to his property at Quamby near Hagley in the district of Westbury. How did Eliza view this new land with its wide open spaces, after the industrialised smoky city of Birmingham? Quite an adjustment!

1861 – A Double Wedding

On 17 October 1861, there was an occasion to celebrate. Not only did John Loone marry his brother William's widow, Eliza, but her daughter, Sarah Jane, was married to Philip Dickens in John Loone's home according to the Methodist rites.

Other Loones also arrived on the *SS Curling*, having left Liverpool on 25 February 1860. They too found their way to Tasmania. So the one hundred and fifty eight acre Rosella Farm became the hub of a more secure and settled life for the Loones.



Paintings of Rosella Farm, Whitemore, Tasmania, in Ada Loone's autograph book, 1912

When John Loone died sixteen years later, Eliza's son, Alfred, my great grandfather, inherited John's farm at Quamby. No doubt the latter years of John's life were lived with enjoyment of the land and a sense of knowing that despite the dark and dangerous years of his life, he had fulfilled his destiny. In 1877 he was buried in the picturesque church of St. Mary's, Hagley, founded by Sir Richard Dry. John's wife, Eliza, who died at the age of 80, is also buried at Hagley.

The Loones and all the associated family branches have spread throughout Tasmania and Australia, making a significant contribution to the areas of stage coaching, mining, and infrastructure, amongst other things. As for the *Royal Charter*, there are many other stories that have been told, and maybe are yet to be told, but from this tragic episode come one other benefit. So bad were the weather conditions across Britain on that fateful night that Captain Robert Fitzroy, head of the Meteorological Office considered ways of warning mariners of impending storms. The *Royal Charter* became known as "the ship that gave us all the weather forecast".

<http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/corporate/pressoffice/anniversary/charter.html>

Sources

1. Personal family history documents in possession of Rosemarie A Searle
2. Personal photos taken by Rosemarie Searle in Tasmania and Anglesey
3. A W Loone, *Tasmania's North East*
4. Ian Clarke, Original letter from John Loone to his sister-in-law Eliza
5. Glass photos of John and Loone, framed in timbers from wreck of the *Royal Charter* in possession of Rosemarie A Searle
6. Internet files on the *Royal Charter*, including:
<http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/corporate/pressoffice/anniversary/charter.html>
<http://www.agius.com/family/ancestor.htm>
www.old-merseytimes.co.uk/ROYALCHARTER.html
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