

The Magic Lantern

A SLIDE WITH A HISTORY – HMS CAPTAIN

Gwen Sebus

Years ago I bought a slide showing the image of a ship. It caught my eye because of the unusual shape of the deck. On the wooden frame was handwritten: "H.M. Turrett [sic] Ship 'Captain' Capsized 1870. 500 lives lost".

After I had scanned the image, I started to look for information about this ship. Using just the words 'capsized



An engraving of HMS Captain in the Bay of Biscay

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1870. 500 lives lost' I found a website devoted to it. However, it appeared that there was no photograph of the ship in sail, only one when it was under construction. I sent my scanned image to the webmaster who turned out to be the great-grandson of one of the stokers who perished. I asked if he had seen a magic lantern slide of the ship before. Within an hour I got an answer back – no, he did not know there was a magic lantern slide made and could he use the image for his website? He also said that the image on the slide was not quite correct. The smoke from the chimney was going in the wrong direction and, of course, it is impossible for a man in a rowing boat to reach a large ship in full sail! A short time later my slide was on the website.

THE ILL-FATED SHIP

After the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, the British navy dominated the oceans of the world. An unfortunate side-effect of such success was that major development in warships virtually came to a standstill. While other countries were quick to embrace steam power and iron hulls, Britain stayed with sails and wooden hulls, the first iron ship only being commissioned in 1840.

Eventually, during the Crimean War (1853-1856), Captain Cowper Coles RN invented the first rotating gun turret and successfully demonstrated it on a raft. The turret enabled a much wider firing arc so ships could engage from any angle and convinced the Admiralty that they needed to replace the old broadside arrangement when arming iron or ironclad ships. The Admiralty achieved promising results with the turret on various types of floating or short-haul vessels. However, the Royal Navy needed long-haul ocean-going vessels to protect its worldwide empire. While steam engines were used in ships at this time, the technology had some way to go before long-haul ships could rely on steam alone – a 'steam and sail' combination was needed. To then add a



THE MAGIC LANTERN WITHIN

These are the first few images in our new series, suggested by John Townsend, featuring slides with magic lanterns, lantern slides or peepshows. If you have any such 'self-referencing' slides, please send them to us (editor@magiclantern.org.uk).



'Going to the Show'



With thanks to Richard Rigby for the long slide, Lester Smith for the travelling (galantee) showman and John Townsend for the slipping slide

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rotating gun turret to rigging, sails and masts was challenging. Coles had a proposal but in 1865 the Admiralty rejected this in favour of one by Sir Edward Reed, the Navy's Chief Constructor. This ship, HMS *Monarch*, was built at HM Chatham Dockyard and completed in 1869. Meanwhile an outraged Coles launched a public campaign and, under great political pressure, the Admiralty allowed Coles to build a ship to his design at a commercial shipyard, Laird Brothers in Birkenhead. The rigging was fixed to an extra deck above the two gun turrets (see slide image), so the guns did not fire through it. A further measure was to use tripod style masts that reduced the quantity of rigging needed.

However, neither the Controller of the Royal Navy, Admiral Sir Robert Spencer Robinson, nor its Chief Constructor were convinced about Coles' design and responsibility for failure appeared to rest with Coles and the builders. Others too had serious concerns. Among them were that the ship's freeboard (distance from deck to waterline) was too short, risking flooding to the gun deck, the ship was too heavy and the centre of gravity too high. During construction some of these potential problems deepened, possibly due to insufficient supervision as Captain Coles was ill. The tonnage increased from around 7000 tons to almost 7900 tons. This additional weight resulted in the ship floating nearly two feet lower in the water, reducing the freeboard from 8 feet in the design to just over six feet in the finished vessel. HMS *Monarch*, for example, had a freeboard of 14 feet. The centre of gravity in the new ship, already thought too high, rose nearly one foot during the build, reducing the ship's capability to recover from heeling. Nevertheless, the new ship, called HMS *Captain*, was completed in March 1870.

Captain Hugh Talbot Burgoyne VC was appointed as the commanding officer and HMS *Captain* was commissioned on 30 April 1870. The ship appeared to perform well under initial sea trials and she undertook two separate longer-distance voyages in July and August that year, to Vigo in Spain and to Gibraltar. Gunnery trials in Vigo showed the first real sign of trouble. The *Captain* rolled heavily during a salvo, nearly to the angle at which she could be expected to capsize.

On 6 September 1870 HMS *Captain* was cruising off Cape Finisterre on the west coast of Spain, with ten other ships. Throughout the afternoon the wind strengthened and the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Sir Alexander Milne, who was on board observing until 5:30pm, was somewhat alarmed to see that as the sea became rougher, waves

washed over the deck. The weather continued to deteriorate and sail was reduced. Shortly after midnight the ship was heeling over and the crew felt it lurch to starboard twice. Before the captain could take any further remedial action, the roll increased and the ship capsized, sinking with the loss of around 480 lives (the memorial at Westminster Abbey records "49 officers and 402 men and boys"). Accounts differ but only 18 or 27 survived, many on a lifeboat which had broken free. Both Captain Burgoyne and Captain Coles, went down with their ship. All the other ships, including HMS *Monarch*, weathered the storm.

The subsequent investigation, held in the form of a court martial, concluded that the ship was insufficiently stable. In fact an 'inclining test' carried out on 29 July 1870 showed this but HMS *Captain* had already set sail on her final voyage before these results were known. The inquiry concluded that: "the *Captain* was built in deference to public opinion expressed in Parliament and through other channels, and in opposition to views and opinions of the Controller and his Department".

When the news of the ship's loss reached England, there was an outburst of sympathy for relatives of the lost men, most of whom lived in Plymouth, Devonport and Portsmouth. A total of 30 wives were widowed in a single Portsmouth street.

AFTERWORD

A few years after my slide appeared on the website, a short reading was added to the MLS Readings Library telling the sad story of the ill-fated ship. I sent a copy to the webmaster and we discussed whether the slide was made before the disaster to show the new experimental design of the warship or afterwards to illustrate the disaster. I think both are true: the slide was originally made to show the new design but the ship capsized so soon – a mere five months after the launch, on her third test voyage – that the slide itself featured in the news. He had also found out that the slide image was based on a picture in *The Graphic*.

The 'HMS *Captain*' website is no longer active. You can find information about this ship online and in books such as *The World's Greatest Sea Disasters* by Kenneth S. Allen and *The World's Worst Warships* by Antony Preston.

Do you have a slide with a history? Please contact Mary Ann Auckland and Gwen Sebus so we can feature it in The Magic Lantern.