

Ship Portraits: Tug *Champion* Towing Ship *Leicester Castle*

Eric Ruff



Author's photo

"Tug *Champion* Towing Ship *Leicester Castle*" by William Edgar (oil on canvas, 23" x 34").

The painting illustrates the *Leicester Castle* being towed from Auckland, New Zealand, to Sydney, Australia, in 1909. This painting is by William Edgar, an Australian ship portrait painter. Like others of his day, he worked for one of several companies that produced photographs and paintings of visiting vessels for their customers. This seems to be unique to Australia – European and American artists were generally 'freelance' artists.

Interest in this painting lies more with the story behind it than in the picture itself. Although we can learn a number of things from this portrait, perhaps the most interesting question is why would Captain Charles C. Hunter, who took command just prior to this incident, be interested in a painting that featured a tug more prominently than his own ship? Many of these Australian artists actually went to sea to photograph incoming vessels and then used photos to produce their paintings. So the answer to our question may be that since the ship being towed would not be under sail or, as in this case, would be damaged, the resultant painting would not show the ship at its best. And at this point in the ship's history, the towing situation would be of interest. As well, this painting might have suited Captain Hunter, as it would indicate

that he had been entrusted to take command, refit and sail the ship back to Europe.

Leicester Castle was an iron-hulled full-rigged ship built in 1882 at Southampton, England by Oswald, Mordaunt & Company. It was 273.4' x 40.3' x 24.2' and was 2009 Registered Tons, 2067 Gross Tons. Her port of Registry was Liverpool, England, 1882-1911, and Drammen, Norway, 1911-1923, where she was known as *Vik*. Her final fate was to be broken up in the United States in 1923.

Our story began on 12 May 1908 when the *Leicester Castle* left Cardiff, Wales, with a cargo of coal bound for Pisagua on the west coast of South America. On 11 October the ship arrived at Montevideo, Uruguay, towed by the steamer *Washtenaw*, having been picked up at sea in distress. Her master, Captain Robert Brown,¹ in a 29 June 1909 interview with a reporter from the *Auckland Star*, mentioned that "he had to put back from the Horn to Montevideo as a result of some of the iron work carrying away." The cargo had to be sold and the damage repaired. After this the ship left in ballast for Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia, on 12 April 1909. Presumably her reason for heading to Newcastle was to load coal

there to complete the charter to deliver a cargo to Pisagua.

The *Auckland Star*'s reporter tells of a voyage filled with mishaps. Eight days out, in a fairly quiet sea, the ship was suddenly struck by a high tidal wave. Reports indicate that the wave was at least 100 feet high and the ship was at such an angle that she seemed to be on her beam ends. Those on deck were thrown off their feet, and the ship looked as if it had been struck by a tornado. Although this was Captain Brown's first tidal wave, he was convinced that it was due to a seismic disturbance on the ocean floor.²

It was two major storms, however, which significantly damaged the ship – one in late April 1909 in the South Atlantic and the other in mid-June off Australia's east coast, only 200 miles from her destination. These storms caused significant damage with the loss of several masts and spars and causing mayhem in the rigging which threatened to bring down more masts. The captain was forced to put her before the wind and make for Auckland.

The owners must already have been dismayed with Captain Brown's report of initial damage to the vessel and his subsequent loss of her cargo. This further report was too much. They decided that Captain Hunter of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, who was then in command of their ship *Irby*, and already on the Australian coast, should take command of *Leicester Castle*.³ He assumed command in Auckland in July 1909 and was aboard for the tow to Sydney.

The following article from the *New Zealand Herald*, of 23 July 1909, tells the story of the trip to Sydney:

A Long, Long Pull. Towing a Ship to Sydney

The tug *Champion*, which has been engaged to tow the ship *Leicester Castle* from Auckland to Sydney, arrived from Newcastle yesterday morning and berthed at Queen Street Wharf.

The *Leicester Castle* put into Auckland on the 28th ult. in a dismantled condition, having met a gale while on a voyage from Monte Video for Newcastle. She was then in command of Captain R. Browne, who has since proceeded to England under instructions from his owners. He was succeeded by Captain Hunter, formerly of the ship *Irby*.

When the *Leicester Castle* put into Auckland it was thought she would be repaired in Auckland but the owners decided to engage a tug and have the ship towed from Auckland to Sydney, to which port new spars and rigging will be sent from England. The cost of re-rigging and repairing the ship will amount to close on £5000, while it is stated that an extra £1000 will be spent in towing fees.

The *Champion* is a powerful steel tug of 307 gross tons and 135ft in length, owned by Messrs. J. and A. Brown of Newcastle and Sydney. She can steam at 14 knots an hour. Captain Halcrow is in command of the *Champion* and Captain Larsen is the towing master. The latter officer has been associated with the tug for the past 12 years.

The distance from Auckland to Sydney is 1,281 miles and with the *Leicester Castle*, a vessel of 2009 tons gross, the tow will not be an easy one, nor without risk. Given fine weather, the *Champion* will tow the ship at an average speed of eight miles an hour. The *Leicester Castle* has been equipped with towing sails, which will be used when the wind is favourable.

This is not the first occasion on which the *Champion* has been despatched on a deep-water voyage to pick up a tow. A few years ago she was sent to Suva to tow the French barque *Beaumanoir*, which had been ordered to Sydney for repairs, and prior to that visited Melbourne for the purpose of towing the ship *Port Patrick* to Newcastle. She was also among the fleet of vessels that was sent in search of the Federal-Houlder-Shire liner *Perthshire*, which broke her tail-shaft between Australia and New Zealand, and on another occasion she was despatched from Sydney to the south of New Zealand on what proved to be a fruitless quest for the Milburn liner *Port Stephens*, which it was believed was then drifting about in the southern latitudes.

The tug ... will set out on her long journey with the *Leicester Castle* this evening.

New iron masts and yards were sent from Europe for fitting during the lengthy refit in Sydney. Several months later, *Leicester Castle* left Sydney for the coal port of Newcastle, just 60 miles to the north, arriving there on 11 November. While there, loading coal for Gatico, Chile, the owners were securing charters for the return trip to Europe. *Leicester Castle* sailed from Newcastle on 5 May 1910, arrived at Gatico on 27 June then in September sailed north for the nitrate port of Caleta Buena from which port she sailed on 11 November for Falmouth for orders.⁴ Calling there on 25 February 1911, she was ordered to Rotterdam.

The owners wasted no time in selling the *Leicester Castle* to some interested Norwegian buyers although managing to get only £4,000 for her – far short of the cost of her lengthy refit. The whole enterprise had been a total disappointment – their ship had left Cardiff in May 1908 returning to Europe almost three years later in March 1911 having delivered only two cargoes in that time. This had not exactly been an unqualified success. The vessel

was renamed *Vik* and she sailed under this name until she was broken up in the United States in 1923.

Captain Hunter was transferred to a four-masted barque *Crown of India*. He later went 'into steam' commanding several of the *War*-class ships carrying coal from Sydney, Nova Scotia, to Halifax during the Great War and later became captain of the Steamship (SS) *Prince Arthur* on the Boston to Yarmouth run. He died in Yarmouth in 1925.

Shipping at the Time

These events took place in the days when ships sailed off and were not heard from until they arrived at their destination. Wireless telegraphy aboard ships was yet to come (1909) and a ship at sea had to be self-sufficient with the master in complete command. The advent of telegraphy and undersea cables in the middle decades of the 1800s, however, ensured that owners could contact agents and repair facilities and, in this case, their captain when he arrived in port, on the far side of the world with relative ease. Today an owner can be instantly in touch with his masters at sea and his agents ashore.

These were the latter days of sail, almost 40 years after steamers had begun to outnumber sailing vessels at sea. The larger sailing vessels, which continued to be built until the 1920s, were substantial vessels equipped to deal with all weather conditions. Ships are still lost today in spite of our knowledge, rules and regulations for safety and shipbuilding, and weather forecasting.

There was little 'romance' to going to sea in 'the glorious days of sail.' It was a business with costs and profits being topmost in the minds of the owners and, to some extent, the masters of the vessels. From the point of view of the masters, officers and sailors it was a hard life sometimes years away from home, few comforts, and periods of boredom while in port waiting for cargoes to be discharged and loaded. The *Leicester Castle* was over four months unloading coal, shifting between ports and taking in nitrates in Chile. Waiting for months to load guano off the South American islands was common and there is one instance, in San Francisco, when the ship *County of Yarmouth* waited a full year for increases in freight rates for grain to Europe (and then, when they did not rise, she sailed for Puget Sound to load wood). In the case of the latter the crew was, of course, discharged in California.

Ship Portrait Project

Just as a portrait of a person is an image that reflects his or her physical characteristics, so a 'ship portrait' is a formal image of a vessel showing its characteristics. While a seascape or marine scene may include ships, in a 'ship portrait' the vessel is the primary subject of the painting. The

Yarmouth County Museum (YCM) in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, contains the third largest ship portrait collection in Canada (after the provincial collections of the New Brunswick Museum and the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic in Halifax).

The YCM's collection consists of some 140 paintings that, with the exception of two portraits, are of vessels formerly registered in Yarmouth or vessels commanded by Yarmouth captains. The collection includes paintings of such ships as the famous clipper ship *Thermopylae*, the well-known Australian emigrant ship *Marco Polo*, and the steel ship *Balclutha* which is presently the main feature of the San Francisco Maritime Museum.

Between 1874 and 1885, Yarmouth was the second largest port of registry in Canada (behind Saint John, New Brunswick) in terms of total tonnage of its vessels. Ships from Yarmouth travelled the world carrying goods between the ports of North and South America (east and west coasts), Europe, the Far East, Australia, New Zealand, and Africa.

The portraits were treasured by the owners and masters of these vessels and were painted by ship portrait artists in many of the ports visited. The collection includes paintings from several North American ports (including Halifax and Yarmouth), Sydney (Australia), Cape Town, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Calcutta with the majority being from various British and European ports. The paintings generally date from 1851 to 1909, although there are portraits of several steamers, mainly Yarmouth to New England passenger vessels, which date up to the 1920s.

Ship portraits provide a fascinating glimpse into the world of yesteryear. They tell us about travel, defence, history, technology, social conditions, the economy, and art. The Yarmouth County Museum collection is the subject of the author's research, and will, it is hoped, yield a book of photos and illustrations on this fascinating subject. 📖

Notes

1. Robert Brown(e) was interviewed as master of the vessel in Auckland but from April 1908 to August 1909 the *New York Maritime Register* listing departures and arrivals for this voyage gives 'White' as the master.
2. Alan Ruffman, Geomarine Associates Ltd., has confirmed via the US Geological Survey that there was no earthquake in the area at that time and that the wave must have been what is now commonly called a "rogue wave."
3. *Yarmouth Herald*, 15 June 1909, stated, "Yarmouth, June 15: Captain Charles C. Hunter of the ship *Irby* has been transferred to the ship *Leicester Castle*, 2389 tons, same owners, due at Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia, where Captain Hunter awaits her."
4. An 'order port' such as Falmouth near the western extremity of Britain (and Europe), was a port where a ship, before the advent of radio, would call to receive orders concerning the port to which it should proceed to discharge or load its cargo.

Eric Ruff, FCMA, is Curator Emeritus at the Yarmouth County Museum and Archives.