

Silhet Migrant Ship



Plymouth, England to Bundaberg, Australia

9 June 1883 - 18 September 1883

During the 1880s approximately half a dozen ships brought new immigrants to Bundaberg from Great Britain. One of these ships was the *Silhet*. On board were 381 immigrants destined to settle and work in Bundaberg and the surrounding area.

Commanded by Captain Pitt, the *Silhet*, a 3-mast barque of 1160 tons, left Plymouth on 9 June 1883. The 381 immigrants consisted of men, women and children of English (311), Scotch (4) and Irish (66) stock. Single men made up the bulk of the passengers on board, followed by married men and women, single women, children, and infants. There were also 31 or 32 crew members.



Setting sail on the *Silhet*

Among the passengers were Mr and Mrs Joseph Crofts. It is thanks to the generosity of Mr Crofts in sharing his diary notes with H.J. Marks, Bundaberg journalist, that we know something of the day-to-day details of the 101-day journey. Mr Crofts records details about food, bad weather conditions, entertainments, and sad events. His diary also evokes the sense of relief and happiness of the immigrants on finally reaching Bundaberg. Marks records some of these diary entries in his columns in the *Bundaberg Daily News & Mail* during June and July 1926. These columns have been compiled by the Bundaberg Genealogical Association Inc in their publication *Immigrant Ships Bound for Bundaberg....*

In Mr and Mrs Crofts' case they left Leicester station in London bound for Plymouth where they would be transferred to the *Silhet*. The newspaper is a little unclear but it appears the Crofts left London near midnight on Tuesday 5 June 1883, and arrived at Plymouth about noon the next day. Mr Crofts applied for the position of school teacher on board and was required to prove his qualifications by undergoing some testing. In addition to becoming the school teacher Mr Crofts was also appointed ship librarian.

On 8 June, a day before setting sail, the immigrants had to undergo final

stringent medical checks before readying themselves for boarding the *Silhet*. At 11am on 9 June the passengers boarded a steamer which transferred them a mile (1.6km) offshore of Plymouth to where the *Silhet* lay anchored. There were some sad feelings on the part of immigrants and those who stayed behind. Mr Crofts wrote:

I shall never forget the sight of, [and], the feeling that overcome me... Many friends were there to see us off – many were broken hearted, while others seemed more cheerful and at last we were able to... Raise a cheerful “Hip Hip Hoorah” as we steamed away.

After settling into their berths the immigrants dined on beef and potatoes and enjoyed a sing-a-long from Moody and Sankey’s hymn book. Most retired to bed about 9.30pm and enjoyed a calm ocean and a good night’s sleep on beds much more comfortable than those back in the waiting depot at Plymouth. By morning however, “*their countenances began to change.*” Rough seas with waves washing over the deck saw many of the passengers suffering from seasickness.



Slow going and horrid weather

The *Silhet* got off to a slow start with very little wind to help her on her way out of Plymouth. In one 24 hour period in early July the ship travelled only 45 miles (72km), and the next day only 27 miles (43km). However, when the weather was good, the ship made good headway. By 14 July the *Silhet* had travelled 4686 miles (7541km).

Towards the end of June the immigrants were in much warmer climes and Mr Crofts noted on 27 June, “*The perspiration rolls off us like water. Down in our berths the thermometer is 88 degrees [Farenheit]. It is awful at nights – we scarcely get any sleep.*”

However, by 30 June conditions had changed again. The *Silhet* and her passengers were experiencing very heavy seas and bitter cold. These unpleasant conditions continued for some days and caused several accidents. Mrs Crofts was nearly swept away when waves crashed over the decks and W. Frost from Leicester broke his thigh bone when he was swept from a ladder onto the deck below by a big wave. After the weather appeared to clear on 6 August the passengers were able to go back on deck, but a large wave still came over and Mr Northover suffered a broken ankle.



Life on board the *Silhet*

To help pass the time the people on board played cards, had picnics or afternoon tea on deck, watched whales, looked at the livestock kept onboard, and prepared the children for their school lessons. There were also the traditional religious services to attend. These were quite strictly observed with the Captain reading prayers from the Church of England prayer book, the Doctor reading from the Bible, and hymns chosen from Sankey's hymn book. Sunday School and evening services were also held.

On some evenings there were concerts and dancing. Sometimes sailors dressed up in women's clothes to entertain the passengers, and the mandolin was played by another sailor. Mrs Crofts and a friend also indulged in a flour fight with the purser when a barrel of flour burst and some flour made it onto the floor!

On the Bank Holiday the passengers enjoyed a grand concert. Mrs Crofts sang "Grecian Bend" and "Bother-the-Men" while Mrs Jago from Liverpool dressed in her husband's clothes and entertained the others. She also dropped into the single women's quarters, still dressed as a man, and succeeded in frightening the young girls (no men were allowed in the women's quarters)!



Food

The food on board ship was edible but not always tasty. Food was rationed out to ensure everyone ate and that supplies lasted long enough for the journey. Mr Crofts noted that on Monday 13 August the 8 people in his mess were given 4 pounds of pork (1.8kgs), 1.5 pounds of salt butter (0.6kg), and 4 pounds of flour. The pork was salty and hard, the butter salty, and the flour difficult to use, there being no baking powder or yeast to help make bread. They were sometimes given other food, such as pea soup (and if they were lucky it included onions too), and rice, which most mixed with sugar, jam, molasses or treacle to help make it more palatable.

On a Tuesday they (8 people) received 4 pounds of tin meat, 3 pounds of bread (1.3kg) and 2 pounds of potatoes (0.9kg) to share between them. They also received 1 pound of tea (0.4kg), 2 pounds of coffee and 6 pounds of sugar (2.7kg). However, the tea, coffee and sugar had to last the mess of 8 people a week. Mr and Mrs Crofts wisely made friends with the steward and were sometimes given little extras to include in their cooking, which helped to make the meals a little tastier.



Births and deaths

During the journey two ladies gave birth. Mrs Scotton had a son on 19 August and a week later Mrs Moran had a daughter. On a sadder note, the passengers of the *Silhet* also experienced one death between Plymouth and Bundaberg. On 23 July Mr Crofts noted the death of a 16 month old child...

The parents of it are in a very sorrowful condition. They cannot bear the thoughts of having it consigned to the mighty deep. Death is awful enough on land, but it seems a far more dreadful thing at sea.... The corpse was sewn up in a canvas bag and placed in a room this morning. A board is laid on the bulwark of the ship with the flag (Union Jack) over it. The corpse is laid beneath the flag and our Captain read the funeral service. When he read the words "we commit this body to the deep" the board is raised and the corpse slides from view into the deep. The sad occurrence has cast a gloom over most of us. While the service was being conducted all was very quiet, and many shed tears of sorrow.



“Land in Sight”

The sailors knew the *Silhet* was approaching the Australian coast on 1 September 1883 and began preparing the ship for any potential emergency. The weather at this time was dark and cold and indeed on this day Mr Croft reported closing the ship's school early because it was too cold on deck for the children. This dreadful weather would continue and would see the ship's passengers in probably the most danger of the trip thus far. The ship's lower fore-top sail and lower mizzen-staysail were blown away in the gales on 3 September and the captain reportedly said "...they were fortunately to be above the water – he had never known it to blow stronger."

Australian land was sighted for the first time at dawn on Thursday 6 September 1883. Many at first thought the call of 'land in sight' was a hoax, but it soon became apparent that the *Silhet* was very near the Australian coast. By noon on 6 September the ship was passing Cape Otway, Victoria. The passengers crowded the deck anxious for their first sight of land. Mr Crofts recorded the feeling of the passengers who were finally nearing the end of their journey,

Sure it was a treat to those who have been brought up on the land, and lived on it, too, all the days of their lives, to once more behold terra firma. It brought home the glorious fact if all is well we shall soon set our feet upon the shores.

By Saturday 8 September the *Silhet* had travelled 14,902 miles (23,982km) and everyone on board was hoping to sight Bundaberg on Thursday 13

September. However, the weather didn't quite cooperate, with the *Silhet* experiencing strong headwinds. For the last week or two of the voyage the weather enabled good progress towards Bundaberg on some days, but on others really stalled momentum.

The passengers were well and truly ready to disembark the ship. Mr Crofts records,

It is quite time we were done with this voyage. People are getting tired on the provisions, and some of them are not nice now, especially the flour....we have had enough of the sea for this time. It has quite lost its charms with us. Nothing will please us but the end of our journey.



Bundaberg at last

The passengers spent Monday 17 September cleaning their quarters. By evening they had spotted the lighthouse on Sandy Point. The next day the coast of Bundaberg was sighted, much to the excitement of all on board – *“...the best of it all is it is the land we have been journeying to reach. We could see white structures in the distance, and numbers of trees. Every eye was fixed intently.”* The *Silhet* dropped anchor off Bundaberg at 9.15am on Tuesday 18 September 1883, 101 days after the journey began in Plymouth, England.

Later that same day Mr W.B. O'Connell, the local immigration agent; Dr May, the health officer; and Mr Duffy, the *Silhet* agent travelled by buggy from Bundaberg to Burnett Heads where a small boat transferred them to the *Silhet* to check on the passengers and crew. There was a roll call and an opportunity for passengers to air any complaints arising from the journey. (There were no complaints made). A Customs Officer also visited the ship and passengers were told they wouldn't be transferred to Bundaberg until Thursday as there was no available steam ship to transport them up river. The passengers were however, provided with fresh provisions including half a beast, bread, potatoes and cabbage.

On Thursday 20 September at about 3pm a steamer pulled up beside the *Silhet* causing great excitement. It was a *“...party of excursionists and their bright cheerful faces filled us with mirth and glee. They hailed us by a cheerful “Hip hip hurrah,” and the song “Rule Britannia.”* Unfortunately the excursionists were not permitted on board the *Silhet* and the *Silhet* passengers weren't permitted aboard the steamer. One excursionist did try his luck but was quickly sent back to the steamer, this apparently due to the immigrants being *“...not yet handed over to the agent”*. However, the visitors provided the passengers on the *Silhet* with much valued colonial

newspapers, nuts, oranges, bread and potatoes.

The steamer *Leichhardt* was spotted coming from the direction of Rockhampton at about 9am on Friday 21 September. It had on board three murderers on their way to Brisbane to receive the death penalty they had been sentenced to. The *Leichhardt* though had to first transport the *Silhet* passengers up river to Bundaberg. There was some sadness on the part of the immigrants upon leaving the ship they had called home for so long. However, all were anxious to begin their new lives.



A new life

Upon disembarkation at Bundaberg the immigrants had to be found accommodation. The Immigration Barracks were unavailable at the time and the Immigration Agent had a difficult task in finding suitable accommodation. The single men were found beds in the Victoria Hall, the married couples were housed in fifty tents in the grounds of the Barracks, and the single girls were placed in the 'eastern building'.

The new arrivals were getting used to the warmer weather and weren't much perturbed at their temporary accommodations. There was also joyous news as three children were born to married couples within a week of arriving in Bundaberg. The next thing to do was to ensure the new immigrants were placed in positions of employment.

On board the *Silhet* were 51 domestic servants, 107 farm labourers, 6 gardeners, 3 masons, 6 blacksmiths, 4 bricklayers, 2 sawyers, 9 labourers, 12 carpenters, 2 wheelwrights, 2 plumbers, 3 painters, and 25 whose occupation was unspecified. The immigrants found employment very quickly once they arrived in Bundaberg. Single girls were placed in work earning from 6 – 12 shillings per week, single men in work earning 26 - 52 pounds per year with rations, and married couples in work earning 60 pounds per year. This was a greater wage than what they had previously earned.



Forty-year reunion

A reunion of *Silhet* immigrants took place at the Caledonian Hall on 25 June 1923. A committee chaired by Mr J Heaps organised the reunion, and a photo of this committee may be seen in the *Bundaberg Daily News & Mail*, in the Saturday 26 June 1926 issue (page 9).

Over 100 immigrants and descendents attended. Many of the immigrants

from the *Silhet* had become pioneers of Bundaberg and District in agriculture and commerce. The immigrants spent the reunion retelling of their departure from Plymouth, the long sea journey to Bundaberg, the welcome from the people of Bundaberg, and how they had made new lives for themselves in a new country. Mr A.D. Mason recalled amusing events from the voyage, and many others performed songs and recitations.



More information

To look up (by surname) a list of assisted immigrants who arrived in Queensland between 1870 – 1899, the Bundaberg Library has a set of indexes in the Reference Section – *An Index to Assisted Immigrants Arriving Queensland*, which was published by the Central Queensland Family History Association Inc., Rockhampton, in 1992.



Web sites for further reference

Bundaberg Regional Library Service's ***Passenger Lists*** bookmarks.
http://delicious.com/bundabergregionallibrary/passenger_lists

Bundaberg Regional Library Service's ***Shipping*** bookmarks.
<http://delicious.com/bundabergregionallibrary/shipping>



References:

Bundaberg Daily News & Mail, Sat 26 June 1926.

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Shipping Intelligence 1883... Bundaberg Genealogical Assoc. Inc. 2003.

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