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"LADY ELIZABETH" - Survivor from 1907

A single-digit GARD policy-holding ship from October 1907 still around? Yes indeed as the following story describes, the barque "LADY ELIZABETH", built in 1879, is still around sort of in what may be called NABSA mode: never afloat but safely aground, in Port Stanley, Falkland Islands.

We are obviously much indebted to Mr Øistein Lydersen and his cousin, Mr Tore C. Johnsen both grandsons of the owner of the "LADY ELIZABETH", Mr N. A. Lydersen, for taking on the adventurous trip to Port Stanley to see their once-upon-a-time family possession in her final place of rest, and for recounting their tale here in GARD NEWS.

A LITTLE BIT OF BACKGROUND

In 1907, when Gard was formed, the sailing ship era in Norway was booming but mainly along the southern coast. The heyday of the wooden ship was over, and with it the possibility of financing ships locally with part funding from forest owners, ship builders etc. However, second-hand iron and steel ships were readily available from such countries as the UK, at affordable prices, and literally hundreds of them poured into what was to become the GARD domain southern Norway. In the centre of this area was Sundet and its nearby archipelago just outside the town of Tvedestrand, some 20 kilometres east of Arendal. The Lydersen family was a prominent and active force in this community rich in maritime tradition and populated by seamen, pilots, fishermen and shipowners. Mr Nils Andreas Lydersen was an obvious person to contact when the idea came to form a specialised P&I club for sailing ships. He was on the committee which carried out the initial groundwork and market research and also served on the GARD Board of Directors from 1907 until his death in 1913.

We are pleased and honoured to leave the word to his grandson:

"LADY ELIZABETH" – Condemned but not forgotten

One vessel of the Gard fleet from the year of the initiation of the Club in 1907, "LADY ELIZABETH", survives today, lying quietly on the beach at Whalebone Cove near Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands.

Her managing owner at the time when she experienced difficulties in 1913 and had to seek port of refuge in Stanley, Mr Nils Andreas Lydersen, was one of the founders of Gard. The writer of this article and Mr Tore C. Johnsen, both grandsons of Nils Andreas Lydersen, travelled to the Falklands in January this year. The idea was to investigate the present status of the three-masted iron barque, built in Sunderland in 1879. One of very few of its kind still remaining, she now forms a landmark near Stanley harbour and a memory of the times when the waters around Cape Horn struck so many seamen and their families with tragedy. "LADY ELIZABETH" lost four men in a storm when rounding the Cape en route from Canada to South Africa.

With tickets obtained through the Falkland Islands Government Office in London, we and what seemed to be mostly military personnel were carried on an RAF Tristar plane to Mount Pleasant airport, via Ascension. Due to heavy winds in the Falklands, we had a one night stop-over in Montevideo.

But first, a brief look at the history of "LADY ELIZABETH": She entered the waters of the Wear on 4th June 1879. Lloyd's Register's surveyor wrote that "the workmanship is of good quality". With dimensions of 223.0 x 34.0 x 21.4 ft, a deadweight of 1,810 tons could be carried on a draught of 19 ft 8 ins. It would appear that she came into being as a speculative venture by her builder Robert Thompson, Jnr. from Sunderland, and was already afloat when seen and purchased by John Wilson, a London shipowner, who had her completed and named "LADY ELIZABETH". Sadly, John Wilson petitioned the High Court of Justice in Bankruptcy on 15th March 1884, and exits from the story of the "LADY ELIZABETH". She was sold by the Merchant Banking Company of London Ltd. to a Manx captain, George Christian Karran, who closed the London register and transferred her to his home port of Castletown on 5th January 1884. George Karran, one of six brothers and six sisters, was to make "LADY ELIZABETH" his home until 1890, when he transferred to the "MANX KING", leaving Captain Lever to care for his old command. He continued as managing owner. Shares were also in other hands within the family and among friends and business acquaintances. (Dave Burrell, Lloyd's List, 13th March 1984.)

"LADY ELIZABETH"'s first passage started from North Shields on 11th September 1879, with 1,760 tons of coal for Bombay, where she arrived on 30th January 1880. After discharging she moved to Madras and Cocanada to load for London with a mixed cargo, arriving on 30th October. In the following two decades she sailed the oceans, partly tramping and partly on liner charters, continuing to make long passages to North and South America, Europe, Australia and the Far East.

Having passed special survey No. 3 in 1904, the opportunity to sell in the early weeks of 1906 saw "LADY ELIZABETH" pass to the Norwegian flag for £3,250. There she joined many other ex-British ships. The third and final owner of "LADY ELIZABETH" as a deep sea trader was Skibsaktieselskabet "LADY ELIZABETH" of Sundet, managed by Lars Lydersen, and from 1907 by his brother N. A. Lydersen. Retaining her name she traded for a further six years until sailing from Vancouver on 4th December 1912, on what was to prove her last passage.

N. A. Lydersen, of Sundet near Tvedestrand and Arendal, was a captain, partly on sailing vessels and partly on steamships until he went ashore in 1904 to start his own business, in line with family tradition. When he died in 1913, aged 55, he had a fleet of 12-13 ships, second-hand and newbuildings, sail as well as steam. Shares were also held by family members and business friends. As his children were too young to take over, management after his death, the business was continued by his wife Mathilde for a few years until the ships were sold, or, as in two cases, torpedoed during World War 1, or, as in the case of "LADY ELIZABETH", condemned. At the turn of the century the Arendal-Tvedestrand region was an important centre for international shipping, Arendal being among the leaders in terms of tonnage capacity. Taking a keen interest in everything related to shipping, N. A. Lydersen, together with business friends in Arendal, took the initiative of establishing Gard, and he remained a member of the Board until his death.

Coming back to the fate of "LADY ELIZABETH" on her last passage, the following account is given by the Master, Knud Petersen (extracts from log as per translation of 1913):

4th December 1912. Left Vancouver BC with a cargo of lumber bound for Delagoa Bay, South Africa. The ship with full outfit for the voyage and in seaworthy condition.

23rd February 1913. South Lat 57½04', West 70½27' (due south of Cape Horn, ed.) The barometer 28.44. At 6.30 p.m. the wind went round from N.E. to a hurricane from N.W. then lost the foresail. The wind was increasing through the night with a roaring high sea. The sea was breaking over both sides of the ship and filled the forecastle with water causing everything to get wet. Used a lot of oil to calm the water also 75 fathoms of 4 inch manila rope over the stern (with both ends fast on board) to prevent the sea from breaking over the stern. The wind was so strong that the water was flying like ashes. The wind was increasing towards morning.

24th. At 6 a.m. the ship took a big sea over her stern, the two men at the wheel were washed away. The wheel, compass, wheel box and rudder bench were washed away. The cabin skylight was smashed and water got into the cabin. Then got tackle on the rudder with which we steered the ship. 7. a.m. ship took another sea over the stern worse than the first, which buried the ship from fore to aft. The same sea took away lifeboats, standard compass, the whole bridge, the boat skids and bent the stanchions. Tried to clew up the fore lower topsail but it blew to pieces... The ship was lying drifting under her main topsails and fore staysail.... 7 p.m. the wind was moderating so that the mate and carpenter with ropes round them got a chance to cut the lashings of the spare spars, it was at great risk of their lives to get rid of the spars.

27th. The ship has a considerable list to starboard and is in a very bad condition, lost four men and one badly injured, suggested to steer for the Falkland Islands, to get into harbour.

7th March. 5 p.m. saw Beauchene Islands in N.E. made the course for Cape Pembroke.

8th. 8 p.m. sighted Cape Pembroke in S. by W. 20 miles off, from that time to the 12th March kept beating outside and could not get into harbour as the wind was West and South West mostly storms and snow storms.

12th. Set the course for Port Stanley wind increasing from N.W. 5.30 p.m. abreast of Volunteer Point, just after the ship struck on a rock three times, twice very hard so that the ship heeled over first to the port and then to the starboard on 58' and stopped, but got over, the ship was running at a speed of 7 knots. We then steered up Berkeley Sound to get into harbour to save our lives in case the ship should sink. Could not see land because it was thick and dark, clewed up the sails and let go both anchors. Sounded the pumps, but there was very little water in the ship.

Next day the tug boat Samson came alongside with doctor and pilot on board. The captain of the Samson would not make any bargain for the towing, but said it would be settled in Stanley. 14th anchored at Stanley harbour with both anchors according to the Pilot's order.

"LADY ELIZABETH" was surveyed by Messrs. V. A. H. Biggs and H. Thomas on March 17th. They concluded that the ship's bottom should be viewed by a diver to see if the vessel received any damage by striking the ground. A diver, Julio Weiske, selected by Lloyd's Agents, came from Montevideo and in his report dated 5th May is stated the following: "...found the bottom all right until just under the mizzenmast where found that the keel is bent in flat into the ship for a distance of six feet. The plates which are riveted to the keel are torn away and are standing out to port and starboard. Above this a plate has been broken in at the edge, leaving the cement inside exposed... It is only the cement which is keeping the ship afloat, if this were to break it would require two large centrifugal pumps to keep her afloat. In my opinion it is not possible for divers to repair the damage under water."

This meant that in order to be repaired the Lady would have to be dry-docked, the nearest possibility being in Montevideo.

The Norwegian Consul writes in his report:... "To the best of my belief and from opinions I have been able to obtain, the cost of sending the vessel to Montevideo and repairing it in dry dock would not be less than 2,000 pounds. Have consulted four persons whose opinion is worthy of credence and find the value of the ship as she now lies is about 500 pounds and if thoroughly repaired her value would be about 2,200 pounds. The above shows that the cost of repairing the vessel would exceed her value when repaired and I consequently certify that she is unfit for repair within the meaning of Section 6 of the Norwegian Maritime Law."

"LADY ELIZABETH" was sold to The Falkland Island Company Ltd. for 1,000 pounds, to be used as a floating warehouse, whereof 50 pounds was paid in commission to T. Dobbins & Company, London. Among other costs incurred were the following: Hire of steam tug Samson: £250, pilotage £6, translation of log: £2.2s 0d, wages and maintenance for 9 of the crew on board the vessel from 24th February to 10th May: £240.6s 1d, same for Captain and 1st Mate from 24th February to 3rd October: £303.14s 0d, payment to Salvage Association, London, sending diver and gear: £200, Insurance Premium of hull based on cost in Mutual Clubs for previous year: £181.6.5.

The cargo was also sold to The Falkland Island Company, for £2,000. This can be compared to the cost of freight for the cargo from Vancouver to Delagoa Bay, of £3,750. A large chunk of this can be accounted for by the cost of loading the ship in Vancouver, £1,100.

"LADY ELIZABETH" served as a floating warehouse for many years until, during a particularly fierce gale, she broke from her mooring, drifted east down the bay and went aground in Whalebone Cove on the 17th of February 1936, 23 years after she limped into Stanley harbour. Seven small holes were cut in her hull to ensure against her floating free at high tide. Another 61 years later, when we went to see her, her appearance as a tall, proud ship was intact, her masts pointing to the sky, still in alignment. With special permission of The Receiver of Wrecks and with the help of Mr John Smith, curator of the Britannia House Museum, and his assistant Mike, we were able to board the Lady. For this purpose they had borrowed the tallest ladder in town, appropriately belonging to Stanley Cathedral. At ebb tide it is possible to wade out to the vessel. At its starboard side a sand bank has been formed over the years.

On board, we could walk about on most parts of the main deck, although care had to be taken in order not to hit the holes that unavoidably have appeared after almost 90 years with no maintenance. The Oregon pine planking seems to be in good condition over at least 50 per cent of the surface. In the forecabin, a winch, anchor hardware and chains could be noted. Anchors were nowhere to be found, though. Some of the rigging and deck gear still remains. In the deckhouse, the galley was in disarray and the stove missing. Bunks for 12 people could be seen and some paint still intact. On the poop, the wheel was gone, but the gear is still there. The after cabins have been completely vandalised, with only debris and scattered pieces of woodwork left. The remains of what must have been quite elegant spiral staircases leading from the main deck to the poop on both sides of the ship indicate that this part of the ship had been of a high standard.

The starboard bulwark is sprung outward and about ten of the stanchions broken. However, this damage was caused by the big wave in 1913. The bulwark is the only place where corrosion was seen to have made holes in the wrought iron plating, although rust blisters and heavy flaking meet the eye almost everywhere on the outside of the hull. (Measurements made by an expedition in 1983, sponsored by Harvard University, found no plates to be thinner than 1/2 inch through examinations at six locations along the lower deck. However, the rivets below the high-tide mark were badly corroded, and plates can therefore be close to falling off.)

Below deck, in the main hold, the structure of the ship, frames and plates appear amazingly strong. The cool climate on the Falklands, and no pollution or acid rain, must have been prime factors in preserving the metalwork.

"LADY ELIZABETH"'s existence had been known to museum curators in many places, the Falklands and the Strait of Magellan being a true storehouse of maritime artefacts. However, no other vessel from the age of sail can match "LADY ELIZABETH" in terms of her state of preservation and absence of modifications or overhauls. During the events in 1982 many people, through television, caught sight of her lying on the beach. Individuals and institutions in Britain, Norway and the USA have evaluated the possibility of rescuing and restoring her, on the Falklands or elsewhere, but so far with no apparent result. The Falklanders want the Lady to stay, but have not had the resources to bring to a halt the steady deterioration in her condition. A big challenge it would be, and time will tell whether sources of funds can be obtained and whether it will be found to be worthwhile to bring such a task to a happy conclusion.

Whatever the future will bring, even though "LADY ELIZABETH" is now in a dangerous condition, hopefully one member of the original Gard fleet will still exist for a few more decades, symbolizing some of the origins of the strength of British and Norwegian shipping and the infrastructure around it, and at the same time acting as a reminder of the struggles and perils of seamen of the sail ship age.

Author: Øistein Ove Lydersen
Address: Elisenbergveien 24, 0265 Oslo, Norway
Telephone: +47 22 55 14 82
Mobile: +47 91 55 22 89