

Cholera on *Great Britain* during July 1855

by Mike Hinton¹

Great Britain, screw steam transport No. 187, Captain Gray, left Liverpool on 7 March 1855 and returned to the port five months later on 8 August.² The Official Log for the voyage which was ‘delivered at the end of the voyage to the shipping master at [the Port of Liverpool]’ recorded five deaths among crew members; James McKenzie fell from the fore topmast rack stay on 7 April when docked at Portsmouth^{3, 4} and four died of cholera during July following the vessel’s arrival in the Bosphorus on 28 June after sailing from Kamiesch in the Crimea on the 26 June⁵ (Table 1). In addition, there was a possible non-fatal case of the disease though the ships surgeon, William Gilmour, MD, suggested on the 6 July that the symptoms exhibited by AB John Davies were more likely to have been associated with alcohol abuse since he was back on duty six days later.⁶

In a letter to his father, Samuel, Heywood Bright wrote on 16 July that ‘We are all well and the cholera seems to have left us altogether,’ while in his final letter from Turkey dated 19 July he reported: ‘We are to sail to day [...] We have had two more deaths from cholera, two stokers, the poor fellows got frightened, and the Dr says half killed themselves, but there have been no fresh attacks this last day or so, and the men seem in good health.’

Great Britain called at Malta and Gibraltar leaving on 25 July and 1 August respectively, and arrived at Spithead on 11 August; no further reports of cholera were reported during the voyage in either the crew or the invalids and passengers, though one man died.⁷

The cholera victims (Table 1)

1. John Simmons died at 9 p.m. on 4 July. The disposal of his body was not recorded in the Log Book. His effects comprised: bag sundries, 1; blanket, 1; books, 4; boots, 1 pr; box, 1; braces, 1; brush, 1; comb, 1; cup, 1; drawers, 3; gloves, 1; hammock, 1; jacket, m, 1; jumpers, 3; neckerchief, 1; pana?, 2; pillow & slip, 1; quilts, 2; razor stroop, 1; razors, 2; shirts, f, 6; sizzors (*sic*), 1 pr; spoons, 3; stockings, 4 prs; trowsers, 3 prs; and vest, 1. These items were handed to the British Consul: Signed James Beckett, pursar, for Mrs Sarah Simmons, 72 Greenland Street, Toxteth Street, Liverpool.

2. William Hellams died on 8 July. His body was interred the Naval burial ground in Therapia but no tombstone was recorded by Brigadier General J.M. Adye, RA, when he ascertained the condition of the cemetery in 1872 on behalf of the British government.⁸ His effects included: apron, 1; coats, 6; collars, 4; jacket, 1; neckerchiefs, 6; shirt, b f, 1; shirts, 16; shirts, flannel, 3; socks; 4 prs; trowsers, 2 prs; trowsers, cloth, 3 prs; turkish cap, 1; and vests, 3.

3. Henry Abernethy died in the morning of 17 July and was buried in the Haidar Pasha cemetery where his tombstone survives, although now disfigured with graffiti. The inscription reads: ‘Sacred to the memory of ‘Henry Abernethy’ stoker ‘Great Britain’ steam ship who departed this life 17th July 1855 aged 59 years. May he rest in peace. His shipmates last token of friendship’ (see Figure). Abernethy died two days before *Great Britain* sailed for England and given the stone was provided by ‘his shipmates’ suggest that it was procured before departure and this may account for why the inscription appears relatively unsophisticated and hurriedly done.

Abernethy’s effects included: bag, 1; blanket, 1; books, 3; boots, 1 pr; cap, 1; carpet bag, small, 1; drawers, 4; handkerchiefs, 2; jacket, m, 1; jackets, 2; jumpers, 3; quilts, 2; sheets, 6; shirts, b. f., 2; shoes, 1 pr; singlets, 4; stockings, 6 prs; trowsers, 6 prs; and vests, 6.

4. Patrick McGrady, who like Abernethy was a fireman, died during the evening the same day but his remains were committed to the deep as ‘the surgeon judging it expedient that the body should be removed immediately for the general benefit of [the] ship.’ His effects comprised: bag, c, 1; belts, 3; boots, 1 pr; drawers, 2 prs; guernzey, 1; hankerchief, 1; jacket, m, 1; jumper, 1; quilts, 2; sheet, 1; shirts, 3; shoes, 2 prsinglets, 2; stockings, 4 prs; and trowsers, 4 prs.

The source of the infection

The cholera bacillus, *Vibrio cholerae*, is spread principally by water contaminated with excrement and though the disease was present in both the Crimea and Turkey at the time it is probable that the infection was acquired in Turkey, where incidentally water could only be ‘procured with difficulty;’⁹ and given that the incubation period may only be a matter of hours,¹⁰ Simmons, the first victim, died a week after the ship’s arrival in the Bosphorus and during the evening of the day after 4th Office William Lawson took a watering party ashore on 3 July, and when AB Auguste Bortlemain absented himself.¹¹

The cemeteries

The cemetery at Therapia is north of the city of Constantinople and remained a recognizable entity until it was abandoned during the 1970s and the land returned to the Turkish authorities. The surviving tombstones were relocated to the Haidar Pasha cemetery; the most impressive of these is that of Captain Edmund Mowbray Lyons, RN, who commanded HMS *Miranda* and died of wounds on 23 June 1855, aged 36. Lyons is also commemorated by an impressive monument in St Paul’s cathedral, London.

The Haidar Pasha cemetery is situated on the cliff top on the Asian side of the Bosphorus and comprises two parts separated by a narrow strip of land. The northern section was utilized first with the oldest surviving tombstone being that of Lieutenant W.L. Macnish, 93rd Highlanders, who drowned during a flash flood on 19 May 1854,¹² and it is where the impressive Crimean War memorial obelisk designed by Baron Carlo Marochetti is located. When this area became full the cemetery was extended to the south with the agreement of the Sultan and it is where Abernathy was buried and where the tombstones relocated from Therapia were installed. The southern section was developed further after the war with civilian interments commencing during the 1860s. WWI and WWII cemeteries also occupy this part of the site and the whole area is now maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

The passengers for England

According to Heywood Bright nine officers, 149 invalids, and two passengers embarked at Scutari while the John Gray, the ship’s master, gave the numbers as ten officers, 148 men, four women, and one lady passenger. Detailed listings of the passengers when at Malta and on arrival in Portsmouth were published in *The Times* and other newspapers, while the official disembarkation return prepared for the Secretary at War on 8 August was confined to the invalids who were in the British Army¹³ (Table 2).

Following disembarkation 65 invalids were transferred Chatham by train via London in the charge of Lieutenant Speight, who himself was an invalid, and on arrival 42 were admitted to the supplemental hospital at Brompton for further treatment.¹⁴

Acknowledgements

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Table 1: The five member of the crew of *Great Britain* that died during the voyage summarized from the Official Ship Log

	James McKenzie	John Simmons	William Hellams	Henry Abernethy	Patrick McGrady
Place of birth	Illegible	Southampton	West Derby	Wexford	Belfast
Age	29	53	23	48	20
Date of joining*	27 February	1 March	27 February	27 February	27 February
Rank	Able seaman	Able seaman	Assistant cook	Fireman	Fireman
Date of death*	7 April	4 July	8 July	17 July	17 July
Cause of death	Fall from the foretop mast	Asiatic cholera	Asiatic cholera	Asiatic cholera	Asiatic cholera
Location	Portsmouth	Constantinople	Off Scutari	Off Scutari	Off Scutari
Place of interment	Not recorded	Not recorded	Naval burial ground.	Haidar Pasha cemetery	At sea†
Officiating priest	Not recorded	Not recorded	Revd Freeth, chaplain to the British Military and Naval Hospital‡	Roman Catholic service taken by Revd Malone	Roman Catholic service performed
Next of kin	His effects included a parcel addressed to Mr A Stedden, 42 nd Highlanders, Balaclava	Mrs Sarah Simmons, 72 Greenland St, Toxteth St, Liverpool. Effects to British Consul	Mrs Wm Hellams, Mr Cox, Callander, Perthshire	Not recorded	Not recorded

[The National Archives: BT 98/4096]

* All 1855.

† On the advice of the ship's surgeon, William Gilmour, MD.

‡ The Revd Thomas Jacob Freeth, MA, LLD (1819-1904).

Table 2: The identity of individuals transported on *Great Britain*

Name	Rank	Corps*	Arrival at Malta, 25 July†	Arrival at Spithead, 8 August‡	Official return of invalids on landing§
Anderson	Major	Royal Artillery	X	X	X
Booth	Mrs		-	X	-
Burnard	Captain	5 th Dragoons Guards	X	X	-
Douglas	Lt Col.	79 th Regiment	X	X	X
Elliot	Captain	5 th Dragoon Guards	X	X	X
Fosberry	ACG	[Irish Constabulary]	X	X	-
Fowler ⁵	Captain	54 th Regiment	-	-	X
Gardiner	Captain		X	-	-
Gardner	Mr		-	X	-
Gordon	Major	93 rd Regiment	X	X	X
Grimstone	Major	Turkish Contingent	X	X	-
Harman	Lieutenant	34 th Regiment	X	X	X
Mills	Major	7 th Regiment	X	X	X
Peel	Captain		X	-	-
Rust	Mr		X	X	-
Sheill ⁵	Asst Surgeon	Staff	-	-	X
Speight	Lieutenant	31 st Regiment	X	X	X
Sullivan	Captain	Turkish Contingent	X	X	-
Watts	Major		X	-	-
Watts, S.W.	Hospital dresser	[Based in Scutari]	-	X	-
-	Sergeants	-	148	169	11 + 4¶
-	Corporals	-			4
-	Drummers	-			2
-	Privates	-			132 + 17¶
-	Women	-	4	8	4 + 4¶
-	Children	-	-	6	0 + 6¶
-	Seamen	-	10	9	-

* The corps included in one or other of the three listings quoted. Square brackets have been used when the information has been obtained from other sources

† *The Times & The Standard*, 31 July 1855. A letter dated 28 July, and published on 2 August, contained the same list. There were some inconsistencies in the spelling of some of names in both lists; these have been corrected.

‡ *The Times* 9 August and *Freeman's Journal & Morning Chronicle*, 10 August 1855.

§. The National Archives: WO 25/1187.

¶ Embarked at Gibraltar.

Notes and references

- 1 Dr M. Hinton, 8 Calverley Court, Calverley Park Gardens, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, TN1 2JN and mike.hinton_tn1@blueyonder.co.uk (as of 2 June 2017).
- 2 The National Archives: BT 98/4096. The owners of the *Great Britain*, who traded as Gibbs, Bright and Co., were George Gibbs and Robert Bright of Bristol and, of Liverpool, Tyndall and Samuel Bright, the latter being the father of Haywood Bright.
- 3 McKenzie's name is not recorded in the England and Wales Civil Registration Death Index but the accident was noted in *The Standard* on 9 April 1855: 'He was aloft helping to set up the fore stays when [he] fell on the deck [and] his head came into contact with some iron work.' His effects listed in the Official Log comprised: belts, 3; blankets, 3; books, 4; boots, 1 pr; braces, 3 prs; coats, 2; drawers, 5 prs; frocks, 3; glass, 1; guernsey, 1; hammock, 1; handkerchiefs, 3 pkts; knives, 3; letter, 1; mitts, 3 prs; mufflers, 3; needles, paper, ink; night cap, 1; parcel (addressed to Mr A Stedden, 42nd Highlanders, Balaclava), 1; pillow slip, 1; pillows, 2; purse with 2/6, 1; razor, 1; shirts, blue, 4; singlets, 6; slate, 1; slippers, 1 pr; souwester, 1; stockings, 5 prs; towell (*sic*), 1; and trousers, 8 prs.
- 4 Incidentally, two tombstones in the Sailors' Burial Ground at Kazatch in the Crimea, viz. those of Ordinary Seaman Francis Bishop, HMS *Megara* (d.9 Aug. 1855) and William Brammam, *Admiral Moorsom* of Hull, (d.29 Sep. 1855 aged 14) recorded that they fell from the main top and mizzen cross trees respectively. See Colborne and F. Brine, *The Last of the Brave*. (London: Ackermann and Co., 1857), p. 25.
- 5 Haywood Bright to Samuel Bright, 1 July 1855. This letter is one of 29 written by him, John Gray, the ship's master, and others during the voyager to Samuel Bright and members of the family preserved in the Brunel Institute, Great Western Dockyard, Gas Ferry Road, Bristol, BS1 6TY.

6 It is probable that the ship's surgeon would have been acquainted with the clinical features of
inebriation and cholera but it is possible the conditions co-existed since cholera is not necessarily fatal
and can present in a mild form. For example, admissions for cholera into the general military hospitals
on the Bosphorus during June and July 1855 numbered 42 with 14 (33%) deaths; British Parliamentary
Papers (1857-58), No. 2434, Vol. II, General Hospital Returns I
7 *The Times*, 11 Aug. 1855.
8 J.M. Ayde, *Reports on the British Cemeteries on the Bosphorus and at Smyrna*. In: British
Parliamentary Papers (1873), No. C.719, p. 30.
9 John Gray to Samuel Bright, 19 July 1855.
10 G.R. Smith and C.S.F. Easman in: *Topley and Wilson's Principles of Bacteriology, Virology and
Immunity*, 8th Edition. (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), Vol. 3, p. 461.
11 N. Fogg, *The Voyages of the Great Britain*. (London: Chatham Publishing, 2002), pp. 87-8.
12 For details see M. Hinton, 'A tragic accident at Scutari: The drowning of Lieutenant Macnish, 93rd
Regiment' *The War Correspondent* (2017), Vol. XXXIV (ii), pp. 15-9.
13 The National Archives: WO 25/1187.
14 *The Times*, 15 Aug. 1855.