



NORTHUMBERLAND & DURHAM FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY

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THE WRECKERS

On 03 February 1865 the Earl Percy, like so many before her,
foundered on the infamous Black Middens.

Wrecking is the practice of taking valuables from a shipwreck which has foundered close to shore. Often an unregulated activity of opportunity in coastal communities, wrecking has been subjected to increasing regulation and evolved into what is now known as marine salvage and as recently as the 19th century in some parts of the world, it was the mainstay of otherwise economically marginal coastal communities.



On the evening of Friday 03 February 1865 at 10pm the sea was as rough as ever, the fog had dissipated and a storm raged with intense fury. Since dark not fewer than 30 vessels had entered the Tyne safely; several schooners, light colliers, some screws and a Norwegian barque had arrived and others were coming.

Wreck off the Black Middens by George Edward Horton

The Earl Percy was an iron screw steamer, rigged as a three- mast schooner of 291 tons with a figurehead in the style of a mailed warrior and built on the Clyde in 1849. Owned by the Tyne Steam Shipping Co. it was Captained by Mr. Taylor with a crew of 19 and one passenger, a Mr. Peterson from Hamburg. It had sailed from Hamburg on Monday 30 January with a cargo of 35 head of cattle, 55 sheep, lard, butter and some general supplies. The ship came safely over the bar on the morning of Saturday 4 February but a succession of heavy waves came rolling in between the piers and a heavy cross sea struck the Earl Percy and hove her on to the Black Middens. She struck one of the boilers from the Stanley, the ship that so tragically sank in November 1864, between the fore and mainmasts. This broke her back and as the tide ebbed she settled down with a starboard list while the heavy sea pounded against her port side. As she broke a large amount of cargo washed into the bight at the Low Lights and because it was just about 11 am large crowds gathered and hundreds were willing to render assistance to save the lives of those aboard ship. Fresh in everyone's minds was the tragic loss of life when the 'Stanley' and the 'Friendship' foundered in the same place not three months previously and thirty people lost their lives.

The coastguards were quick on the scene with the rocket apparatus, a device bought as a result of the tragedy the previous November, however three lifeboats were at the scene and all the crew and the passenger were rescued and taken to the Half Moon Inn for dry clothes and refreshments. The authorities were quick on the scene, they wanted to avert scenes of looting as had occurred with the wreck of the Stanley and 40 naval volunteers and all available Police officers were marched down to the wreck to assist with either the saving of life or protection of property.

As soon as the crew were got off and the tide had fallen further the lifeboats set about saving as much of the cargo as possible. Men were sent to the stricken ship and with the aid of a crane and a sling began to remove the half dead animals from the hold and take them ashore, bales of hay and the boiler from the Stanley used to cushion their descent, those that did die were butchered on the spot.



Winter Fuel by Robert Jobling

Salvors watched over by the authorities removed casks of lard and stored them safely. By now the shore was crowded with thousands of persons come to see the wreck. A number of poor people were busily engaged in collecting the coal which had been washed ashore and this was permitted without question. Most watched passively but 24 persons were taken into custody for stealing goods washed up on shore and when they appeared before the bench the following Monday, Alderman Spence, Borough Magistrate fined everyone £0-5-0d and £0-2-6d costs. A salutary lesson.

Story taken from *The Newcastle Weekly Chronicle, Saturday 11 February 1865*

