

A tragedy at sea

HMS Birkenhead was one of the first iron battleships ordered by the Royal Navy, in 1845. It was designed as a paddle steamer. It had twelve water-tight compartments designed to keep the ship afloat if one or more of them were holed in an accident. Commissioned in 1848, it was already out of date, as screw propellers were now standard, faster and much more efficient. Converted to a troop ship, she was carrying around 600 men, women and children to South Africa in 1852 when she hit a rock and sank three miles off the coast. Over 400 people died. As usual with the Royal Navy, there was a Court of Enquiry, which provides us with lots of evidence about events on board.

Details from the Court of Enquiry

In January 1852, HMS Birkenhead left Portsmouth transporting troops to the war against the Xhosa in South Africa. On 25 February 1852, she left Cape Town, with about 643 men, women and children on board. Captain Salmond was given orders to use all possible haste to get to his destination. In order to speed up the trip he decided to hug the South African coastline as closely as possible. It was perfect weather, and the ship was able to maintain a speed of around 8.5 knots (about 10 miles an hour).

At about 2am the next morning the ship hit an uncharted rock, ripping a hole in the hull. There were, in line with regulations, not enough lifeboats for everyone on board. Only three of these boats could be lowered. The rest of the men assembled on deck. All the horses were pushed overboard and encouraged to swim for the shore. Captain Salmond tried to escape the rock by reversing engines, but only succeeded in making the hole bigger. He gave the order to abandon ship. Lieutenant-Colonel Seton, the senior army commander, gave the order to stay on deck. Within 25 minutes the ship had sunk.

By the next day a total of 193 had been saved; 60 who had managed to swim to the shore nearly three miles away through shark-infested waters, 40 who were rescued still clinging to the rigging and 93 from the three boats that were launched. No-one is sure exactly how many died in the tragedy.

Significance criteria

Historians try to use criteria to test how important events and people from the past are and in what ways they were/are important. This can help us to understand why we remember certain events particularly strongly when others are largely forgotten. Sometimes, we might feel that an event deserves more attention in the current day than it popularly receives.

Historian Ian Dawson uses these criteria, or tests, to help explain the ways in which an event or person can be historically significant. He suggests that we should consider whether the event or person:

- changed events at the time it happened
- improved lots of peoples' lives – or made them worse
- changed peoples' ideas
- had a long lasting impact on a country or the world
- has been a really good or a very bad example to other people of how to live or behave.

Thinking points:

- Do you agree with Ian Dawson's criteria?
- Do you think any of them are more important than the others?
- Can you think of any of your own significance criteria?

Evidence sheet one: the aftermath

Some headlines from the time:

Source 1 How the loss was reported in the newspapers at the time

AWFUL WRECK OF THE BIRKENHEAD STEAMER

The Belfast News-Letter, 9 April 1852

LOSS OF HER MAJESTY'S STEAMER BIRKENHEAD

The Morning Chronicle, 9 April 1852

ANOTHER AWFUL SHIPWRECK

The Era Sunday, 11 April 1852

TOTAL WRECK OF HMS BIRKENHEAD

Dundee Courier, 14 April 1852

Some evidence from the enquiry held after the accident:

Source 2

‘Ensign Russell, one of the crew in one of the three lifeboats, saw a young boy struggling in the water. Immediately he offered to give up his seat for the boy. The boy was pulled aboard, and Ensign Russell jumped overboard ... shortly afterwards he was seized and dragged under by a shark.’

Source 3

Captain Edward Wright of the 91st Argyllshire Regiment:

‘The order and regularity that prevailed on board, from the moment the ship struck till she totally disappeared, far exceeded anything that I had thought could be affected by the best discipline; and it is the more to be wondered at seeing that most of the soldiers were but a short time in the service. Everyone did as he was directed and there was not a murmur or cry amongst them until the ship made her final plunge – all received their orders and carried them out as if they were embarking instead of going to the bottom – I never saw any embarkation conducted with so little noise or confusion.’

Evidence sheet two: remembrance and commemoration

What did people think about the accident at the time?

Source 4

Queen Victoria ordered a memorial to be built to the memory of those who died. You can still see the memorial today on the site of the Chelsea Hospital. The Kaiser of Prussia issued an 'Order of the Day' to be read to all his assembled troops asking them to be as brave as the men of the Birkenhead.

What did people think about the Birkenhead 40 or 50 years later?

Source 5

Rudyard Kipling wrote a famous poem about the men of the Birkenhead in 1896:

Soldier an' Sailor Too

To take your chance in the thick of a rush, with firing all about,
Is nothing so bad when you've cover to 'and, an' leave an' likin' to shout;
But to stand an' be still to the Birken'ead drill is a damn tough bullet to chew,
An' they done it, the Jollies -- 'Er Majesty's Jollies -- soldier an' sailor too!
Their work was done when it 'adn't begun; they was younger nor me an' you;
Their choice it was plain between drownin' in 'eaps an' bein' mopped by the screw,
So they stood an' was still to the Birken'ead drill, soldier an' sailor too.

Rudyard Kipling, Barrack Room Ballads, 1896

Source 6

Colour Sergeant O'Neil, one of the survivors, was asked in 1902, on the 50th anniversary of the sinking, what his memories were:

'I might be allowed to say a word or two about the memorable disaster, the wreck of the Birkenhead. My share in that is soon told: simple obedience of orders, standing on deck slowly but surely sinking, whilst the women and children got safely away in the boats, then by God's providence and a long and perilous swim midst sharks, breakers and seaweeds, I managed to scramble ashore.'

What have people said/thought about the event more recently?

Source 7

More recently, there has been a rumour that the ship was carrying gold, to pay the troops, and there have been a series of, so far unsuccessful, underwater archaeological attempts to find it. All they have found so far is a cannon and some military buttons and insignia.

The disaster is the first recorded instance of 'women and children first, which has since become standard maritime procedure. Remember how vilified (attacked) in the press some of the First Class male passengers who survived the sinking of the Titanic were!

Tasks

1. Much of the enquiry into the event focused on who was to blame for the event. Can you find any evidence in the information or sources to support the case that each of the following people were to blame: The Admiralty (Naval Officers), the Army, Captain Salmond, Lieutenant-Colonel Seton, the ship's crew, nobody – it was an accident.
2. Using Evidence sheet one, explain how the event was viewed at the time. Try to use examples to support your points.
3. Using Evidence sheet two, explain how people viewed the event in the following decades.
4. What impressions of the event do you gain from looking at the artistic portrayals on Evidence sheet three?
5. Most people today have probably not heard of the HMS Birkenhead or the fate of her passengers. Other similarly tragic naval disasters are, however, very widely remembered, most notably the sinking of the Titanic. Why do you think we popularly remember some such events above others?
6. Look again at Ian Dawson's significance criteria. How significant, and in what ways, do you think, was the loss of the Birkenhead?
7. Design a memorial to the event. You should include:
 - A picture of the memorial. Include labels to explain: where it will be, what it will be made from, what symbols/pictures it will incorporate, what words or information it will feature.
 - A plaque to stand alongside the memorial, which explains to visitors who know nothing about the sinking of the Birkenhead, why it is a significant event in History.

Teaching notes

This is a challenging, stand-alone lesson for KS3 students, intended to bring the key concept of significance into focus. It requires no additional contextual information or prior teaching, but might fit well as an interesting addition to studies of the Titanic.

Starter idea

You may wish to begin with a starter which makes the idea of memory and significance more concrete. Students could be asked to jot down memories from their own lives which stand out particularly vividly and then to consider what it is about these events which make them personally significant. You could then ask them to repeat the process, but this time for news events over the past five years – which spring immediately to mind, and why? Which were covered most thoroughly in the media, and why? This can lead into an interesting discussion about why certain historic events receive more attention than others and how we might generate criteria for testing this.