

## *George Russell's account of the wreck of the Minerva*

This extract comes from a black hard-covered exercise book in which Russell chronicled the history of the Russell family, as he knew it, and his own life story. It takes the form of a letter written to his son, George Barsham Russell. Commenced in 1869, when the latter had just turned two, it was undertaken to fill Russell's leisure hours when he was tired of reading. He intended that once his son had reached the age of 15 he should read it – more than once – and 'act upon the principles expressed, or at least benefit by them'. It is based upon Russell's diaries (which he kept from c.1847 to 7 May 1863, the date of the birth of his first child), and thereafter on an engagements diary maintained by his wife, Frances Matilda, containing records of visitors, items of importance, etc. Frances persuaded George to give up his diary as she had 'a general distrust of diaries' of the detailed nature of George's, because it is impossible to say into whose hands they might eventually fall.

The family history commences with George Russell's own grandfather, George Russell (1735–1804), a wealthy soap-boiler of *Longlands*, Footh Cray, Kent. With his own story George is honest, chronicling his youthful wilfulness and demonstrating its results, in order to prevent his son following the same course. Very occasionally the text has a 'preaching' quality, but the story it presents is fascinating.

In the text are a couple of illustrations. A plan demonstrates the circumstances of George's falling overboard and being rescued during his second voyage at sea prior to coming to Natal. There is also a plan of his property *Longlands* on the Berea (which was between Musgrave and Currie Roads, bordering St Thomas's Road).

Russell completed this 'letter' in January 1872. In later years he added two photographs of Durban to the text – one of Field Street looking towards the Bay, and the other from the same spot looking down West Street showing the buildings on that street's south frontage. These were included in the book to indicate the positions of George's two offices, the first in Field Street, and the later one in Central Chambers, West Street. He has meticulously identified all the other buildings depicted. Another photograph shows *Longlands* house, while there are several photographs of George Barsham Russell at various stages of childhood.

One hopes that George Barsham Russell did have the opportunity to read this 'letter', so painstakingly and lovingly prepared by a father for his only son. He died of typhoid at the age of 15 years and three months.

Unfortunately this document has not come down to posterity in its entirety. After George Russell's own death, apparently, his wife's desire for privacy caused her to excise and destroy 28 and a half pages of text – covering roughly the period September 1861 to May 1863, the eighteen months during which Russell's father died, and he met and married his wife.

Grateful acknowledgment is given to Mrs L. Ascani of 14 Nahoon Gardens, Beacon Bay, East London, for permission to use this extract.

SHELAGH SPENCER

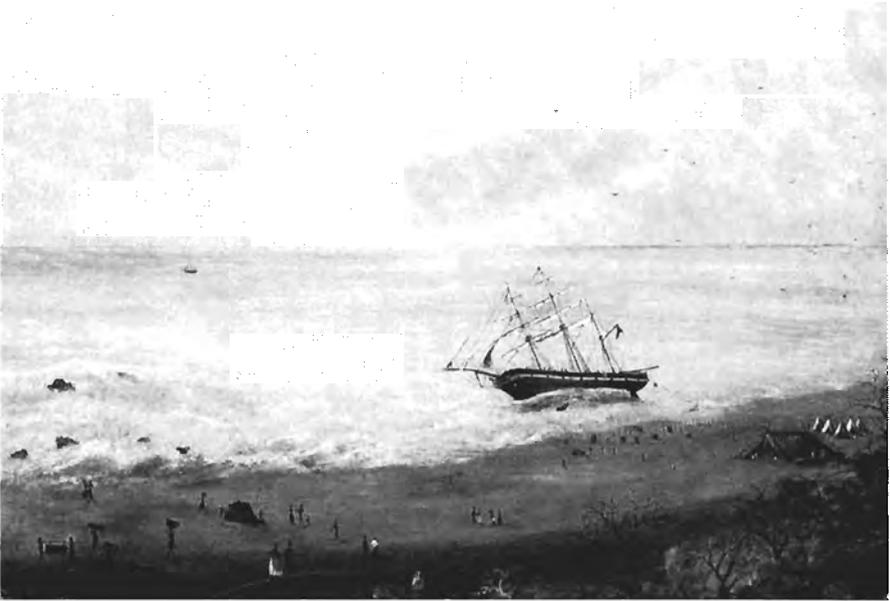
All our goods being safely shipped and everything being ready we joined the ship in the East India Docks on Monday 8th April 1850. The ship left the docks (Blackwall Gates) on the 11th, not being able to get out before, but did not sail from Gravesend until the 16th. The delay at Gravesend gave us time to

settle ourselves comfortably and to see that everything was right, so having time to think, it occurred to me to ask my father if he had insured all the goods we had with us — valued at about £1 000 — and he replied he had not, for having run himself very close, he had not more than £50 left in cash to take with him, that the premium of insurance would make a large hole in that little sum; and besides, if the ship went down, we should probably all go with it. There the subject unhappily dropped, and I was too thoughtless to renew it. The ship was to call at Plymouth to take in more emigrants and when all were on board we were to receive our land certificates.

We had a very rough passage down but arrived there on the 23rd. After receiving our complement of passengers, stores etc. and making final arrangements, sailed on Friday the 26th April 1850, from dear old England, with three hundred passengers on board, bound for Port Natal, there to make our fortunes, and speedily return. Twenty years have elapsed, and I have not returned, and may possibly never return to see those white chalk cliffs again, notwithstanding I long most ardently to do so.

The incidents of a voyage are in themselves a history, where you have the affairs of more than three hundred people to record, but as this does not come within the purpose of my narrative, I will merely say that the passage was an average one and very enjoyable there being plenty of amusement and change with — a first consideration on board ship — a good dietary scale. We arrived after a voyage of 68 days on the 3rd July, and anchored at the outer anchorage. The day following several of the passengers went ashore, in the only cargo boat that came out to us, with such of their things as they had handy; while we looked forward to leaving the ship in the same manner on the morrow, if we could only get our new tent, and take it with us. But the proverb has it ‘Tomorrow never comes’, and no tomorrow came for us.

We were much interested in all the stories the boatmen circulated of the wild animals and natives ashore, and notwithstanding it was a fine night with but a slight breeze blowing, we did not sit up long discussing the wonders we had heard, but retired early hoping to get a good night’s rest to prepare us for the coming fatigues and bustle of going ashore. Our cabin was a large stern cabin on the maindeck; i.e. below the upper deck and underneath the cuddy or poop cabins — with large ports, or windows, and formed one of a series termed the ‘intermediate’ and was entirely separated from the steerage passengers’ compartment; it contained our whole family. About 6 bells (11 pm) my mother woke us by enquiring the cause of a thumping outside our stern windows, and I explained that it was caused by the large surfboat which the crew had that day got into the water, where it was fastened astern. Shortly afterwards we heard the crew playing out cable. I went to the hatchway to see what was the cause, but did not take the trouble to go on deck, seeing the stars shining brightly overhead, feeling there was but little wind, and noticing the captain lounging across the front of the poop with a cigar in his mouth; so I grumblingly reported that they were ‘giving her cable’ and turned in again, once more falling asleep. — However my mother persuaded my father to go up and see what the continued noise and unusual bustle was about. He returned shortly, I heard him come in, and never shall forget the thrill, curdling of the skin, as it were, that passed through me as he said, sharp and resolute — ‘Get up all of you, and dress yourselves as soon as you can!’ I was into my trousers and great coat, before the rest had time to ask what was the matter; and before I hurried out, muttered to reassure them by my



The wreck of the *Minerva*, from an oil painting by Joseph Forsyth Ingram entitled 'Stranding of the *Minerva*, 1850'.

(Photograph: Local History Museum, Durban)

professional knowledge that 'the ship was drifting a little, or hauling her anchor home — pay out cable — spare anchor in the chains — all right directly etc.' — As I put my head up the hatchway, the captain was shouting 'Starboard, starboard hard!' This confirmed my idea that we were drifting rapidly, having parted our chain cable. The wheel was a large double one, in front of the poop close to our hatchway; seeing no one there, I sprang to it at once, spun it round and shouted in reply 'Starboard hard it is Sir!' I was shortly after relieved by one of the crew, and employed myself assisting to carry out the captain's orders. What a scene of wild confusion and disorder was presented — orders shouted backwards and forwards and up aloft, chain cables rattling; seamen swearing at passengers for being in the way, and passengers crowding together with ropes in their hands, ready to hoist sails when they should be loosed. 'Hoist the foretopmast staysail', shouted the captain; it was hoisted, and it filled on the port side (tack), inclining our head out to seaward, after a minute of breathless suspense, one or two dips of the ship, then a voice shouted from the forecastle 'It's filled on the starboard tack, Sir' and, despite the rudder, the wind and current turned the bows of our fine ship in towards the shore, and the Backbeach.

Then came the conviction on the captain and crew, that unless we got sail on her in time to turn right round — pointing her head first to the Bar and then to the open sea — that we should without doubt go on shore. Orders were shouted and only half executed; all was flurry and confusion, till by one consent, as the roaring of the surf became too plainly audible, we all ceased from our labours to watch the ship clear the end of the huge Bluff which now towered above us. Her head was pointing directly to it, and we hoped, nay expected, to drift past it. I had barely exchanged with a companion, the

opinion that we should clear it, when we were almost shaken off our feet by a dreadful crash of her bows onto the outlying Bluff rocks. A huge roller lifted and swung us broadside on, with three heavy thumps that brought one's heart into the mouth; the sensation is dreadful, and I did not get rid of it for many weeks after; in fact for years seldom went into a boat for pleasure, but I was reminded of it, when she thumped upon the sand banks of our Bay.

A quivering groan, with a faint shriek or two from the women (who had all gathered together in the cuddy) appeared to echo through the ship. Orders were given to the carpenter to rig the main pumps: to fire signal guns and blue lights; volunteers were called for to go below to work the huge pumps, and I went accordingly. What a change was there, the sleeping places of the steerage passengers had been ruthlessly knocked down to allow room for the heavy pump beams to work, bedding, clothing, writing desks, cooking utensils and food lying about the deck, now running with tons of water thrown by pumps at every stroke, worked as they were by about 40 men at a 'spell', singing in chorus the windlass song 'Row Billy, row my hearty'. Three or four ship's lanterns serving only to make the gloom, disorder and anxious features of the workers more painfully dismal. The water at last reached 17 feet in the hold, so we were simply pumping in the sea, and out again through the ship's bottom. Orders were given to cease pumping, as the ship was 'hard and fast'. I returned to the poop and removed my father from under the yards of the mizzen mast, out of danger of their falling, to a secure place by the taffrail. The ship continued to thump, and the masts jerked like fishing rods; the beating of the ship on the bottom, we knew would make her safer from sinking, possibly putting her higher up and closer to dry land. She leaned over however towards the sea, so the sails were backed to help in keeping her upright and steady. Our anxious glances shoreward were at length gladdened by the sight of lights moving across the inner bay, and soon afterwards they came round the Bluff, and the shore people made a large bonfire opposite the ship. The captain hailed them, and they replied 'Hold on till daylight'. Orders were accordingly given to light the galley fires and prepare coffee which we all greatly needed, especially the women and children. Afterwards as the tide began to fall, and the ship settled down into her stony bed, many of the passengers came onto the poop, where we rigged up with spare sails such shelter from the wind and showers of spray as could be contrived. Our family I got snugly under the lea of a skylight, where the younger members dozed away the time till dawn. Daylight at last enabled us to see distinctly the high Bluff, the groups of people on shore, the rolling surf dashing past us and churning themselves into acres of foam, as they crept up the shelving and broken rocks close to us. It presented a scene thrilling and grand, but it is not my object to take up space by picture drawing for which I have no gift, but simply to narrate my history and the adventures that are so far inseparable from them. As soon as it was sufficiently light, a rope was conveyed on shore fastened to a cask, and preparations made for landing by means of the surfboat, that fortunately still swung under our stern, tho' half-full of water. Speculations were on every side indulged in, as to how long the ship would hold together; if we could unload our goods, or if they would wash on shore, or out to sea. To put the matter to the test, I went below to our cabin where I packed up my sea chest with all my belongings, filling the spare space with all the empty coffee cannisters and pickle bottles I could find and there I left it to take its fate with every expectation of its floating on shore if the ship should suddenly break up.

I then carried my Uncle John's coir hammock which was in my bunk as a mattress, with all my bedding lashed up in it, onto the deck and threw it overboard. We watched it with intense interest, and I had the satisfaction of seeing it floating in and ultimately on shore; where I afterwards recovered it, and, as I before said, have and use it still. While in the cabin —into which the sea kept dashing — I secured my father's cashbox, together with sundry articles of feminine attire, stays, boots, combs, brushes etc. for which my mother had prayed me to make a search. All being ready the women and children were sent on shore first in the surfboat, which was pulled backwards and forwards by means of the rope connecting the ship with the shore. After several successful trips had been made, our turn came, and we were lowered, or sprang into the boat while it rose and fell alongside, as best we could, taking with us nothing beyond what could be carried in the hand. We were laid on the bottom (floor) of the boat indiscriminately, as close as we could pack half lying the rest squatting, some up to their knees in water, which kept splashing in salt showers over the side as the seas struck us. At length came the order to 'let go', when the boatmen, who stood in the middle of the boat among the passengers' legs and limbs, ran us in hand over hand along the line till we neared the shore, when to our dismay, we were ordered back again, as the line had caught in some of the ledges of rock under water, so preventing the boat from reaching the dry land. Back we went, and were drenched with the seas again.

Twice the attempt was made without success, and, anticipating an upset, I looked about me to see how I should jump to get clear of the little children who surrounded me, resolved to trust to the wash of the sea to float me to land, since I was too heavily clothed to think of swimming much. I must admit I only thought of myself under the circumstances. However, my forethought was, thank God, not put to the test, for I had barely made the reflection, when 'all clear', followed by 'hold on for a big wave' was shouted. Capitally managed, like a racehorse we rushed on towards the shore, went down in the hollow of the breaker; stayed there a minute; mounted high on the next, and were almost dashed far up onto the flat rocky beach, into the midst of the crowd of sympathetic colonists. They instantly seized the boat, to keep it upright, as also from being washed back again, and helped the passengers out, carrying the women and children in their arms up onto the sand at the foot of the Bluff.

As soon as the boat grounded I jumped over, up to my ankles in water, calling upon my father to jump also. We scrambled up out of the wash of the water, and turned to look at the landing of the rest. Two brawny boatmen were persuading my mother to entrust herself to them, saying 'Come along Mother, we'll take care on yer', and presently I saw her seated in their united arms, sedan chair fashion, with her bonnet flattened and awry on her head, her spectacles far down her nose, and the skirt of her dress towing along in the rippling water under foot. We all got safely on shore, and without accident, and were welcomed by the kind attention of the Colonial Chaplin, the Revd W.H.C. Lloyd, who had provided little comforts, and shelter from the sun for the ladies, in the stunted bush growing at the end of the Bluff.

During the afternoon we were all boated over to the Point, and from thence had wagons to take us up to Durban, where tents had been provided, in addition to two wooden barracks, belonging to J.C. Byrne, on the spot now occupied by the Durban Gaol. Thus my boy, I landed in Natal, on the Fourth

day of July 1850, and all I then possessed besides the clothes I had on, and a gold mourning ring for my grandfather (left me by my grandmother), on my finger, was one silver shilling, a silver watch, a railway ticket, a jack-knife, a meerschaum pipe and a new pair of boots in my greatcoat pocket. My father, in addition to his cash box (containing our land certificates, and about £50 in gold), had a small carpet bag of family clothing. Remember we were not insured, consequently lost all else we possessed, so landed in this colony comparatively ruined and destitute. . . .

Russell family, 4 July 1850

Father: George Russell of Fooks Cray Kent  
Mother: Ann Smith Russell (born Barsham)  
Children: George Russell (myself) aged 18  
Elizabeth Ann Russell aged 17 (about)  
Susanna Russell aged 15 (about)  
Louisa Russell aged 11 (about)  
Edward Russell aged 9 (about).

