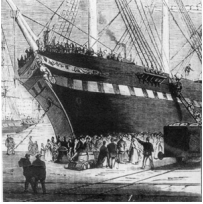


THE VOYAGE OUT

Leaving Home



When our ancestors boarded emigrant ships in Britain or Europe and set out on the more than 3 month journey to New Zealand, most had no idea what they were letting themselves in for. The vast majority had never seen a vessel of that size let alone undertaken a voyage on one. Indeed many had never seen the ocean or traveled further than the next village. Full of hope for a better life in a new land on the other side of the world, the grim conditions of shipboard life meant for some the end of this once-in-a-lifetime dream. One story tells of a woman so apprehensive about putting to sea she was returned to shore while the ship was still in the English Channel.

It is difficult to imagine the psychological pressures placed on emigrants, particularly those leaving family and loved-ones behind. In this day and age when we travel to the other side of the world we know that our return home may be accomplished in a matter of hours. The vast majority of emigrants making the journey in those days would never see their homes again. Whilst most traveled willingly and in hope of achieving a better life for self and family they, too, had also torn themselves away from their country, family, friends and loved-ones and were anxious about their future.

Living Quarters

The voyages undertaken by our immigrant ancestors during the mid to late 19th century have often been so romanticised that people today have little sense of the trials and hardships they suffered. Many of the early ships were cramped and much of the available space on board was packed with cargo. Each family was allocated tiny living quarters, sometimes only divided from their neighbours by a canvas curtain or blanket thrown over a wire. Fresh air was ducted in from above or by way of small portholes which, in rough weather had to be covered preventing any air at all from coming in. A passenger on the Palmerston, to Port Chalmers with European immigrants, described on-board arrangements as: "Our quarters, excuse me, saloon is midship about 130 feet long and the full width of the ship, 30 feet. The bunks, shall I call them beds, are on the two and two principle, one above the other, and 3 feet 6 inches



broad, but how long I will not mention. In front of all the beds are nice seats made of 9 inch boards, meant no doubt for comfort. The dinner tables are constructed so as to be hung up under the deck to allow more floor space when not needed to serve for our dainty menus or meals. The seats along the tables, for we have chairs, are top heavy, and cannot stand by themselves when they are not weighted by occupation, when heavy seas are running, and that is almost every day and night".

While space 'teewn decks caused customary movement was severely restricted, the only means of exercise was undertaken by taking a constitutional on deck. Sometimes emigrants were victims of poor food, damp conditions and illness spread, more-often, by close contact with those already infected. A health check was always undertaken before departure but some were able to keep the symptoms of their illnesses secret. During good weather, the lot of the passengers was much easier, but when stormy conditions prevailed the ships of the time were often ill-equipped for emergencies. During storms at sea the hatches to the emigrants quarters were frequently battened down in an attempt to protect the passengers and stop water from flushing down into their living quarters. These vessels were, however, anything but watertight and damp conditions almost became a way of life.



Emigrant accommodation on board ship was split into three parts. Single Men were usually berthed in the bow section and Single Women in the stern, while the two, as modesty and chastity demanded, were separated by the Married Couples section. Single men and women were not permitted to commingle on board ship, nor were the sailors permitted to fraternise with the single women. We have heard, in some cases, of the Single Women's accommodation being locked down at night - a dangerous situation in the event of an emergency.

Life on Board

Boredom often took their toll on board and three months of ship-board life with few activities and entertainment's would sometimes lead to dangerous pursuits. One story tells of a boy who, having nothing better to do, commenced swinging on a rope. As he swung out over the side of the ship his hands slipped from the rope and he plunged into the sea, promptly disappearing. The ship was put about but nothing more was seen of him.



Diversions were set up on board in order to keep the passengers entertained. Music and singing was encouraged and concerts were often held during the voyage with costumes and printed programs to ensure a sense of realism. The availability of printing facilities on board many ships frequently saw the emergence of ship-board newspapers. Passengers with smatterings of literary ability would be invited to contribute items and editions (usually weekly) contained poems, stories, letters to the editor and information on the ships speed, current position and expected date of arrival. The publications were given a name associated with the name of the vessel and surviving copies remain available to this day in locations such as the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, New Zealand.

Care of the Emigrants



Illness and Death

Illness and death were frequent attendants on board ship. Such illnesses as marasmus, diarrhoea, scarlet fever and even the fevers associated with teething took their toll of the young whilst enteric (typhoid) fever, tuberculosis and scarlet fever, amongst other diseases, ensured that a number of the adult passengers were never to see their new home. Congestion and bronchial illnesses were exacerbated by the damp and icy conditions in the cold Southern Ocean whilst physical weakness and youth were preyed on by the sapping heat of the tropics. On some voyages one can almost map the location of the ship by the frequency and nature of the illnesses as they strike their deadly blow. Included in one ship-board diary are three consecutive entries for one month:

15th. One little child dead. The parents belong to Sweden.

23rd. A female dead, belonging to a Zeeland parent.

24th. One little child dead, belonging to a Polish parent.

Another diary, kept by an emigrant on board the Indiana which sailed for New Zealand in August 1858, reflected ship-board life in the 19th century. The author is speaking of his wife, Charlotte:

Aug 25th: Charlotte is a little stronger today but forced to bathe the breast with hot water and poultice with Linseed Oil.

Aug 26th: The same as yesterday. The Captain caught a dolphin, the first on Indiana. I climbed topsail Yard. We got her up on deck in the afternoon. Not up long. Faints away. I carry her down and she faints twice I stay with her. Take babe in with me and it is very ill all night.

Aug 28th: Charlotte is much worse, baby tolerable, calm today and yesterday.

Sept 5th: Babe much the same as yesterday, only falling away fast. Spoke the City of Benares for Calcutta 24 days out....Mrs Langridge baby died with thrush. Is buried the same night.

Charlotte is the same..

Sept 10th: Grows weaker and at 5.02 a.m. she expires at the age of twelve months short of seven days. The Captain gets a nice little coffin for her and she is buried at 11 a.m. in Lat. 2.39 N. Long. 16.35 W. (about 100 miles west of Liberia)

One other reference speaks for itself. "4 p.m. Mrs Ried is buried, no coffin, no timber. Schoolmaster read."

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Reference:

Newspapers of the period

Various books and documents

[[reference](#)]