

A large, multi-masted sailing ship, likely a three-masted vessel, is shown from a low angle, sailing on a choppy sea. The ship's sails are fully deployed and appear to be made of a light-colored, possibly canvas, material. The ship is moving towards the right of the frame. The sky is overcast with soft, grey clouds. The overall tone of the image is somewhat somber and historical.

Tales of Shipwrecks at the Cape of Storms

by
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Chapter 5

'The Anvil Strikes' *Colebrooke*

Just south of Cape Point lie Bellows Rock and Anvil Rock, twin blinders which together have been responsible for a number of maritime accidents. In 1911 the Portuguese passenger liner *Lasitania*, with 600 people aboard, impaled herself on Bellows Rock and sank, mercifully with minimal loss of life. More than a century earlier Anvil Rock had precipitated another little-known sea drama, which resulted in the loss of the British East Indiaman *Colebrooke*.

The *Colebrooke* was a three-decked ship of 729 tons built in 1770 in what was then the biggest private shipyard in the world, John Pery's yard at Blackwall on the Thames. She was named after Sir George Colebrooke (1729-1809), chairman of the Board of the Honourable East India Company in 1761 and 1771.

Preparations for the *Colebrooke's* third voyage to the East began in early January 1778. Passengers and cargo were taken on at the East India Dock at Blackwall between 6 January and 3 February. Then, loaded with lead ingots, copper and a variety of British export goods and carrying 212 passengers and crew the *Colebrooke* moved to Gravesend nearer the mouth of the river to wait for the rest of the East India fleet to assemble. All was ready by 8 March and she sailed from the Downs, off Deal in Kent, in the company of eight or nine other vessels, including the HMS *Asia* and the East Indiamen *Gatton* and *Royal Admiral*.

After an uneventful voyage, which included a stop in Madeira to purchase wine, the fleet reached the Cape on 24 August. Because it was the middle of the Cape winter they were not permitted to anchor in Table Bay and made instead for the winter anchorage on the other side of the Cape Peninsula, in Simon's Bay.

The Anvil Strikes

The weather was clear but windy, with a fresh north-westerly blowing. The *Colebrooke* led the fleet past Cape Point shortly after 11am on the 24th, and had just hauled to the eastward to enter

False Bay when she struck what is now known as Anvil Rock. This isolated rocky pinnacle rises like a fang from the surrounding seabed to within four metres of the surface and was not marked on the Dutch charts being used by the 1778 East India fleet. Frantic signals from the *Colebrooke* to the *Asia*, *Royal Admiral* and *Gatton* ensured that they avoided the rock, although the latter came very close to colliding with the *Colebrooke* in the process.

The *Colebrooke* tore free of the rock almost immediately after striking, but water began pouring into her hull from somewhere under her powder room, which was located on the lower, or orlop deck, near the bow. By the time the crew had put on the pumps minutes later there was already three feet of water in the hold, indicating that the ship had suffered serious damage.

In a hurried conference her master, Captain Arthur Morris, and his officers concluded that nursing the *Colebrooke* to the anchorage in Simon's Bay was not an option. The rising water in her hold was rapidly making her unresponsive and difficult to steer and this meant that the manoeuvring required to enter Simon's Bay, against the prevailing wind, was going to be difficult, if not impossible. Instead, they decided to run the vessel across to the eastern shore of False Bay where they hoped they would find a suitable spot to beach her. This in itself was a gamble, given the nature of the far shore of the bay. It was largely rocky, with steep mountains coming right down to the water and with only one stretch of sand on which the *Colebrooke* could hope to beach. In addition, it was virtually uninhabited and very difficult to access by land.

A Race against Time

With her Company ensign flying upside down to signal distress, the *Colebrooke* sought assistance from the *Gatton* and *Asia*. Boats were despatched from both vessels carrying about eighteen sailors to assist the *Colebrooke's* crew on the pumps. Her

powder room was totally flooded by now, and it was impossible to reach the hole in the hull to attempt repairs. The crew dropped a weighted sail off the bows and managed to haul it under the hull where it was secured like a bandage over the hole, slowing the ingress of water. Attempts to lighten the vessel by jettisoning her guns had to be abandoned because the ports on her gun deck were already submerged.

Morris sent the second and third officers up the masts to examine the coast ahead, and they reported a sandy beach which seemed to offer the best hope of running the ship aground safely. As the *Colebrooke* wallowed across the bay the water slowly gained on those pumping and bailing. By the time she approached the beach there was 14 feet of water in her holds and her bow was so low that she was shipping water through the hawse holes.

With water bubbling up through her forward hatch covers, the *Colebrooke* grounded about 200m off the beach at Kogel Bay at 4pm on the afternoon

of 24 August. Her topsails were let go and this had the effect of swinging her stern round to bring her bow into the wind and swell. The mizzen mast was then cut away to stabilise her, after which the boats were launched. As far as beaching a sailing vessel goes, this was a textbook operation.

The first boat, a pinnacle, attempted a landing on the beach but was upset in the surf and seven of the fifteen men aboard drowned. This discouraged further attempts at landing and efforts were made to transfer the passengers, soldiers and crew to the *Gatton*, *Asia* and *Royal Admiral*, which had followed the *Colebrooke* as she limped across the bay ready to assist her. By the time it was too dark to continue transferring people, only about seventy men remained aboard the wreck under the command of the third officer, John Elliot.

John Elliot was born at Elliot House near Ripon in Yorkshire. He went to sea in 1772 at the age of thirteen, as a midshipman, on the *Resolution* on James Cook's second voyage (1772-75) which



After striking the Anvil the *Colebrooke* wallowed across False Bay to her final resting place at Kogel Bay.



*The safe anchorage in Simon's Bay - c.1789.
from a watercolour by Johann Christian Friderici*

resulted in the first eastward circumnavigation of the world. Only one other person on the *Resolution* was younger than him, and that was George Vancouver who was later to be celebrated for his exploration of the northwest coast of North America. Also aboard the *Resolution* was the Swedish naturalist Anders Sparrman, who joined the ship at the Cape on her outward voyage. Elliot would have been familiar with Cape Town by the time the *Colebrooke* went aground, having stopped there twice on *Resolution's* around the world voyage. When the *Colebrooke* was wrecked he was just twenty-one years old.

To lighten the ship, and stabilise her further, Elliot had the fore- and main masts cut away some time after dark. Instead of getting clear of the ship, however, they became entangled with their rigging and those left aboard spent an uncomfortable and worrying night as the heavy surf battered the floating masts against the hull, threatening to destroy the already dangerously weakened wreck.

The other vessels in the fleet stood off all night. By the following morning, Tuesday 25 August, the wind had moderated and rescue operations were resumed. Some of those still on the wreck were transferred to the other ships, while others made it to the beach on rafts, where they set

up camp with those who landed the previous afternoon.

John Elliot and a small group of crewmen remained on the *Colebrooke* when the rest of the fleet departed for Simon's Bay. After doing what they could to secure the wreck they rowed across False Bay to Simon's Bay in the last of the *Colebrooke's* boats, an arduous twenty nautical mile pull which took them ten hours. Elliot's journal suggests that his night on the wreck allowed him to save most of his valuables, for besides a trunk of clothing, he took with him his two watches, a small sword and pistols when he left the wreck.

Rounding up the Survivors

The next few days were occupied with trying to rescue the remaining survivors. On Wednesday 26 August three boats, one under the command of Elliot, were sent from Simon's Bay to search for the *Colebrooke's* missing longboat. It had last been seen crowded with fifty-seven people, trying to get from the wreck to Simon's Bay, late on the 24th.

On the morning of Thursday 27th, after spending the night at sea, Elliot took his boat back to the *Colebrooke*. The wreck was virtually

submerged by now, but he boarded nevertheless to assess its condition and at the same time salvaged a few more items. Heavy surf on the beach at Kogel Bay meant that nothing could be done to rescue those still camped on the beach near the wreck, and Elliott advised them to start walking north along the coast towards the nearest Dutch farms in what is now Gordon's Bay, then known as Vishoek. Elliott was lucky to escape alive on this occasion as he became trapped on the wreck by the surf, which also nearly destroyed the boat which was trying to take him off the wreck.

The following day the search was resumed and Elliott again returned to the *Colebrooke*. The return trip across the bay in darkness that night almost ended in disaster as a sudden north-westerly storm nearly drove his small boat out into the open sea. After a frightening and miserable night Elliott and his exhausted crew returned to Simon's Bay to rejoin the fleet the following morning. There they received the news that the missing boat had been found.

The boat had spent two days and nights at sea after leaving the wreck on the 24th and eventually came ashore at Swartklip. All but one of its company had then walked to safety, probably to the VOC *butiepost* in Muizenberg. An injured man had been left with the boat and although a rescue party found him, he died shortly afterwards and was buried in the dunes.

The Governor of the Cape, Joachim van Plettenberg, had been informed of the wreck immediately the first survivors reached Simon's Bay on the 25th. He instructed the nearest *landdrost*, in Stellenbosch, to organise the rescue of those now walking along the eastern shore of False Bay.

Such a rescue was no easy task as this section of the False Bay coast was remote, inhospitable and rugged. It had only been explored for the first time the year before by Captain Robert Gordon. Gordon was the first to put Kogel Bay on the map, originally naming it Plettenberg Bay in honour of the Governor, but later changing the name on his map to Kogel Bay - apparently because of the round cobbles on parts of the beach that resembled cannon shot. Some days after the wreck those put ashore on the afternoon the *Colebrooke* was beached reached Gordon's Bay, where they were taken in and looked after by the

local farmers.

Some of those who came ashore on the day of the wreck took the opportunity to desert. They scattered into the surrounding countryside and the Stellenbosch commando was tasked with arresting any deserters they came across. On 8 and 10 September the Council of Policy received two reports from the Stellenbosch *landdrost*, and with the survivors having reached safety, decided that the commando had done all it could. It was ordered home, and the *landdrost* was instructed to send any deserters he had managed to apprehend to Cape Town.

Once all the *Colebrooke's* scattered survivors had been accounted for, the entire company made their way to Cape Town where they found lodgings until an onward passage could be arranged for them.

As for the *Colebrooke* herself, Captain Morris ensured that as much of her cargo as possible was salvaged, and sought the assistance of the Governor and the Council of Policy. On 26 August, accompanied by VOC officials, he attempted to reach the wreck by land, but they were foiled by the ruggedness of the terrain, and forced to return to Simon's Bay four days later. Others were not so easily deterred. As the news of the wreck spread rapidly along the bush telegraph, local farmers and others from as far away as Swellendam - 150 kilometres from the site of the wreck - were soon on the scene, some accompanied by their slaves. The promise of rich pickings from the stranded vessel, and the remoteness of the wreck site, encouraged them to risk ignoring the harsh VOC proclamations against looting wrecks.

The Stellenbosch *landdrost* despatched his burgher commando to guard the site, and their arrival at the wreck on 27 August is noted in the ship's log by those camping on the beach. They recorded 'we met some Dutchmen and two soldiers with slaves carrying provisions who told us they were sent by the order of the Governor'. Despite the presence of the commando at the wreck it proved impossible to prevent looting and scavenging, particularly at night, when the *Colebrooke* eventually broke up, scattering its contents along the False Bay coast.

On 29 August news reached Captain Morris in Simon's Town that the gale the previous night had 'broken the wreck entirely to pieces'. Three



The remains of **the Colebrooke** in its watery grave in Kogel Bay. The last chapter of the story will be told by archaeology.

Photo: C. Shapiro

weeks after the wreck, on 18 September, Elliott and the first officer, Le Mesurier, were sent overland to visit the site and report on what should be done with the wreck. After an arduous and dangerous trek along the coast from Gordon's Bay, which involved crossing the Steenbras River where it flowed deep and fast into the sea, they reached the wreck site. Elliott described the scene as follows:

'Nothing more of the wreck could be seen than about four feet of her stern post: The beach (which is about two miles long) was entirely covered with parts of her sides, bow pieces, stern frame, parts of her decks, masts, pinnace, yawl etc. But no part of her cargo except between sixty and seventy pieces of cloth; which had been preserved by people sent there for that purpose.'

Elliott and Le Mesurier returned to Cape Town on 26 September and reported that the wreck and its contents were largely beyond salvage. On

30 September the wreck, with the two boats and everything that could be salvaged, was sold by auction for £177 sterling. Given her condition and inaccessible position in the surf it was unlikely that very much could have been salvaged from her at the time.

Epilogue

In 1986, more than two hundred years later, the wreck of the *Colebrooke* was found by Cape Town diver, Charlie Shapiro. Buried under a generally deep covering of sand, the state of preservation of the wreck is remarkable, as is the archaeological richness of material on the site. The cargo of lead ingots and copper ingots, sheets and plate used as paying ballast were still packed in the remains of the wooden hull of the ship. Many of the lead ingots bear makers' names, such as W Blackett, the East India Company stamp and the date 1778. Mixed in with these items are iron cannon, rolls of lead sheathing, iron rods and girders, barrels of lead shot, perfectly preserved bottles of wine from Madeira, barrels of red lead oxide, boxes of penknives, barrels of gunflints, coils of rope and a myriad personal items and ships' fittings.

Much of her cargo of lead and copper, and a range of other items, were salvaged by Shapiro under the terms of a permit from the National Monuments Council. Some of this material is now to be found in the collection of the IZIKO Maritime Museum in Cape Town. The wreck of the *Colebrooke* nevertheless remains an archaeological treasure awaiting detailed excavation and recording. The remains of the ship and its contents have the potential to reveal in vivid detail something of what life must have been like on a late 18th century British sailing ship engaged in trade with the East. In recent years the fabulous porcelain cargos of the ships coming home from the East have grabbed the headlines. However, as an outward bound East Indianman the cargo carried by the *Colebrooke* is also particularly interesting, consisting as it did of British exports, the products of the burgeoning Industrial Revolution.

The last chapter in the story of the *Colebrooke* thus remains to be written and will be revealed by archaeology.