

The Clipper Ship *Torrens*

I recently obtained some vintage postcards that feature the clipper ship *Torrens*. Three examples are featured in this article. I have to admit that I had never heard of the vessel, so I did some research on the Internet. As it turned out, she was a very famous ship.

Among the almost innumerable list of Sunderland-built sailing vessels, this one stands out as being the most fa-



mous of them all. She was launched in October, 1875, by James Laing's Deptford shipyard, and was the last full-rigged composite passenger clipper to be built.

Constructed with iron frames and teak planking, the 1,335 tonner was designed to carry emigrants from England to South Australia and return home with wool and other produce. Flores Angel, daughter of the ship's first master and part owner, Captain Henry Robert Angel, performed the launching ceremony. A striking figurehead,



modeled on Flores, was carved by sculptor, Joseph Melvin.

Torrens entered service as flagship of the Elder Line, leaving Plymouth on December 12, 1875, for her maiden voyage to Adelaide, which was completed in 85 days. She was regarded as a beautifully modeled ship, with

splendid sea keeping qualities. In light airs, when other vessels were practically becalmed, *Torrens* was able to glide along at several knots.

As Commodore of the Elder Line, Captain Angel flew his own ensign from *Torrens*' masthead; this being a white flag with a crescent and two stars. Other members of the Elder fleet flew a similar house flag with a red background.

Captain Angel made 15 voyages between Plymouth and Port Adelaide, averaging an unequalled 74 days for the outward passage. He also established a record-breaking 64 days for the passage, once sailing 336 miles in 24 hours.

On his retirement in 1890, Angel was succeeded by Captain WH Cope, who made six return voyages to Adelaide. On his first passage, a mid-Atlantic squall resulted in *Torrens* sustaining major damage, forcing her to put into Pernambuco, Brazil, for repairs. She finally arrived in Adelaide, 179 days after leaving London.

Between 1891 and 1893, the famous Polish novelist, Joseph Conrad, served as chief officer on two return voyages.

Captain Falkland Angel (son of Henry Robert) took over command in 1896 and completed six passages between London and Adelaide, the last two coming close to disaster. In 1899, the vessel struck an iceberg near the Crozet Islands in the southern Indian Ocean, losing her foretopmast, jib boom, bowsprit and figurehead.* The second photo in this article features the damage that was sustained.

In 1903, while returning from Adelaide, she loaded explosive ordnance (remnants from the Boer War)



from St Helena. While under tow in the Thames, she collided with another vessel. Fortunately, the explosives did not ignite, and she was not badly damaged.

Afterwards, she was sold to Italian owners and was eventually scrapped by Genoese ship breakers in 1910. The third photo shows the *Torrens* under the Italian flag.

*In 1973, an Australian National Antarctic Research team discovered a headless figurehead of a woman on Macquarie Island (south-west of New Zealand). Researchers believe this is the figurehead lost by *Torrens* in 1899. It was later taken to the Queen Victoria Museum in Launceston, Tasmania.

For those who are interested, plans and an "Anatomy of the Ship" book featuring this clipper ship can be purchased on the Internet.

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