

Queen Bee Bottoms in Bay

There was excited anticipation on board the sailing ship *Queen Bee* as she rounded Farewell Spit during the late evening of Monday 6th August 1877 heading for Nelson Haven where they would go ashore the following morning after 108 days at sea. Widow, Mary Elizabeth Gibbs, had settled her nine children in bed and was about to do the same when suddenly the ship struck something and shuddered violently, tilting to one side. It was quickly realised they had run aground. As the situation became more serious the frightened passengers and crew began preparing for the worst.

By 4am Captain John Davies realised they were in serious trouble so ordered the 'dinghy' to be launched with second mate John Going and four crew to go for help. Some hours later they reached Bark Bay where Richard Huffam and William Hadfield helped them get to Riwaka River mouth then by track to Motueka where they reached the Post Office Hotel about 7:30pm, then roused the postmaster who sent a telegraph message to Nelson and to the ship's agents N.Edwards & Co, London.

"Ship Queen Bee struck Farewell Spit last night at 12 o'clock. Left at 4am this morning for assistance. Ten feet of water in the hold when we left. Send assistance immediately. Boat's crew waiting answer. John .E.Going, Second Mate."

Back at the wreck the morning light of Tuesday 7th revealed a sorry sight so Captain Davies ordered all women and children to abandon ship. Mary and her three youngest children boarded the 'lifeboat' along with 11 others, four of these being crew to do the rowing. Her six other children were among the twenty one packed into the larger 'cutter'. After several hours the smaller and lighter 'lifeboat' managed to land at Awaroa where they found refuge with the Hadfield family who lived there. The slower 'cutter' lagging behind was affected by the increasing nor'west wind and blown offshore. With very little freeboard their challenge thus became one of bailing and hoping as they drifted into the middle of Tasman Bay.

By late afternoon the fifteen men remaining on the *Queen Bee* gave up their hope of rescue and boarded the one remaining boat, the Captain's 'gig'. They too soon found themselves at the mercy of the wind blowing them across a rough Tasman Bay towards Cook Strait. All night they wallowed and bailed, trying to run with the waves and swell. At first light on Wednesday 8th they spotted the northern end of d'Urville Island so began steering towards it, hoping for a suitable landing spot.

The twenty one in the 'cutter' were blown well across Tasman Bay and close to the southern end of d'Urville Island come nightfall but the rough seas made it too dangerous to land among the rocks in the dark so they manned the oars all night to keep offshore hoping for calmer waters in the morning.

At the same time as these two boatloads were off the coast of d'Urville two rescue vessels, *Lady Barkly* and *Lyttelton*, reached the *Queen Bee* only to find her abandoned, mostly submerged with hatches burst open and cargo littering the sea. With no sign of any survivors in the area *Lady Barkly* began searching the coastline to the south where she was met by the schooner *Merlin* who had on board the fifteen from the 'lifeboat' who had landed at Awaroa. From here the *Lady Barkly* continued further south and came upon the 'dinghy'. The five crew climbed aboard leaving Richard Huffam and William Hadfield to row home, keeping the 'dinghy'.

When the *Lady Barkly* returned to Nelson that evening the rescue of twenty survivors created an atmosphere of excitement but at the same time there was much concern for the missing twenty one in the 'cutter' and the fifteen men left behind on the wreck. For Mary this was a particularly distressing time, all her possessions lost in

the wreck and six children missing at sea. Among the settlers of Nelson no effort was spared in preparing several vessels for Thursday's search, as well as the collection of bedding, clothing and funds to assist those rescued so far, and in readiness for the other thirty six they hoped might soon be found.

After spending the night of Tuesday 7th August in rough seas off the west coast of d'Urville Island seas calmed by morning allowing those in the 'cutter' to land at Te Puna Bay, just north of Sauvage Point at the southern tip of d'Urville. While they set about lighting a fire and drying clothes Able Seaman Willis went in search of help. Fortunately he headed in the right direction as he soon met up with Ngati Koata maori at Ohana Pa. Young Sidney Gibbs remembered the scene well. *"Suddenly we heard shouting and looked up the bracken-clothed hillside saw a horde of maoris racing towards us. We all gathered together to meet them not knowing whether they were friendly or hostile, companions or cannibals. However our fears were soon put to flight, the worst we had to experience was an energetic rubbing of noses. The maoris took us over the hill to their pah, even carrying some of the younger ones, and treated us royally."*

While this was happening at the south end, back at the north end of d'Urville the Captain's 'gig' was finally (about 5pm) blown ashore into a rocky cove near Nile Head. The rough surf flung the 'gig' end over end and *"within two minutes she was smashed to atoms."* When they scrambled ashore and regrouped on the small beach they found that the ship's carpenter, nicknamed Chips, was missing presumed drowned, his body swept away by the surf. One of the men started off, on his own accord, over the cliffs in search of help and was later followed by another, Harry Hilliard, who fell from the cliff and hurt himself badly. As darkness fell the group of thirteen bedded down on the stones for the night, no doubt wondering what had happened to the other three boatloads, and about the possibility of being rescued in the morning.

By the morning of Thursday 9th the focus of the sea search had shifted to Tasman Bay's east coast and a number of vessels got underway. Meanwhile the maori at Ohana assisted the twenty one survivors, some in their cutter others in the 'maori boat' to get through French Pass to Elmslie Bay where they were taken in by Arthur Elmslie and Wallace Webber who farmed there.

Trapped in the rocky cove at the north of d'Urville the thirteen men had a miserable night with the high tide forcing them off the beach up onto the rocks. Their fortunes improved during the morning however, they discovered a dribble of fresh water coming down a rock crevice, then one of the crew produced a soggy box of matches and a magnifying glass from his pocket. Using the sun's rays they eventually managed to get one to light and soon had a quite a fire going. There was no sign of the crewman who had climbed the cliffs the evening before but during the afternoon the third mate, Mr W.H.Mason, also climbed the cliffs. Out to sea they could see ships searching but none noticed their smoke so they settled in for another cold night on the rocks. And still the people of Nelson, particularly Mary Gibbs, waited anxiously for news.

The Nelson based naval vessel *Aurora* rowed through the night and pulled in at Ohana for a rest about 9:30am on Friday 10th. *"No sooner was she in sight than the whole of the maoris were seen on the beach dancing and jumping about in great glee. The boat had hardly touched the ground before she was full of maoris, eager to impart the information that the missing cutter had been found, and that the passengers were all safe and well at Mr Elmslie's."* Waiting for the right tides to get them through French Pass meant that the return to Nelson did not proceed until early

the following morning, some on board *Aurora*, the others, including the Gibbs children, in the 'maori boat'.

The remaining twelve men trapped in the rocky cove continued to send up smoke all morning as they watched ships searching offshore. Then about 2pm the *S.S.Manawatu* rounded Nile Head about a mile away, and raised their flag to show they had been spotted. It was about midnight when *S.S.Manawatu* returned to Nelson and there were many to welcome her especially when they learnt of the twelve survivors on board, one drowned and two missing. "But where were the women and children?" they all wondered.

With the early morning start from Ohana the *Aurora* made good progress ahead of the 'maori boat' so called into Cable Bay to send a telegraph to Nelson with the good news and an arrival time of 4pm. In Nelson word spread like wildfire around the town and just about the whole population of 5,500 made their way to the waterfront where a band played, flags were flown, cannons fired and crowds cheered. First ashore was the three year old daughter of Dr and Mrs Maunsell, then their young baby, just a few days old. About 7pm the 'maori boat' arrived and a similar emotional reception took place as Mary Gibbs greeted her six missing children.

Boats continued searching for the two men missing on d'Urville. Mr Gutherlest, the ship's butcher, was found by land searchers during Saturday and was returned to Nelson late that night by the *Lady Barkly*. Twenty five land searchers from both *Lyttelton* and *H.M.S.Sappho* (who only arrived on Saturday) found Mr Mason on Sunday 12th August. He was described as "*hatless, almost clothesless, and wretched looking indeed, but still alive.*"

This article was compiled mainly from newspaper reports in 'The Colonist' (1877) and from a first hand account written by 20 year old Harry Hilliard, mentioned in the story.