

The Elephant Wreck

Patience Kevin 29/12/2009



One of the most prominent wrecks on the East African coast is the Ahmadi, whose remains have lain below the lighthouse at Ras Serani, Mombasa for close on a hundred years. She was launched as the Endeavour for McIntyre Brothers of Newcastle and after twelve years service sold to the Bombay and Persia Steamship Navigation Co. Ltd and renamed Ahmadi. The ship grounded while entering Kilindini from Zanzibar on the evening of 16 November 1909 under the command of Captain T.L.

Green while carrying 343 passengers and 71 crew. At the time of stranding it was not practice to have the leading lights lit as ships generally entered during daylight. However the Master knowing he would be arriving late had asked the ships agents to telegram Mombasa and ensure the lights were lit. On arrival a blue flare was lit indicating the need for a pilot although there were no certificated pilots available and pilotage was not compulsory. A local native was used more for his knowledge than his navigating skill. The tide was in accordance with the East African Pilot and with a moon and the weather clear Captain Green headed in on the compass course indicated on the chart hoping to pick up the pilot. On reaching the turning buoy he ordered 'hard a port' and the helm was put over but there was little change in heading.

Realizing something was amiss he ordered 'slow ahead' and then 'stop' and finally 'full astern'. Four minutes later the ship gently grounded. The soundings showed 11 feet forward, and 42 feet aft. The engine was run full astern while cargo was shifted from the

forward to the aft hold and the ballast tank emptied. A kedge anchor was laid to keep the stern in deep water but the hawser parted when the tide was running in and the ship swung broadside on to the reef. The passengers were landed and cargo and baggage loaded into lighters. The following day The Times of London reported the ship aground with a total value of £150,000. Two more anchors were laid out to stabilize the vessel while three other company vessels the Africa, Nadri and Tima attempted unsuccessfully to refloat the ship.

Five days later another report stated the ship was leaking badly and hundreds of bags of cloves were thrown overboard and the ship's agents offered one rupee per bag delivered to the old port jetty. There was fierce competition between boat owners who rushed up and down the harbour collecting the floating jetsam. Dhows were brought alongside and tons of coal discharged but to no avail: the ship remained stuck fast. No. 2 hatch was now flooded and the collision bulkhead buckled. The crew left on the 25th and the Master the following day. On the 27th the port authority divers confirmed severe damage to the hull caused by the strong winds and heavy seas, and the surveyors reported the pumps were unable to keep the water out and it was unlikely the ship would be refloated.

By the 29th the agents recommended the ship and cargo be sold by auction but the owners had already contacted the Perim Salvage Co. whose vessel Meyun arrived from the Red Sea on 18 December and discharged the remaining cargo. Despite their efforts the ship remained firmly on the reef and was declared a total loss. The remains were sold in auction to Hassanali Jevanjee for £225 and stripped of all useful fixtures and fittings with some of the timber being used in a house in Nyali. A Court of Enquiry held in Bombay on 23/24 December concluded that the Master and crew had acted correctly and attributed the stranding to the strong currents from the old port and Kilindini channels preventing the ship from answering the helm.

The triple expansion engine remained upright for many years and due to the steam pipe projecting from one end became known as the 'Elephant Wreck'. Eventually with the passage of time the engine fell over and the name faded into history. In 1984 the author was tasked with recovering a section of propeller shaft. Around thirty foot was cut using thermic lances and after machining the corroded layer, the steel was found to be in excellent condition. Today the rusting remains of the two boilers and engine still lie on the foreshore below the lighthouse.