

The Sailing Packet *Josephine Willis*

by Frank Davenport

In a newspaper advertisement dated February 1854, Henry H. Willis & Co. announced that two ships, later named *Josephine Willis* and *Joseph Fletcher* were under construction by Fletcher Brothers of Limehouse expressly for the Willis & Co. shipping line. The sailing packet *Josephine Willis* was built and owned by Fletcher Brothers and chartered by Henry H. Willis & Co. to provide additional tonnage for the monthly packet service to New Zealand. Whether a business or family relationship existed between the ship builder and the charterer is not known, but the *Josephine Willis* is believed to have been named after Willis's wife Sarah Josephine Willis while the *Joseph Fletcher*, also under charter to Willis & Co was named after the founder of the ship building business who died in 1852.

In February 1856 the *Josephine Willis (JW)* departed St. Katherine's Dock, London, on her second voyage to New Zealand, having successfully completed her maiden voyage to NZ the previous year. For this second voyage the *JW* is recorded as having a valuable and miscellaneous cargo, probably similar to that of the maiden voyage, sparsely documented in the NZ port records. In addition to providing the packet service, Henry H. Willis was a board member of the New Zealand Company, which offered both free and subsidized transportation to NZ for specific individuals, undoubtedly by one of his sailing packets. The *Josephine Willis* had two



Fig. 1 Bung jar with "Rose & Lilly" plate.



Fig. 2 Crockery at wreck site.

classes of accommodation for the long journey, and on this trip had 10 first class, 60 steerage passengers, and a crew of approximately 35.

The *Josephine Willis* was towed to the English Channel, and on the evening of Sunday, February 3, she parted company with the pilot and towing steamer, leaving her to start the hundred-plus day voyage to New Zealand. After two hours, a lookout on the *JW* spotted a light ahead which was erroneously thought to be the Dungeness light, and the ship was immediately steered to starboard. Unfortunately, the light ahead was from the ironclad screw steamer *Mangerton*, which, having spotted the *JW*, immediately steered to port. The two ships collided, with the steamer slicing the wooden sailing ship down to the waterline. With the steamer imbedded in the *JW*, about thirty

individuals, mainly crew, saved themselves by scrambling onto the *Mangerton*, which began taking on water. The *Josephine Willis* was, however, fatally damaged. When the *Mangerton* reversed out of the tangled mass, the *JW* quickly turned on her side but remained afloat for more than an hour -- without assistance to the passengers who were clinging to the rigging, and eventually perished.

An inquest into the loss of life by the Folkestone Coroner found that the *Josephine Willis* was responsible for the collision by not porting her helm when the light of the steamer was seen. However, the Coroner's jury stated

that there was a “great want of humanity² on the part of the crews of both ships in not sending assistance to the passengers of the ship whilst they had it in their powers to do so....” The jury probably felt that Captain Bouchier of the *Mangerton* had a moral or ethical duty to try to save the passengers from the *Josephine Willis*, even though there was no legal duty. Captain Bouchier was subsequently charged on three counts of manslaughter, tried, and acquitted at Maidstone Assizes³. In June of 1856, the owners of the *Josephine Willis* sought £60,000 compensation in the High Court of Admiralty for the loss of the ship and cargo. The owners of the *Mangerton* filed a cross action for damages. After hearing the respective cases, the Judge, with his nautical assessors, Elder Brethren of Trinity House, found that the *Josephine Willis* was to blame for not porting her helm and found in favor of the *Mangerton*.

The Dover Straits has hundreds of known wreck locations, however, one particular wreck was absent from the charts, that of the emigrant sailing packet *Josephine Willis*, run down in 1856 with the loss of 70 souls. Soon after the sinking, hard hat divers⁴ visited the ship and reported that it sat upright on the bottom but was unsalvageable due to a tangled mass of masts and rigging.

Twenty years ago, a Folkstone fishing boat snagged its

nets and requested assistance from Folkstone Sub Aqua Club. Divers¹ freed the nets from the wreck’s rudder post and when they were back on board the fishing boat, they produced two items identical to those in Fig. 1. The artifacts were subsequently identified as a stoneware bung jar with a rouletted band and impressed *Imperial Potteries of Lambeth* and a plate printed in blue with a pattern named “Rose & Lilly,” manufactured by Davenport of Longport. Unfortunately, the boat’s engine failed and was unable to maintain its position or provide an accurate location of the underwater obstruction, frustrating any further investigation by the now curious divers.

More recently this shipwreck has been the subject of 22 years of research, both in and out of the Channel, by Mr. Tony Goodfellow, a recreational diver and member of the Folkstone branch of the British Sub Aqua Club. Eventually in the summer of 2012 the final resting place of the *JW* was found. Goodfellow found the *Josephine Willis* about four miles south of Folkstone resting in silt under 100 feet of water. The intervening 160 years have reduced the *Josephine Willis* to a hummock on the sea floor about 150 feet long, 50 feet wide, and 6 feet high. How much of the hull is buried is not known but many large timbers remain. Figure 2 shows some of the scattered crockery partially visible in the silt.



Fig. 3 Plate “FRIBURG” pattern.



Fig. 4 Breakfast cup “ROSE” & LILY” pattern.



Fig. 5 Plate “OLEASTER” pattern.



Fig. 6 Plate “GEM” pattern.



Fig. 7 Pitcher with “FUNICULAR” pattern.



Fig. 8 Saucer “LEEN” pattern.

Tony Goodfellow, a diver and researcher, and fellow club members, Eddie Huzzey, an experienced diver and participant in numerous archaeological dives, plus ex-Royal Navy diver, marine historian and researcher Paul Wilkin, have visited the wreck and recovered a number of items.

Towards the stern, rotted crates revealed their contents to be blue and white printed earthenware manufactured by Davenport of Longport with impressed dates of 1852 and 1854. The patterns were predominantly standard “Willow” and the romantic “Friburg” pattern. These “Willow” pattern pieces are generally kitchen wares, such as baking dishes, covered dishes, basins and “well and tree” meat platters. The “Friburg” pieces tend to be tableware of various sizes, serving dishes, plates as Fig. 3, and ladles. The discovery of Davenport tea and table wares in the “Rose and Lily” pattern (Figs. 1, 4) substantiated the fishing boat’s encounter some twenty years prior. Other Davenport table wares have “Ceres” and “Ivy Leaf” patterns with the “Muleteer” pattern on chamber pots. In addition, many Davenport white ironstone food moulds of various shapes and sizes have been recovered.

Towards midship more ceramics were discovered which included tea wares, ironstone breakfast cups and saucers printed in gray with an olive tree pattern named “Oleaster” (wild olive), Fig. 5. Beneath the pattern name are initials CM, for Charles Meigh of Hanley, a mark printed in a foreign script and an impressed mark stating *Improved Ironstone China*. Although the initials CM were used between 1835-49, the copper plates undoubtedly remained in use despite a pottery name change. Figure 6 shows an ironstone tea plate printed in gray with border flowers enameled over the glaze with some pieces additionally decorated with yellow rim lines to simulate gilding. This over painted plate is printed with pattern name “GEM” above the initials CM & S, which dates it from after 1851 when Pankhurst left the partnership and the name changed to Charles Meigh and Son. The plate is also impressed *Improved Ironstone China*, together with the printed foreign script mark. It is possible that these pieces were destined for the Far East because on the return leg of the maiden voyage the *Josephine Willis*’s last port of call was Calcutta.

The slightly iron stained earthenware pitcher in Fig. 7 is printed with a black sheet pattern and was probably part of a toilet set. This pitcher was a fortuitous find because it identified the maker as J. Reed with the pattern named “FUNICULAR.” John Reed was the owner of a South Yorkshire pottery which initially operated under the name Rock Pottery but changed to Mexborough Pot-



Fig. 9 “Willow” pattern baker.

tery when John succeeded his father James Reed in 1849. Although very few of their products were marked, a 2008 paper by Dr. Alwyn Cox⁵ shows various printed biscuit shards from the pottery site with Figs. 30, 31, 32 showing a Chinoiserie pattern on cups and saucers named “Leen” depicting an Oriental lady with a parasol. Recovered blue printed cups and saucers are identical to the printed shards because when glazed and fired the black printed biscuit turns blue and additives to the glaze produce the diffuse or flown coloring of the recovered pieces. The saucer in Fig. 8 is marked with a cartouche which encloses the pattern name “Leen” over the letter R, which is thought to represent the makers name REED.

Several “Willow” pattern baking dishes have been recovered, shown in Fig. 9. All are marked with a crown cartouche and ribbon stating IRON STONE CHINA above the



Fig. 11 Bowl and pitcher blue sheet pattern.



Fig. 10 “THIRSTY STAG” & “LEEN” comparison.



Fig. 12 Chamber pot Romantic pattern.



Fig. 13 Saucer "Peahen" pattern.



Fig. 14 Pot "Passing the Pipe".

maker's initial R. The under side of the baking dishes are also printed with excerpts from the "Willow" pattern. Dr. Cox shows a "Willow" pattern plate and two versions of the crown cartouche in Cox Figs. 33, 34, 35.

Of the ceramics recovered from towards the bow most are unmarked and unattributed. Several egg cups and tea cups, currently missing their saucers, are printed in dark gray showing a stag with a protruding tongue which has been assigned a TCC⁶ name "Thirsty Stag." The stag stands amongst fern-like trees but, unfortunately, these various items are unmarked.

Fig. 10 shows a comparison of a "Thirsty Stag" slop bowl with a "Leen" slop bowl. They appear to have been made with identical internal moulds and jiggering blades. The single recovered "Thirsty Stag" bowl is somewhat more thickly potted, weighing 220 gms whilst the average weight for several "Leen" bowls 207 gms. In view of the physical similarity it seems likely that the "Thirsty Stag" pieces are also from Mexborough Pottery.

Some of the eggcups were discovered packed in straw inside chamber pots and pitchers, probably not the potters' preferred method but a shipper's arrangement to maximize cargo space. Many chamber pots were in the shipment, with some produced in three sizes, the smallest probably intended for children. Some of the pots, although unmarked, are printed with the "FUNICULAR" pattern discussed previously. A further number of chamber pots and wash basins are undoubtedly from toilet sets and these are printed with a blue floral sheet pattern shown in Fig. 11, also unmarked. Yet more pots are printed in blue with an unidentified romantic rural scene, also unmarked, Fig. 12.

Interestingly, peahen decorated saucers were recovered; these are hand decorated with a multi-colored peahen amid green sponged trees, Fig. 13. The author feels these saucers were an unexpected find in a shipment destined for a British colony because the peahen pattern was quintessentially an American market design.

Several polychrome printed earthenware pots have been recovered, which would have been used as meat or fish paste containers. The pot in Fig. 14, now empty, was fitted with a metallic cap embossed, presumably naming the contents and maker, none of which is now decipherable. The pot was made by F. & R. Pratt of Fenton Staffordshire and is decorated with a polychrome print and has a TCC assigned name "Passing the Pipe," database # 8538. In the print the man's raised ruffed arm passes a pipe backwards over his shoulder. A second pot, Fig. 15, empty and missing a seal, is also decorated with a polychrome print which is believed to be derived from a view of the "Chalees Satoon," a pavilion at Allahabad India. Similar patterns can be found in the *TCC Pattern and Source Print Database* #268, #598, printed in blue and white on wares manufactured by Mayer & Newbold of Lane End Staffordshire.

In addition to the pots, polychrome printed earthenware pot lids



Fig. 15 Pot Indian scene.

were recovered, but to date, without matching pots. Figure 16 shows an unusually small diameter lid (2-7/8 inch) decorated with a print titled “A Rebel” or “Jack at Old Birch’s” and is currently unidentified. A multi-colored printed pot lid, Fig. 17, with a shell pattern is similar to patterns in the *TCC Database* pattern #4941 and may have been produced by Mayer & Newbold of Lane End Staffordshire.

Many other ceramic objects from unknown makers have been recovered. A gold printed ceramic doorknob, fig.18, suggests the fulfillment of an order from an Auckland merchant. Several transfer printed toilet basins are known to exist in the wreck; Fig. 19 represents the only one recovered to date. This basin predates “modern” one-piece ceramic toilets and would have formed part of a valve-type water closet comprising the assembly of several additional non-ceramic pieces.

Ownership of this ceramic cargo is not known. Port records from the 1854-55 maiden voyage show that the cargo, as might be expected for a packet service, comprised both raw materials and many diverse products for delivery to more than 65 merchants in New Plymouth and Auckland. Only a slightly better idea of the *Josephine Willis’s* cargo can be gleaned from contemporary newspaper advertisements, which offer materials and products from the ships currently in port, often with the ship’s name, e.g. “from the *Josephine Willis*” or simply “Ex *Josephine Willis*”. Although there are newspaper advertisements which offer crockery, even large quantities of blue and white, most crockery seemed to have been offered at auction. Furthermore only a few of these auctioneers appear in the port records as receiving shipments from *Josephine Willis*. Whilst the preceding information relates to the maiden voyage, there is no reason to believe that the composition of the cargo on her second ill-fated voyage would have been significantly different.

Both Lockett⁷ and Collard⁸ describe the sale of Davenport products overseas. However, the selection of ceramic artifacts recovered suggest that some items may have



Fig. 16 Pot lid “A Rebel” or “Jack at Old Birches”.

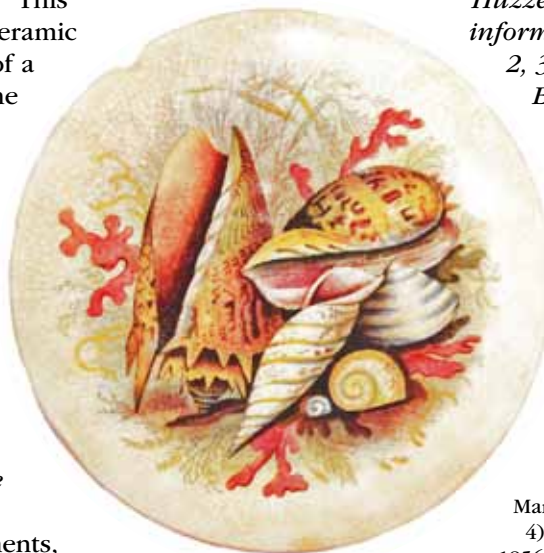


Fig. 17 Pot lid shell pattern.



Fig. 18 Gold printed door knob.



Fig. 19 Printed Toilet basin .

been destined for sale beyond NZ.

How products from the relatively small Mexborough pottery came to be shipped New Zealand may never be known, but then, as now, blue and white printed crockery was popular and in every day use.

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Notes.

- 1) Communication from Paul Wilkin who participated in freeing the nets.
- 2) *The Folkstone Chronicle* (Weekly) February 9, 1856, page 2 col. 2.
- 3) *Lloyds Weekly London Newspaper* March 16, 1856, page 9 col. 4.
- 4) *The Folkstone Chronicle* (Weekly) February 23, 1856, page 15 col. 2.
- 5) *The Northern Ceramic Society Journal* Volume 25, 2008-2009, pg. 144-185, *Mexborough Rock Pottery* by Dr. Alwyn Cox.
- 6) *The TCC Pattern and Source Print Database* <http://www.transcollectorsclub.org/>
- 7) *Davenport Pottery and Porcelain 1794-1887* pg 24 by T.A. Lockett, 1972 David & Charles Newton Abbot.
- 8) *Nineteenth-Century Pottery and Porcelain in Canada*, ed. 2 1984, p.243-244 by Elizabeth Collard, Mc Gill-Queens University Press.