

## What Do You Do with a Shipwrecked Sailor?: Extreme Weather, Shipwreck, and Civic Responsibility in Nineteenth-Century Liverpool

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Using press reports of a minor shipwreck within Liverpool's port jurisdiction, this essay applies a microhistorical approach to examine the intersection of extreme weather, a dangerous shore, and the urban-maritime microcosm of a major port. It shows how an extreme weather event acted as a catalyst in reactivating debates about civic and social responsibility for seafarers in 1840s Liverpool. It considers how the experience of the shipwrecked crew was depicted by the press and their sufferings instrumentalized in discourse about the welfare of shipwreck survivors and sheds light on larger debates about charity and philanthropy.

On 18 November 1840, the *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette* printed a succinct entry:

LIVERPOOL—Nov. 17: The Lord Nelson, from Poole to Runcorn, was driven on shore last night on the North Bank; crew saved (“Maritime Extracts”).

Like most entries about shipping losses in the Victorian press, this one leaves much hidden—and subsequently lost—by its use of the passive voice. However, even the sketchiest of details can generate important questions about a local event and its wider significance (Brewer 97). Although this was a minor shipwreck, which took place within Victorian Liverpool’s watery jurisdiction, a micro-historical examination of the wreck of *Lord Nelson* illuminates the perilous intersection of extreme weather, a dangerous shore, and the urban-maritime microcosm of a major port. It offers a glimpse of a coastal world few historians have examined, and a consideration of the centrality of weather in historical processes. In this essay, I will show how an extreme weather event acted as a catalyst in reactivating debates about civic and social responsibility for seafarers in a port dominated by shipping interests. My analysis focuses on the ordeal of the crew of the 113-ton brig to consider how their experience with a brutal winter storm was depicted by the press and their sufferings instrumentalized in discourse about the welfare of shipwreck survivors.

Shipwreck narratives—factual and fictional—were common reading fare for the public throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These narratives applied common shipwreck tropes: Christian “transformation and renewal”; heroic exemplars overcoming tragedy; exotic, resourceful castaways; and sensationalistic examples of moral failing,

depravity, and cannibalism at sea (Thompson 6–7; Mitchell-Cook 113–33). With the exception of castaway narratives set in foreign locations, they rarely considered the fate of survivors.

A similar disinterest in survivor experiences is found in factual shipping-loss reports published in the popular press and in specialized periodicals of the nineteenth century. Their attention was on international and coastal trade, rather than on maritime labour. The *Shipping Gazette* was not the place for narratives of tragedy and spectacle, or of individual travail against the elements, nor was *Lloyd's List*, although it printed more details about the incident. *Lord Nelson* had been lost in a “severe gale” on the North Bank. The master of this shipwrecked brig was identified only as “Griffiths.” The rest of the crew, comprising his son, another young boy, and three men, were not named. *Lloyd's List* also reported that three additional vessels had been blown ashore in the same gale, two on adjacent coasts in Liverpool Bay. The fourth wreck lay ashore to the east of *Lord Nelson*: the unidentified crew of the unnamed sloop drowned.

The Conservative *Liverpool Courier* published a story about *Lord Nelson* on the same day as the shorter entries in the trade press appeared. Syndicated nationally on 19 November, the account appeared in such Tory broadsheets as London's *Morning Post* (“The Late Hurricanes”), *Evening Standard* (“Total Wreck of the Lord Nelson, of Milford”), and *Times* (“Total Wreck of the Lord Nelson, of Milford”). The syndicated article was printed within long columns dedicated to describing the gale's ferocity and the resulting damage around the country—houses left without roofs, coal barges sunk, and hundreds of wrecked vessels dotting the coasts. But why did the *Courier* choose *Lord Nelson* for coverage rather than the other wrecks, especially those whose crews had died or had also been rescued?

The article documents the experience of *Lord Nelson*'s crew and also of the Liverpool boatmen who saved them, initially drawing on traditional shipwreck and storm imagery to attract the attention of readers—the wildness of the cold November sea washing over the vessel, the crew tied to the remaining mast throughout the night as the gale shattered the ship beneath their feet, and, finally, the heroism of their rescue. But the article also advances a second agenda. Although the *Courier* begins its coverage with the spectacle of shipwreck, it soon shifts to a moral commentary on Liverpool's civic and philanthropic failures, reigniting debates about the welfare of shipwrecked sailors in the port.

Shuttled from the pier to the office of the less-than-two-year old Liverpool Shipwreck and Humane Society, the weather-beaten crew were sent by the society's secretary to the Lloyd's agent. The Lloyd's agent initially directed them back to the society and then on to the parish office. Finally, the master, “very much bruised and ... rendered almost senseless” by the storm, his son, “much swelled,” and the rest of the crew, condition unreported, were delivered to the workhouse, where the workhouse governor was to provide them with dry clothes, food, and medical attention. In powerful phrasing echoed in the national papers, amplifying the pathos of their ordeal, the *Courier* proclaimed that the crew were “bandied about for a place of refuge” (as cited in “Total Wreck of the Lord Nelson” *London Evening Standard*).

Nineteenth-century Liverpool was a major port in the United Kingdom, situated on a dangerous approach littered with sandbars and plagued by extreme tides. But weather increased these hazards; north-westerly gales in the winter months slammed vessels against shifting shores, as had happened to *Lord Nelson*. The *Courier* decried the lack of emergency shelter for shipwrecked seamen in the city: “It is much to be regretted that no asylum or place of refuge has been provided for the men so situated” (as cited in “Wreck of the Lord Nelson” *Liverpool Mercury*). This was a pointed reference to Liverpool's failure to establish a Sailors'

Home comparable to that of London, which housed mariners, shipwrecked or unemployed until they could find new berths. Indeed, there wasn't much choice of accommodation available for *Lord Nelson's* hypothermic, exhausted crew.

Shipwreck survivors brought ashore in Liverpool during the Irish Sea “hurricane” of January 1839 had been dispersed to the Northern Hospital, the Infirmary, the Night Asylum for the Houseless Poor, and local public houses. The first two options were not available to *Lord Nelson's* crew because of overcrowding. Statistics given in the local press showed that both had substantially more patients than beds the week *Lord Nelson* went down (“Liverpool Infirmary” and “Northern Hospital”). The Night Asylum was not suitable for shipwreck survivors needing medical attention and sustenance after suffering exposure. Established for travellers, homeless vagrants, and sailors, it offered only a wooden platform or the floor for sleeping, and an uncertain supply of food (West 4). It is unknown why the crew was not taken to a public house within the Docks, particularly one designated by the Dock Trust as a receiving house for accident and drowning victims (Parliamentary Papers 153). The Liverpool Shipwreck and Humane Society, founded during the 1839 hurricane to “act at a moment’s notice” to aid survivors, neglected to support *Lord Nelson's* crew twenty-three months later (“Relief of Shipwrecked Persons”). Liverpool’s mechanisms to assist and shelter shipwreck victims, needed especially during the stormy winter months, had failed them.

In the aftermath of *Lord Nelson's* wrecking, the press and philanthropic elite instrumentalized the trauma experienced by *Lord Nelson's* crew. Their bodily existence was transformed into the representational, depicted by clichéd descriptors and mobilized for social change. They were “poor creatures” and “objects of compassion,” their individuality and agency subsumed in rhetoric deployed by moral reformers to promote civic responsibility

towards seafarers (“Total Wreck of the Lord Nelson”, *Liverpool Standard and General Commercial Advertiser*; “Total Wreck of the Lord Nelson” *London Evening Standard*).

Egerton Smith, the *Mercury*'s Liberal editor and founder of the Night Asylum, voiced self-interested displeasure that “the poor fellows” were not “directed” to the Night Asylum. He also attacked the Liverpool Shipwreck and Humane Society for not having “provided a place of refuge,” noting the “handsome funds placed at their disposal” for such purposes (“Shipwrecked Seamen”). The next week, honing his argument, Smith adamantly opposed the *Courier*'s suggestion that the Dock Committee establish an “Asylum for Shipwrecked Seamen.” Shipwrecks were sporadic, he claimed; the workhouse and the Night Asylum offered sufficient shelter for the few shipwrecked seamen (“Proposed Asylum for Shipwrecked Seamen”). An anonymous correspondent concurred, claiming that men were only “occasionally thrown destitute upon our shores.” He added: “every licensed public house should be a house of refuge” (“Refuge for Shipwrecked Seamen”). And yet the Dock Committee kept three lifeboat crews on their payroll for these supposedly sporadic extreme weather crises.

These exchanges are an expression of ideological clashes regarding civic responsibilities. The Whigs and Reformists (soon to be amalgamated into the Liberal Party) argued for diffuse, independent, as-needed facilities, while the Tories wanted a more authoritarian, locally controlled institution with the Church of England at the centre. Shipwrecked seafarers were caught in between. Indeed, the Tory-controlled Shipwreck and Humane Society was more attentive to rewarding lifesaving than accommodating survivors. Although the Lloyd's agent agreed to present a plan for a shipwrecked asylum to the Dock Committee, there is no evidence that he did so. Even if he had, the fate of the Sailors' Home showed it wasn't viable. Since 1837, Liverpool's civic authorities had failed twice to establish an organization to build a home, thwarted by the ideological differences and

political infighting (“Sailors’ Home Society”, “Sailors’ Home”, “Town Council Proceedings”). It was only in 1841, with a Liberal compromise on the Tory demand that “inmates” attend Church (as opposed to nondenominational) religious instruction to “civilize” them, that a stable committee was formed. Liverpool’s Sailors’ Home opened in 1845, ten years after that of London (“Liverpool Sailors’ Home”, Kennerley 81).

The *Courier’s* narrativization of *Lord Nelson’s* ordeal tells us more about the growing pains of the urban-maritime space as the philanthropic elites negotiated with the physical environment and with each other. While Liverpool prided itself on its charitable institutions and civic duties, it was not ready in 1840 to extend centralized care to shipwreck survivors, despite its identity as a major port and its location on a dangerous coast plagued by severe weather. Survivors were attended to ad hoc, as they also were when brought ashore in smaller communities and remote locations. It is unknown how many others were “bandied about for a place of refuge” after suffering the loss of their vessels from storms. Mid-nineteenth-century Liverpool had other, pressing issues to face: the growth of steam shipping and the need for extensions to the docks, public health crises, sectarian violence, and a large influx of immigrants escaping famine-torn Ireland (Milne). And yet extreme weather affected all those concerns—gales were a constant threat to *all* shipping—and storms provoked responses to improve navigation and safety measures. Indeed, the Liverpool Dock Committee found itself contributing funds toward a fourth lifeboat in 1843 after another ferocious gale (“Life-boat at Southport”). However, the welfare provision for shipwrecked mariners, rescued by the committee’s lifeboats and boatmen, lagged behind.

And what of *Lord Nelson’s* crew? They were given secondary roles in their own rescue, their agency and identities erased in the discourse of the port’s elites, although their existence was not ignored as their fellow survivors had been. The *Standard* was the only paper to follow up: “On enquiring at the Workhouse, last night, we learned that the poor

creatures appeared yesterday quite recruited;—they left the Workhouse early yesterday, and had not returned last night” (“Total Wreck of the Lord Nelson”). The “poor creatures” reclaimed agency for themselves.

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