

1855.

VICTORIA.

PILOT STATION AT ALBANY ISLAND.

COPY CORRESPONDENCE RESPECTING ESTABLISHMENT OF A PILOT STATION AT ALBANY ISLAND.

LAI D upon THE COUNCIL TABLE by THE CHIEF SECRETARY by command of HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR, and ordered by THE COUNCIL to be printed, 28th November, 1855.

[COPY]

No. 29.

Downing-street,  
27th March, 1855.

SIR,

With reference to your despatch, No. 137, of the 27th of October, I transmit for your information the copy of a letter from one of the Secretaries to the Board of Admiralty, containing some suggestions in regard to the establishment of a Pilot Station at Albany Island, together with the copy of a despatch addressed from this department to the Governor of New South Wales; and I have to state that no further steps can be taken in the matter until after the receipt of the report there called for.

27th February, 1855.

No. 19, 6th December, 1855.

A copy of the letter which you have forwarded from the Chairman of the Managing Committee of the Underwriters at Melbourne, in connection with the foregoing subject, has been communicated to the Lords of the Committee of the Privy Council for Trade.

I have, &c.,

(Signed)

G. GREY.

Governor Sir C. Hotham.

[COPY.]

Enclosure No. 1, in foregoing Despatch from Sir George Grey.

Admiralty,

27th February, 1855.

SIR,

I am commanded by My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 8th instant, enclosing the copy of a despatch from the Lieutenant Governor of the Colony of Victoria, with the copy of a letter from the Chairman of the Managing Committee of the Underwriters at Melbourne, representing the loss of life and property which had resulted from the present state of the passage through Torres Strait, and in reply I am to state that their Lordships fully concur in opinion with the Committee of the Underwriters at Melbourne, that the number of 70 wrecks and loss of 150 lives, in a comparatively short space of time, in Torres Straits calls for serious attention, and that, if practicable, some remedy for such a state of affairs should at once be devised.

With respect to the necessity for fresh surveys and soundings referred to in the Underwriters letter, it appears from the Admiralty records that the late Captain Francis Blackwood and Captain Owen Stanley, between the years 1842 and 1850, made a complete survey of this Strait from the Barrier Reef, forming its eastern limit, to the entrance of the Gulf of Carpentaria and Endeavour Strait, which forms the approach to Torres Strait from the westward, in addition to which the inner passage from Sandy Cape, in latitude 25° S., to Torres Strait has likewise been surveyed.

Captain Blackwood also erected a conspicuous stone tower on Raine's Island, in the fair highway to Torres Strait.

Several of the charts arising from these surveys of the Strait and its approaches have been for some time published; six other charts are in a forward state, and all will be published in the next two months.

No immediate further survey would therefore seem to be required, either of Torres Strait or of the Inner Passage.

If, however, the Committee of the Melbourne Underwriters refer to the Outer Passage from Sydney and Melbourne to Torres Strait, which is the track most frequented by shipping for six months of the year, that portion of the Coral Sea has not been surveyed. A chart, shewing the general track of vessels through this sea, was drawn up by Mr. Frederick Evans, Master, R N., in 1845, and printed by the Colonial Government at Sydney, and is about being republished by the Admiralty, but no complete examination of that sea has been made. Assuming

A.—No. 11.

the track to be 100-miles wide, the space to be surveyed would be about 100,000 square miles, and would occupy a surveying screw steamer seven years at least.

If the wrecks referred to really have taken place in Torres Strait, and not on the whole passage from Melbourne to Torres Strait, which seems more probable, and if wrecks do frequently occur there, it might be advantageous to establish a Pilot Station there; it would, however, be attended with some difficulty and expense, as owing to the constant trade wind blowing from the south-east during the season that vessels use that passage, the pilots would be carried by the vessels 150 miles to leeward, and would take a long time to beat back to their station in their own pilot boats; but this obstacle would be overcome by the use of one or two small screw steamers.

Should it be decided to establish such a Pilot Station, a most eligible site is offered at Albany Island, and at Cape York, the extreme north-eastern point of the continent of Australia; but it would not be safe to do so without also forming a small military post there for the protection of the pilots from the natives.

The necessity for such a post, for various political reasons, has long been urged; it will become much more necessary if a Pilot Station is to be established there.

The expediency of occupying these points, the key of Torres Strait, before any other nation should do so, has been strongly represented to their Lordships by Rear Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort, in May, 1849, in December, 1851, and again in June, 1854, and his arguments appear to derive additional force since the occupation of New Caledonia by the French during the past year.

Albany Island offers a good harbor for access from north and south, fresh water, some pasture for cattle, stone for building, and sufficient depth in the harbor for a steamer to lie alongside, and take in coal from the shore, if a depôt of fuel were formed there. Cape York, which is on the main land immediately adjoining, affords a look out place, having a view commanding the approaches to Torres Strait either from the east or west, and also the entrance of the great Gulf of Carpentaria, and it would appear on every account a most eligible position to occupy.

I am, &c.

(Signed)

W. A. B. HAMILTON.

Herman Merivale, Esq.,  
&c., &c., &c.

[Copy.]

No. 19.

Enclosure No. 2.

Downing-street,  
6th December, 1854.

SIR,

In the despatch addressed by the Duke of Newcastle to your predecessor, of the 25th April last, No. 44, Sir C. Fitz Roy was informed that the attention of Her Majesty's Government had been directed to the expediency of establishing a fortified station at Albany Island or Cape York, for the purpose of securing the command of Torres Strait, and that His Grace had requested the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to procure for his information a report respecting that Island.

I now transmit to you copies of a letter and of its enclosure received from the Admiralty, together with a report from the Inspector General of Fortifications on this subject.

In addition to the information called for by the despatch above mentioned, I would wish to be furnished with your opinion how far it would be practicable to construct defences of an efficient description at the place referred to, at a moderate expense, and if practicable to do so, what would be the nature of the defences which you would recommend. Should your other duties preclude your visiting Albany Island in person, Lieutenant Colonel Barney, late of the Royal Engineers, who is resident at Sydney, might be usefully employed in visiting the spot, and reporting to you on the subject.

I have, &c.,

(Signed)

G. GREY.

Governor Sir Wm. Denison,  
&c., &c., &c.

[Copy.]

Sub-enclosure 1, to No. 2.

Admiralty,  
3rd June, 1854.

SIR,

With reference to your letter of the 4th ultimo, requesting to be furnished with any information as to the condition of Albany Island, I am commanded by My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to transmit to you herewith, for the information of the Duke of Newcastle, a copy of a report from the Hydrographer of this department on the subject, together with the accompanying chart.

I am, &c.,

(Signed)

B. OSBORNE.

H. Merivale, Esq.,  
Colonial Office.

"ALBANY ISLAND is about three miles long, by half a mile wide, lying in a north-west and a south-east direction, parallel to, and at half a mile distance from the north-eastern angle of Australia, near Cape York. The sound between having a depth of from 8 to 10 fathoms, forms a good anchorage:

"The island contains about 1000 acres; its outline is irregular, having several small bays and rocky headlands. On its western sides the shores are generally steep, the cliffs being above 30 feet high, the banks covered with the usual Australian brushwood.

"The rocks are either a stratum of ironstone, in irregular masses, or a very coarse sandstone. The latter stone is suitable for rough building purposes, such as the construction of a pier. The hills are generally covered with bushes and occasional tufts of short grass: there would be sufficient pasturage for a small number of cattle and sheep, and a good supply of water. There are also several spots where the soil is suitable for gardening purposes, thus ensuring a supply of vegetables during the greater part of the year.

"The island is well adapted as a coaling station for six steamers making the passage by Torres Strait, and at one spot in Port Albany, a vessel could lie close enough to place a board to the shore and wheel the coals on board; in the same manner a hose could be led from the spring of fresh water to the ships' tanks.

"Albany does not exceed 30 feet in height; but at Cape York, in the immediate neighborhood, Mount Bremer rises 400 feet above the sea, and affords an admirable signal station and look-out place, commanding an extensive view over the approaches to Torres Strait. The island lies in 10° 40' south latitude. It is 2,700 miles distant from Singapore, 1,200 miles from New Caledonia, and 1,600 miles from Sydney.

"Captain Owen Stanley made a complete survey of the island in 1848, and so far may be said to have taken possession of it. At that time there were no inhabitants on the island, and there is no reason to suppose it is now occupied by any of Her Majesty's subjects.

(Signed)

F. BEAUFORT."

[COPY.]

Sub-enclosure No. 2, in No. 2.

Inspector General of Fortifications' Report.

Without knowing the degree of importance attached to the occupation of Albany Island, the nature of the establishments proposed for it, the number of inhabitants likely to be on it, and the expenses that would be thought reasonable to incur upon its defences, it is impossible to make any recommendation for their nature.

The circumstances of position do not appear to present any peculiar facilities for defence; on the contrary, the anchorage being covered by an island on one side, and the main land on the other, would require an extensive and divided force for its native protection.

A Battery on the most commanding point on the island at each end of the anchorage, the passage not being, according to the chart, above 700 or 800 yards wide, would probably afford considerable security to the establishment from attack by means afloat; but against a landing it could only be protected by a superior armed force, which perhaps may be obtained by organising the whole of the male residents for the purpose when the station shall be occupied.

It is submitted that the new Governor for Sydney, Sir William Denison, who will probably be aware of the nature and extent of the establishment, proposed for Albany Island, and who is a military engineer, will be able to give the best general recommendation for its defence.

(Signed)

J. F. B.

10th July, 1854.

No. 34.

Downing-street,  
5th April, 1855.

SIR,

With reference to my despatch No. 29, of the 27th of March, I transmit for your information, a copy of a letter from one of the Secretaries to the Lords of the Committee of the Privy Council for Trade, with its enclosures, respecting the proposed establishment of a Pilot Service for Torres Strait, and the formation of a station at Albany Island. 28th March, 1855.

I have the honor, &c.,

(Signed)

G. GREY.

Governor Sir Charles Hotham, &c., &c., &c.

[COPY.]

Enclosure in Sir George Grey's Despatch.

Office of Committee of Privy Council for Trade,  
Whitehall, 28th March, 1855.

SIR,

I am directed by the Lords of the Committee of Privy Council for Trade to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 8th ultimo, enclosing copies of a despatch from the Lieutenant Governor of Victoria, and a letter from the Chairman of the Managing Committee of the Melbourne Underwriters, representing the loss of life and property which has resulted from the present state of the passage through Torres Strait, and submitting the expediency of establishing a Pilot Station, to be supported by a moderate rate upon the tonnage passing through the Strait, and also to fresh surveys being made.

Before answering your letter, my Lords considered it desirable to learn the opinion of the Committee for managing the affairs of Lloyds on this subject, and caused a communication to be addressed to them accordingly, and I am now to transmit to you for the information of the Secretary of State for the Colonies the enclosed copy of the Committee's reply, and to state that if the numerous shipwrecks referred to in the letter from the Underwriters at Melbourn, have occurred owing to the intricate nature of the channel of Torres Strait, it would seem very desirable that pilots should be stationed off the eastern entrances in the reef, for the purpose of picking up vessels and conducting them through the Strait. It would however be necessary in order to keep up the supply of pilots in the offing, that there should be in the Strait, a station at which they could rendezvous after they had conducted the ships through the passage, and where they would find a conveyance to carry them back to the offing station in time to prevent inconvenience. It would be impracticable to perform this regularly in sailing vessels, as it is only during the steady prevalence of the south-east trade wind that the channel is frequented, and two steamers at least would be necessary for the purpose of bringing the pilots back to the offing stations, and it is obvious that these steamers would require a depôt for coal.

Thus it appears the expense that would attend any plan approaching efficiency would be considerable, and in whatever manner this expense might ultimately be met by a pilotage rate, the plan proposed by the Colony, viz. : a compulsory rate upon vessels of all descriptions to be concurred in by all nations does not seem very practicable.

But my Lords are of opinion that the object might, to a great extent at least, be effected by Colonial legislation, whereby the pilotage on vessels sailing from the Colonial ports might be collected in the case of the vessels bound through the Strait clearing out in the Colony, either at the time of such clearance or *vice versa*, and in case of such vessels as do not clear out in the Colony, by rendering imperative the remuneration of the pilots by the usual mode of payment at the time when their services are engaged.

It would however be quite necessary for the protection of the pilots and the depôt, as also of any buoys and beacons which might be placed in the channels, that there should be a military force resident somewhere in the vicinity of the Strait, especially as for several months in the year the passage is not frequented, and the pilots would then in all probability return to the southward, leaving the buoys, beacons, and any other stores there might be at the depôt, unprotected, and subject to the depredations of the natives.

Albany Island appears to be well adapted for such a military station, as it possesses excellent anchorage, has good water, and is conveniently situated; and my Lords would submit for the consideration of the Secretary of State for the Colonies whether, in the event of their Lordships' suggestions being carried into effect, it would not be advisable to secure so desirable a spot for such a purpose.

Herman Merivale, Esq.,  
&c., &c., &c.

(Signed)

I have the honor, &c.,  
JAMES BOOTH.

[COPY.]

Sub-enclosure.

Lloyds, 15th March, 1855.

SIR,

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 27th ultimo, transmitting copy of a communication, with its enclosures, respecting the loss of life and property stated to have resulted from the very intricate navigation of Torres Strait, the defective state of the charts, and the absence of pilots to conduct vessels through them, and I am directed by the Committee for managing the affairs of Lloyds to acquaint you, for the information of the Lords of the Committee of Privy Council for Trade, that they have carefully considered the documents referred to, and are fully aware of the very great dangers attending ships passing through the Strait alluded to, as also of the larger number of wrecks continually taking place there, and they would gladly see some steps taken to remedy so great an impediment to the trade of the Australian Colonies. In the opinion of the Committee this would be best effected by continual re-surveys of the intricate channels of Torres Strait, thereby ascertaining any alteration in the position of the coral reefs and on the state of the currents.

The Committee would at the same time suggest that the channels be marked by efficient beacons and buoys, and that the result of the surveys be published in the Colonies and not delayed by transmission to the mother country.

As regards the establishment of a pilot service for Torres Strait, the Committee desire to express no opinion further than if an effective establishment could be formed in so difficult a situation as that named, and attended with charges for services performed, such a pilot service would probably tend in an important manner to prevent the numerous accidents to shipping now so justly complained of.

(Signed)

I have, &c.,  
GEO. A. HALSTEAD,  
Secretary.

J. H. Farrer, Esq.,  
&c., &c., &c.  
Board of Trade.