

THE PAPANUI

by Ian Bruce

If ever a governor was thrown into the deep end, it was Dr Wilberforce Arnold. In addition to his normal duties as Colonial Surgeon, he was sworn in as acting governor on Sunday 10 September 1911 in a ceremony at 12:15 and governor Gallwey left St Helena the same afternoon on RMS Tintagel Castle to take up his new appointment as governor of Gambia.¹ Some 24 hours later, the SS Papanui arrived on fire with hundreds of passengers and crew on board.

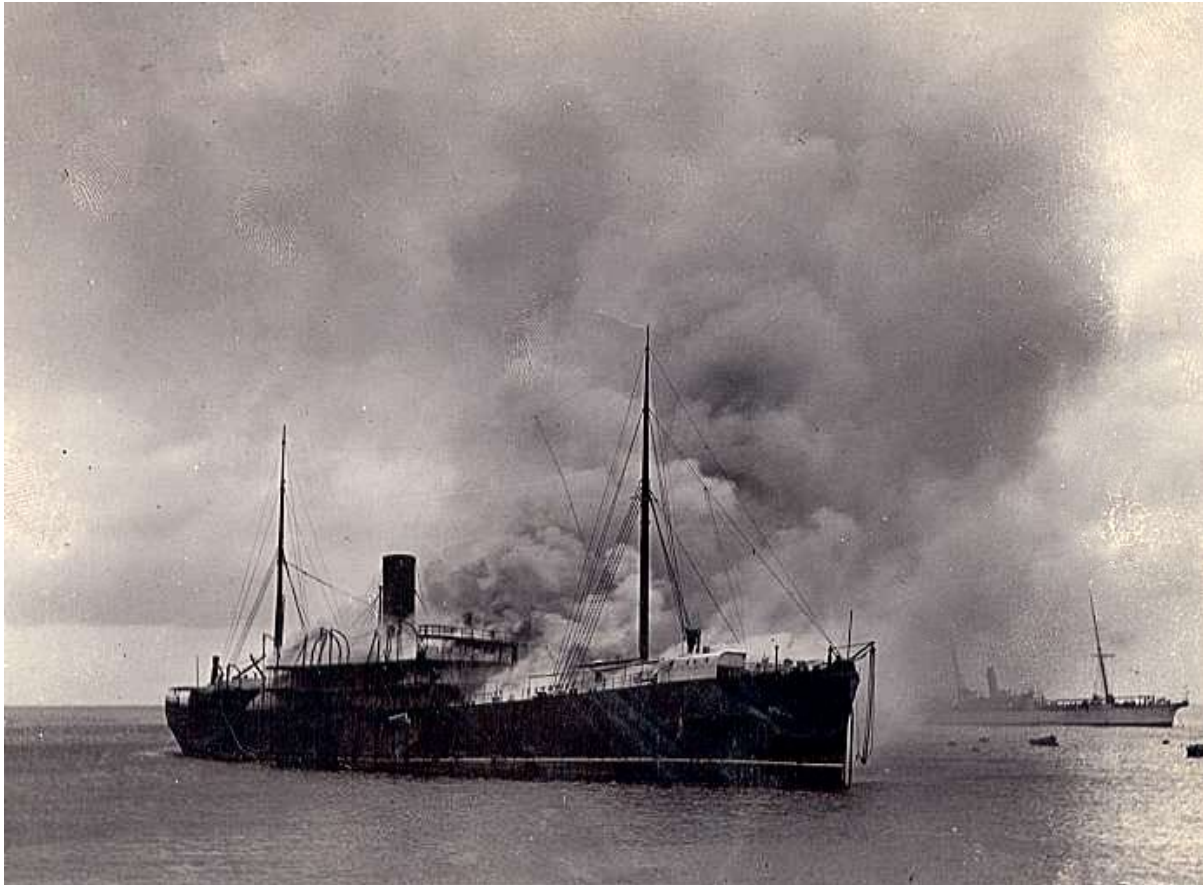
Built for the New Zealand Shipping Company and named after a suburb of Christchurch, the Papanui was launched in Dumbarton on 4 November 1898.² The 6,370-ton vessel could carry over 450 passengers and a crew of 100. She could never be described as a lucky ship. Within two years, she was damaged by a collision with the breakwater at Cape Town.³ Then in late September 1901, a fire was discovered in the refrigerated No 3 hold containing 38,000 lamb and rabbit carcasses.⁴ The charcoal insulation was somehow set alight. It took five days to put out the fire, one crewmember dying from asphyxiation. The ship put into Vigo, Spain where the passengers were discharged. All the damaged meat was later thrown overboard en-route to London. Whilst anchored at London in 1909, there was another fire, this time in a passenger's cabin.⁵ This spread to the saloon and steerage section. Firefighters took three hours to subdue the fire and both the main deck and No 5 hold were damaged. The following year, the ship hit a rock off Tasmania. Some 300 feet of her lower bottom were damaged and hundreds of mattresses needed to be tied around her to plug the damage so she could limp into Melbourne. This was the final straw for the owners and she was quickly sold to a private syndicate, the Australian Shipping Company.⁶ Contrary to orders by the port authorities, the damaged ship left Melbourne under a Nicaraguan flag and with a Philippine crew for Japan for repairs.⁷ Arriving back at Sydney from Japan, Thomas Moore was appointed as captain on 29 March 1911. A newspaper reported:

Captain Moore is a well-known shipmaster and was for many years in the Sydney-Japan service and his appointment to the Papanui was popular. Lately he has been practising as a marine surveyor at Sydney. The Papanui has booked a number of passengers for the Coronation [of George V].⁸

The Papanui's last voyage to Britain was just a prelude of what was to come. After leaving Melbourne, a flange broke on the engine. It then ran short of coal within three days of Colombo, so the ship's hatches and some of the wheat cargo were burnt to keep up steam.⁹ The ship was next delayed by boiler leaks off the Suez Canal.¹⁰ Coal was picked up at Liverpool and cargo at Glasgow. Passengers were picked up at Avonmouth and London (Gravesend), many of whom were delayed in reaching the ports because of a national rail strike.¹¹ The ship finally sailed from the UK on 21 August 1911. An additional 900 tons of coal was loaded at Las Palmas on 28 August, 40 tons being placed on top of existing coal in the thermally insulated No 3 hold. According to a later Australian newspaper report, this was located immediately under the Captain's bridge.¹²

Fumes from the same hold were reported on 3 September. Because of this, and also to help trim the ship, which had a strong list, some coal was transferred to the stokehold by the crew and some passengers over the next two days. Fumes were again detected coming out of the hold on 11 September, so crew and volunteers from the passengers began turning over the coal. After it had passed St Helena, the Papanui twice steered back to the island before the heading was set back to the Cape. Two different reasons were later given for this. When interviewed by newspapers, passengers stated that Captain Moore was only persuaded to steer for St Helena for a third and final time by a delegation of both passengers and crew. This implies that the vacillations in the course were the result of the crew steering for St Helena against orders, these being countermanded by the Captain. It was certainly the case that after arriving at the island the Captain claimed his crew had mutinied. A second

version was given in Captain Moore's sworn statement. This claimed he had decided to head for St Helena at noon on 9 September but had altered course several times to clear smoke from the bunkers.¹³ On arrival at the island on 11 September, he secured the hold hatches. The ship's boatswain W. H. Dunn also made a sworn statement and claimed all coal taken on the ship had been of good quality and that the outbreak of a fire was kept from passengers: "The Chief Officer was trying to keep fire quiet. On Saturday the 9th Sept. when we were just knocking off we were put on watch to help in the hold but could not stay down more than 2 minutes at a time as it was so hot. There was very little fire inside of bunker." He also testified that by 4 AM, long after the fire broke out on the ship, "The Captain was on the upper deck in a deck chair."



SS Papanui & cable ship Britannia

The ship arrived at St Helena at 3:30 pm on 11 September. The Eastern Telegraph Company's cable ship Britannia happened to be anchored nearby and offered to help disembark the passengers but this was declined. According to the St Helena Guardian, Dr Arnold and the harbour master (Robert R. Bruce) boarded the Papanui in the evening and entering Captain Moore's cabin found he was armed with a revolver.¹⁴ He explained that even though he had faced a mutiny by his crew he was unconcerned about any danger to either his ship or its passengers. Some passengers had been crowding around the lifeboats and he commented that they left "at their own risk."

Having been reassured there was no need to disembark, many passengers retired to their cabins but at 10:15 PM the hatches of No 3 hold blew off and a fire began to spread over the whole ship.¹⁵ A young Belfast crewmember Frederick Gardner proved to be the hero of the hour, running through the smoke to rouse sleeping passengers.¹⁶ He then organised the loading of women and children into lifeboats. They were taken to the nearby cable ship Britannia for the night. Only then did he allow the offloading of male passengers, who were taken ashore and marched up Ladder Hill to the military barracks to sleep on the floor. He was one of the last to reach the wharf where he was greeted with cheers and carried shoulder high. It has also been claimed that the Captain was then reported missing and a search party went back to the ship and found him in the engine room in a comatose state.¹⁷

A vivid account was left in 1968 by one of the passengers, Lilian Mary Gillham. She was travelling to Australia with her three children and her version of events shows she was unaware of a fire until the explosion and that a ship's officer later carried a gun to control the passengers.

Then one night we landed at St Helena. As we sat on deck we could see the captain and one or two in his room drinking, and I said to one of the officers who was a bit friendly with us "Why are we stopping here?" he said. "Oh, I expect the boss wanted some shore company!" (Well it was the place where Napoleon was kept prisoner). So I said to Miss J, "We will go and explore in the morning." I put out all the clothes that the children had to put on and all got to bed. About 10 pm. there was a knock on the door "Get up and get dressed quickly. The ship is on fire." Cyril was fast asleep and it seemed impossible to wake him up. Enid was up and dressed. Merv, I took the baby down to the deck and left her with a woman, then went back and collected all the blankets and locked my cases. All the time there were taps at the door, "Hurry up and go out on deck." The first officer stood at the top of the ladder with a loaded revolver in his hands, in case some of the steerage passengers (Italians) attempted to go first. Boats were ready for us to go over to a ship [Britannia] anchored nearby and British men were on it and were lovely, gave up their berths and gave brandy to those who were overcome.¹⁸



Fire-warped damage to the Papanui¹⁹

This ignorance of a fire agrees with a report from the St Helena Guardian which afterwards stated that "On arriving here the casual observer could notice no smoke issuing from her on her arrival to indicate that there was fire aboard".²⁰ A letter written by another passenger Bill Beattie to his mother from St Helena confirmed that officers needed to control panicking passengers, stating:

Folks were running up & down like madmen. I never imagined folks could be such cowards, especially men. It was really a disgrace to our country. Only for the First Mate standing over

the boats with a revolver, some of them would have jumped into the boats before the women & children.²¹

The women and children were rowed from Britannia to the shore early the next morning and taken to the hospital in Upper Jamestown. A number of married couples found accommodation in the town. Most of those rescued only had the clothes they were wearing when they left the ship. Viewing the scene from Ladder Hill Fort, the men could see luggage on the deck of the ship. The doors were locked overnight and finding they had been confined to the Fort, Bill Beattie and several other men set out to recover their possessions.

[..] a dozen of us volunteered to go aboard the Papanui & help to save the passengers' baggage. We were refused permission to get out of the Fort, so we took French leave. We dropped over the wall on to the rocks. Only four of us, however, as it was so risky, that the other 8 were afraid. If you had missed your footing, we would have been smashed to atoms. Luck was on our side, however, & we managed it. But I don't think any of us would care about trying it again. Anyhow, we got down to the harbour & got a small boat & rowed to the ship. The fire had a good hold by this time. We had 500 tons of dynamite on board, part of the cargo, so you can understand the risk we ran. Well, we all claimed our own baggage first & took it ashore & went back to help save other folks. I have got all mine with the exception of 1/2 dozen shirts, 1 pair brown boots, 1 cap, some handkerchiefs & my writing pad. They were all under my mattress & I had not a bit of mind about them or I would have had them too. However, that is a mere nothing, as hundreds have got nothing but what they stand up in. Well, we got back to the ship & worked for 5 hours saving luggage. By this time of course, dozens of small boats were in use, so we were a party of them that stayed on board, pitching the luggage over the side into the small boats. Well, we stuck that for 5 hours until we were ordered off by the Captain, the danger being too great, so the ship had to be abandoned. We did not get off Scott free either. Our hands and arms were burnt in several places. They are nearly better now, however, and in saving nearly 99 per cent of our own luggage, we have been amply rewarded for our labours. Hundreds have nothing but the togs they stand up in & even then they are only half dressed. However, in a sense they have only their selves to blame, if instead of running up & down that night of the fire they had looked after their baggage as I did, they would have come off better than they did. The first thing I did when we got the alarm was to get out of bed, go up on deck & see what danger there was. It was terrible at that time, so instead of rushing up on deck like the others, my pal, who is also a grocer & comes from Ayr, we dressed ourselves in our best togs & packed our bags with everything we could remember [..].

One lady lost her false teeth on the ship, another lost a cheque for £200. Mrs Paterson lost her organ, wardrobe, bedding, sewing machine, dresses, all Mr Paterson's tools, many of which were new, & her musical box. She has lost her share anyway, consequently she is very down hearted. I think she has some of them insured. Its terrible what some of them have lost. One first class passenger had a motor car on board, so he has lost it.²²

Dr Arnold arranged for food to be distributed and temporary mattresses made filled with straw and grass. Each of the 109 crew and 374 passengers were given 3s per day for living expenses. The local newspaper reported that Dr Arnold:

“[..] devised and formed a Committee of the two leading ladies of the Island, assisted by the Matron of the Civil Hospital, whose professional experience would be of great value and assistance. Enquiries were set afoot as to those who were destitute and to the credit of the Inhabitants it was found that few, if any, existed but that had not been liberally assisted, the cry for help had not gone forth unheeded. His Excellency's medical knowledge has lead to the distribution of passengers throughout the Country districts [..].²³



Papanui Passengers on the Wharf

The island was already short of food because of the national strikes in Britain. Passengers commented how tired they became of a diet of rice and fish. However, St Helenians were described as the kindest they had ever met. Considerable hostility to Captain Moore was voiced, who was said to have carried his gun for his own protection.²⁴

A telegram was sent to delay the sailing of SS Opawa from Liverpool, which was about to take passengers to Australia. Much of the ship's cargo was shifted out and "a small army" of joiners were brought in to create berths and cabins in the holds. A number of joiners remained on board when the ship sailed so that additional quarters could be built inside a coal bunker as it was being emptied. The Opawa was seen by a lookout on Ladder Hill when it was 30 miles from the island, a gun being fired to warn the passengers to prepare to board the ship.²⁵ The embarkation was speedily accomplished, extra lifeboats (from the Papanui) were installed and the Opawa sailed for Australia the same day, reaching Albany on 6 November. A memorandum of complaint about their treatment on the Papanui was sent by passengers to the London Board of Trade. At the same time, the passengers raised funds and sent a bronze tablet to St Helena expressing thanks for island's hospitality. This is located outside the entrance to the library in Jamestown.



An early claim was made against the ship owners for £188-11s-9d relating to a delivery of pears that had deteriorated due to neglect during the outward passage from Australia to England. Since this was not paid, a Court order was made in October 1912 to wind the company up.²⁶ The St Helena Government were too slow in counting up the cost of the disaster because by the time it claimed £9,908-8s-7d a year later for the cost of looking after the passengers and crew, the shipping company had been put into administration.²⁷

In October 1913, a claim for £5,280 plus interest was granted by the Supreme Court of Western Australia in favour of the ship owners against the Union Insurance Society of Canton, for the recovery of damages for breach of contract on the insurance of goods.²⁸ An appeal by the insurers to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London in 1916 also failed.²⁹

It was probably no coincidence that the Papanui's sister ship SS Paparua was also destroyed by fire in March 1926. Once again, the fire started in No 3 hold after passing St Helena en route from England to Australia, sinking 500 miles from Cape Town.³⁰

Shortly after 4 p.m., the chief engineer (P. Postgate) went through the communicating iron door that opened from the stokehold into the No 3 hold, and by the light of his electric torch noted a thin spiral of smoke ascending from the coal against the after bulkhead. He at once called Capt. Wilde and informed him of the spread of the fire, and then returned to the hold in company with the chief officer (F. A. Orr). Subsequently the chief officer went up on deck to get the crew and the hoses along in order to shift or cool down the coal as required. Returning into the hold a couple of minutes later, they were astonished to find the charcoal and wood insulation blazing furiously against the after bulkhead. The hoses were useless to stem the almost incredible rapidity with which the flames spread right round the hold, and in a few moments the fire fighters were beaten back through the door into the stokehold. Even then the chief officer and one of the engineers sallied through once more, wearing smoke helmets, in

another attempt to check the fire, and only just managed to stagger into the stokehold again before the iron door was hastily clamped up in order to prevent the deadly brown fumes of the burning charcoal and the belching heat from flooding the boiler room.

The propensity for stacked coal to occasionally react exothermically with air is well understood today, as is the need to dissipate the heat to prevent the formation of hot spots (spontaneous combustion).³¹ Although the precise cause of fires on the Papanui and Paparoa will never be known for certain, it can at least be stated that the practice of storing coal in thermally insulated bunkers was inherently risky, especially when that insulation was itself flammable, part of which (wood) had a lower ignition point.

An account of the Papanui disasters by Tony Cross was published in *Wirebird* in 1992 in terms of a postcard sent from the ship by one of its sailors.³² Thanks are respectively due St Helena Museum and John Turner for the photographs of the Papanui passengers and the memorial plaque. All internet references were accessed in March 2017. URLs have been provided for many references below in condensed tinyurl format.

¹ *St Helena Guardian*, 14 September 1912.

² Duncan Haws, *Merchant Fleets*, vol. 7 (Burwash, E. Sussex: TCL Publications, 1985); 'New Zealand Shipping Co. Launch of the S.S. Papanui', *The Evening Post*, 5 November 1898, 4, <http://tinyurl.com/y74hkbqa>.

³ 'The Papanui', *The Star*, 5 February 1900, 3, <http://tinyurl.com/y99guwgf>.

⁴ 'The Papanui Fire', *New Zealand Herald*, 13 November 1901, 5, <http://tinyurl.com/yc3o6ahn>.

⁵ 'Anglo-Colonial Notes', *The Press*, 11 June 1909, 8, <http://tinyurl.com/yevqw2ly>; 'Fire on the Papanui. A Thousand Damage', *Auckland Star*, 1 May 1909, 5, <http://tinyurl.com/y7cmturw>.

⁶ 'SS Papanui', *Evening Star*, 5 May 1910, 5, <http://tinyurl.com/yd33d6j6>.

⁷ 'The Papanui Fire', *Poverty Bay Herald*, 5 December 1911, 5, <http://tinyurl.com/yabxkxxm>.

⁸ 'The Papanui. Captain T. Moore Appointed', *Evening News (Sydney)*, 4 April 1911, 3, <http://tinyurl.com/y742oqck>.

⁹ 'The Papanui', *Evening Post*, 20 June 1911, 6, <http://tinyurl.com/yaaaobq4>.

¹⁰ 'Papanui Afire.', *The Star*, 13 September 1911, 2, <http://tinyurl.com/ybzh9m7b>.

¹¹ 'Effect on Emigration, Inconvenience Caused to Those Intending to Emigrate', *Aberdeen Journal*, 18 August 1911, 7, <http://tinyurl.com/y9gyhzdl>.

¹² 'The Papanui Immigrants', *Western Mail (Perth)*, 11 November 1911, 15 & 23,.

¹³ Museum of St Helena, 'S.S.Papanui 1898-1911', 2011, 16–18.

¹⁴ Ferdie Gunnell, 'SS Papanui Remembered', *The Sentinel*, 11 September 2014, 14.

¹⁵ 'Ship on Fire', *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 27 October 1911, 7–8, <http://tinyurl.com/y7pvjn3j>.

¹⁶ 'Belfast Man's Gallantry, Rescue Work on a Burning Vessel', *Larne Times*, 4 November 1911, 7, <http://tinyurl.com/ychxhvj>.

¹⁷ Gunnell, 'SS Papanui Remembered', 14.

¹⁸ Sourced from a document by Lilian Mary Gillham's daughter-in-law, Mrs Jean Gillham, who passed a copy to the St Helena museum

¹⁹ One of a dozen photos of the Papanui taken by author's grandfather, Thomas R. Bruce.

²⁰ 'Destruction by Fire of the British S.S. Papanui in Jamestown Harbour', *St Helena Guardian*, 16 September 1911.

²¹ Alexander Hugo Schulenburg, 'The Loss of the SS Papanui, 1911: A Letter', *Wirebird: The Journal of the Friends of St Helena* 36 (2008): 3–10.

²² Schulenburg, 'The Loss of the SS Papanui, 1911: A Letter'.

²³ 'Destruction by Fire of the British S.S. Papanui in Jamestown Harbour'.

²⁴ 'An Interesting Tale of the Sea', *The Press*, 1 December 1911, 5, URL: <http://tinyurl.com/mdt26j4>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ 'Order for Winding-Up', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 October 1912, 10, <http://tinyurl.com/yd7lzd4>.

²⁷ 'Wreck of the Papanui, Claim by St Helena Government', *The Western Australian*, 26 October 1912, 12, <http://tinyurl.com/yd38wvzm>.

²⁸ 'Loss of the Papanui', *The Daily News (Perth)*, 25 September 1913, 8, <http://tinyurl.com/h2dtrecb>; 'Loss of the Papanui Recalled', *Daily Commercial News & Shipping List (Sydney)*, 10 October 1913, 4, <http://tinyurl.com/jdc285k>.

²⁹ 'Marine Insurance Appeal', *Daily Commercial News & Shipping List (Sydney)*, 22 February 1916, 13.

³⁰ Lawrence George Green, *Eight Bells at Salamander. The Unwritten Story of Ships and Men in South African Waters, and Some of the Forgotten Adventures and Mysteries of the Wide Oceans That Wash the Shores of Africa*. (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1960), 78–82. 'Abandoned on Fire, The Paparoa in South Atlantic', *Evening Post*, 19 March 1926, 9. 'Thrilling Story of the Sea', *The Observer (Adelaide)*, 17 April 1926, 46. URL: <http://tinyurl.com/jlmqkjg>

³¹ Herminé. Nalbandian, 'Propensity of Coal to Self-Heat', *IEA Clean Coal Centre*, 2010, <http://tinyurl.com/kdvuprd>

³² Tony Cross, 'The Last Voyage', *Wirebird: The Journal of the Friends of St Helena* 5 (1992): 13–17.