

Duncan Sinclair and the *Alexander*



CABLE V. SINCLAIR

THE ALEXANDER AND THE FIRST FLEET VOYAGE

Duncan Sinclair was the Ship Master of the *Alexander*, which arrived in Sydney Cove on the 26th of January, 1788

The *Alexander* was the largest convict transport in the First Fleet, carrying all-male convicts. It had the highest mortality rate of the First Fleet ships: with 16 passengers dying before and 15 during the voyage. Whilst moored at Plymouth, the overcrowded *Alexander* had to be evacuated because of an outbreak of typhus. During the 8-month voyage to Botany Bay, the 452-ton barque carried approx. 25-33 crew and 195 convicts.

During the First Fleet voyage, Sinclair encountered several challenges. On 12 May 1787, 10 sailors aboard the *Alexander* mutinied over unpaid wages. On 18 July 1787, amid widespread illness, Sinclair was ordered to pump out the bilge water. Surgeon White, claimed illness was *“wholly occasioned by the bilge water, which had...risen to so great a height that the panels of the cabin, and the buttons on the clothes of the officers, were turned nearly black by the noxious effluvia [toxic fumes]. When the hatches were taken off, the stench was so powerful that it was scarcely possible to stand over them.”*

On the 6th of October, Sinclair was faced with a more serious mutiny involving the convict, John Powers and four crew members. Armed with knives, pistons and crowbars, they planned to escape at their next port of call. However, one of them betrayed the plan and they were sent to *Sirius*. Powers was put in irons and the four crew set to work under close watch. Surgeon Bowes claimed this was caused by Sinclair *“not exerting a proper spirit over them.”*

The fleet spent a month at Cape Town before setting sail again on the 12th of November. In December, the fleet faced severe storms, sustained damage and many aboard the *Alexander* fell ill. The *Alexander* finally arrived in Sydney Cove on the 26th of January, 1788.

THE COURT CASE

In July 1788, convicts Susannah and Henry Kable successfully sued Sinclair for lost goods in the first civil court case in the new penal colony, and he was ordered to pay £15 in compensation. John White recorded in his journal on 8 July, *“Sinclair considered it as oppressive to be obliged to pay for that on account of which he had not received any freightage, but his objection had no weight with the court, as the ship was in the service of government and paid for the sole purpose of conveying these people, and the little property which they possessed, to this country.”*

RETURN VOYAGE

Sinclair left the colony on 14 July, 1788 on the *Alexander*. During the return voyage, the ship lost 17 crew members to scurvy near Borneo. After taking on board the survivors of the wrecked *Friendship*, who were also stricken with scurvy, the ship struggled to reach Batavia (Jakarta) as the crew were so sick only one man *“was able to go aloft.”* The ship finally arrived in England on 3 June 1789.

Deposition of John Hunter Esqr Captain of the *Sirius*:

“John Hunter Esqr being sworn, deposes, that at the Cape of Good Hope, application was made to him by His Excellency Governor Phillip to cause Inquiry to be made for the Parcel on board the Alexander - that he immediately applied to Duncan Sinclair, desiring him to search for the articles... some after time the Master D. Sinclair acquainted him that one of the Parcels was found, and he did not doubt but the other would be found - but that the After Hold was in such a disturbed State, it was almost impossible to look for it.”

