



'S S ASTON HALL 1882', are clearly visible on the bell.

The Aston Hall Bell

Charles Nelson

I have been visiting Crete for more than a dozen years, usually with small groups of people keen to see the island's remarkable springtime wild flowers. We wander through gorges which are natural botanical gardens and traipse over plains carpeted with blue and purple and white anemones and bright pink tulips, all overlooked by snow-covered mountains that make all the Munros seem like mole hills. We meander along goat paths through ancient olives groves and past field sparkling with scarlet poppies and golden pheasant's-eyes. There are splendid archaeological and historical sites too. Prime is the partly reconstructed palace of Knossos where, so myth asserts, King Minos reigned and the Minotaur, half bull half human, was conceived and kept captive in the Labyrinth. There are tranquil, mediaeval harbours built from honey-coloured stones, where Venetian fleets sheltered. A Turkish fort, which dominates Souda Bay, looks out over the place where the Sirens and Muses held their legendary contests and where modern battleships tie up. This fort, together with a few abandoned minarets, signify Crete's Muslim and Ottoman past, while dozens of the quiet chapels, lit by candles, frescoed with saints, perfumed by incense, tell of a continuity of Christian worship dating back almost two thousand years to the Apostle Paul. On the plateau over-

looking Souda Bay, one of those tiny chapels forms part of the abandoned monastery of St John of Patmos. The Turkish fort, just mentioned, is a short distance away and all around in the olive groves are the telltales signs of more ancient buildings – temples, villas, theatres, baths, 'cyclopaean' walls, and a newly excavated heroon where heroes were buried and honoured by their fellow citizens, "The city honours

Praxiochos, son of Philetairos, a hero". Vast brick-built water cisterns, resembling subterranean cathedrals, were constructed here by the Romans. Even today these retain a little water, just enough to indicate their enormous capacity, and they provide ample evidence that once there was a thriving city-state on this parched hill-top. Aptaera was its name, meaning, perhaps, the wingless one.

The monastery of St John is no longer occupied by monks: the cells are empty, and one of the ground-floor store-rooms serves as an information point with an exhibition about the history of the lost city. The little chapel, locked away behind the fence which protects this archaeological site, is still used by the local people. Candles are lit, icons are venerated, incense is burned, prayers are earnestly repeated, and the holy Eucharist is celebrated on high days and holy days. There are always fresh flowers on the icons, and all around the monastery flowers blaze in the spring sunshine – poppies, chamomile, bryony, honesty and crown daisies.

It was not until this past year that I paid much attention to the bell hung above the door of the little chapel. The words, 'S S ASTON HALL 1882', worked in a pale metal, are clearly visible on it. This is a rather strange

View of chapel with Souda Bay in background





Ruins of Aptaera.

inscription, in the Roman alphabet, for a bell on an Orthodox chapel on a remote hill on a Greek island.

SS *Aston Hall* 1882

One of the merits of the internet is the ease with which arcane information can be found. That information often needs to be treated with some caution, but when several different sources coincide to tell a story, the result can almost be more intriguing than the original enquiry. Having returned from Crete in late-April, and with access again to the world-wide web, I searched for ‘SS *Aston Hall*’ and was rewarded with some basic facts. A steamship with that name really had existed – clearly the bell’s original ‘belfry’ was not a Cretan chapel.

SS *Aston Hall*, an iron steamship, was built in the Gourlay’s shipyard at Dundee and was launched in March 1882. After fitting-out, her maiden voyage was to the Cape Colony in South Africa. An advertisement in *The Times* on Monday 13 November 1882, for the International Line, announced that,

Succeeding *Govina*, and loading in the South West India Docks, the very fine new steel steamer ASTON HALL 4,043 tons gross register, 500-horse power nominal, will be dispatched for Algoa Bay and East London.

The wording was altered the following week, “ASTON HALL 3,568 tons gross register, 2,200-horse power effective [...] receiving cargo until 25th inst.” appeared on Wednesday 22 November 1882. As there is no indication that she did not sail for East London, it seems safe to assume that *Aston Hall* made the voyage without a hitch and was back in England early in the new year.

The ship’s name, including the word ‘Hall’, denotes that she was built for the Sun Shipping Company of Liverpool, founded by Robert Alexander in 1868, and Liverpool was the SS *Aston Hall*’s port of registry (vessel no. 86250). There were other ships in the company’s fleet, all with ‘Hall’ as part of the name, and so the company was also known as the Hall Line. The next advertisement that I have traced, in *The Times* of Tuesday 30 January 1883, was indeed in the name of the Hall Line, and announced that the *Aston Hall* would sail from, “Liverpool to Bombay, via Suez Canal, calling at Malta if sufficient inducement offers”, in the Spring. She seems to have left sometime in early May, for there is a report that she had arrived at Port Said, from Marseilles, on 30 May, and was heading for Aden, and presumably Bombay. After discharging cargo and probably some passengers (although it is not clear how many cabins she had for paying passengers), and taking on a new cargo, the ship left Bombay on 5 July. By 18 August, SS *Aston Hall* had

passed Gibraltar on her return voyage, heading for Liverpool. Four days later *The Times* reported that the *Aston Hall* had docked at Penarth “from Marseilles”.

Whatever her cargo, SS *Aston Hall* made a prompt turnaround, and by mid-September she was passing Lisbon, again on her way via the Suez Canal to Bombay. A voyage from England to India, with calls at intermediate ports, took her around eight weeks. On 12 November she again left Bombay bound for Liverpool. On this return voyage, SS *Aston Hall* called at Malta, leaving the island on 7 December and passing Gibraltar five days later. Her third voyage was to Calcutta.

The Nile Expedition 1884

In the summer of 1884, there was a great public clamour for the British government to send troops to The Sudan to relieve the besieged city of Khartoum, then being defended by a small garrison commanded by Major-General Charles Gordon. Newspaper reports during September 1884 indicate that the *Aston Hall* played a small part in the belated campaign. To get a relief force into The Sudan, the government decided to send troops through Egypt up the River Nile, so 900 boats were purchased. Ferrying these to Egypt entailed chartering cargo ships, and *The Times* reported on 2 September that,

The British India Steamboat Company [has] a commission to take 30 of the boats in their chartered steamer *Aston Hall*, which will sail for Bombay in about a week [...].

A hospital ship, *Bulimba*, was also got ready, and both ships loaded their cargoes. On 15 September, *The Times* reported that,

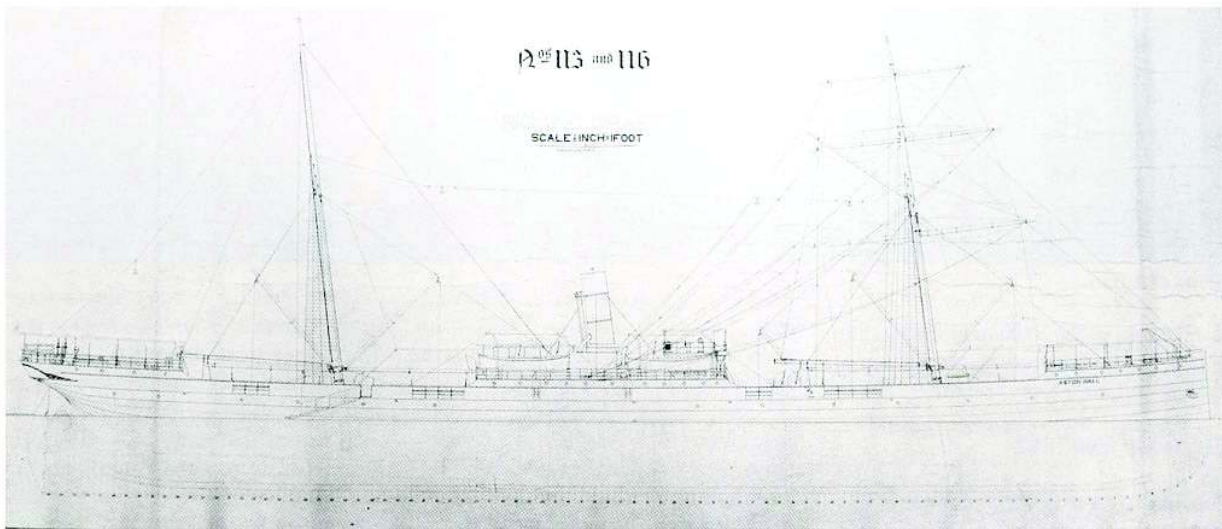
Two truck-loads of Nile boats, numbered 780 to 800 arrived from Dundee by rail yesterday at Woolwich Arsenal, for shipment on

full-powered steamer” bound for Cape Town, Algoa Bay, Port Alfred and East London – the route of her maiden voyage – and onwards to Mauritius. On 13 February 1890, she departed Liverpool bound for New Orleans. Two years previously she had been reported at Norfolk in Virginia, and in May 1908 sailed to Buenos Ayres.

The ship’s career was not unblemished. From *The Times* on 30 August 1890: “*Aston Hall* towed into Jeddah with tail shaft broken by the steamer Port Jackson.” From *The Times*, 22 August 1891,

Constantinople states that the *Aston Hall* was in collision with the German steamer *Rhenania*, a vessel of 4,079 tons, built in 1900, and owned by W. Kunstmann, of Stettin. The *Aston Hall* is a steamer of 3,627 tons, built in 1882, and valued at £14,000.

Five days later the news from Constantinople was worse. *Aston Hall*’s decks were now “seven to eight feet under water” because of a 20-foot gash in her port side. “It is stated that, through the vessel is much exposed to all southerly winds, the prospects of



SS *Aston Hall* rigging plan. (Dundee City Archives)

board the hired transport *Aston Hall*, which is timed to leave the Royal Albert Docks, Woolwich, on Wednesday, with 80 boats.

SS *Aston Hall* sailed from England on 17 September “with no passengers” but with Major Montague Boyle, King’s Rifles, in charge of the Nile boats. She arrived in Egypt and unloaded, departing for Bombay on 5 November. SS *Aston Hall* played no other role in the affair. The Nile Expedition was a fiasco: Khartoum fell to the forces of Madhi Mohammed Ahmed, and Gordon was killed two days before Kitchener’s troops reached Khartoum.

Subsequent decades

Although she was probably mainly employed in the England–India trade, sailing to Karachi, Calcutta and Bombay, *Aston Hall* was not always plying the waters of the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. In June 1885 she was advertised as “a splendid

The steamer *Aston Hall* towed into Bombay by the steamer *Poseidon* with tail shaft broken and stern tube damaged, will probably discharge cargo and go into dock for repairs.

In 1901 the Hall Line Ltd was taken over by J. R. Ellerman & Co., and the *Aston Hall* continued, as an “Ellerman steamer”, to make voyages to India. What brought her to the Sea of Marmora in July 1909 is not known, and perhaps it was lack of familiarity with the shipping channels in Turkish waters that led to her wrecking. In *The Times* on 2 July 1909, under the headline “The Marine Insurance Market”, there was an ominous report from Constantinople (now Istanbul),

[...] the Ellerman steamer *Aston Hall* has been beached, after collision, at Akircapou, Sea of Marmora, full of water, and that two salvage steamers are engaged in pumping. The cargo of timber is being discharged. A telegram from

ultimately refloating her are good.” SS *Aston Hall* was not refloated; her travelling days were done and she was sold for scrap. Yet, the ship’s bell was not melted down: it survived intact. How the bell subsequently got from Turkey to Crete we probably will never know. A possibility is suggested by the troubled history of the Eastern Mediterranean. In 1923 there was an “exchange of populations” when ethnic Turks were expelled from Greece and Crete, and ethnic Greeks were ejected from Turkey. Maybe one of those unfortunate people, a devout Orthodox Christian of Greek descent, brought the bell from Constantinople to Crete. The fact it was a ship’s bell was of no consequence, and it was hung on the chapel. Today its voice resonates across the olive trees, the bay and the final resting places of innumerable heroes.

Dr Charles Nelson is an Irish botanist, editor and author, now living in East Anglia.