


**HMS *Birkenhead***, also referred to as **HM Troopship *Birkenhead***, was one of the first iron-hulled ships built for the [Royal Navy](#).

She was built in [1845](#) at John Laird's shipyard at [Birkenhead](#) as a [frigate](#) and named *Vulcan*, but the Admiralty renamed her *Birkenhead* and had her converted into a troopship in [1848](#).

## Final voyage



 Plaque commemorating the sinking of the *Birkenhead*, affixed to the Danger Point lighthouse near [Gansbaai](#)

In January [1852](#), under the command of Captain Robert Salmond, the *Birkenhead* left [Portsmouth](#) conveying troops to the [Cape Frontier War](#) (then referred to as the [Kaffir War](#)) in [South Africa](#). She picked up more soldiers at Queenstown (now [Cobh, Ireland](#)), and was also conveying some officers' wives and families.

In the late afternoon of [25 February 1852](#), the *Birkenhead* left Simon's Bay near [Cape Town](#) with approximately 643 men, women, and children aboard, under instructions to reach its destination at [Algoa Bay](#) as quickly as possible. In order to make the best speed possible, Captain Salmond decided to hug the South African coast, setting a course which was usually no more than three miles from the shore; using her paddle wheels she maintained a steady speed of 8.5 knots.

At 2 a.m. the following morning, the *Birkenhead* struck an uncharted rock near Danger Point (today near [Gansbaai, Western Cape](#)). The impact was so violent that the forward compartment of the lower troopdeck flooded instantly and over 100 soldiers were drowned in their hammocks. The surviving officers and men assembled on deck, where Lt Col Seton of the 74th Foot took charge of all military personnel and stressed the

necessity of maintaining order and discipline to his officers. Distress rockets were fired, but there was no assistance available. Sixty men were detailed to man the pumps, while the rest were drawn up to await orders. Poor maintenance and paint on the winches resulted in only a few of the ships' lifeboats being launched; eventually two [cutters](#) and a [gig](#) were launched, onto which all the women and children were placed and rowed away for safety. Only then did Captain Salmond order that those men who could swim should save themselves by swimming to the boats; Lt Col Seton, however, recognising that rushing the lifeboats would risk swamping them and endangering the women and children, ordered the men to stand fast. The soldiers did not move, even as the ship broke up barely twenty minutes after striking the rock. Some of the soldiers managed to swim the 1.5–2 miles to shore over the next twelve hours, often hanging on to pieces of the wreck to stay afloat; however, most either drowned or were taken by [sharks](#).

*"I remained on the wreck until she went down; the suction took me down some way, and a man got hold of my leg, but I managed to kick him off and came up and struck out for some pieces of wood that were on the water and started for land, about two miles off. I was in the water about five hours, as the shore was so rocky and the surf ran so high that a great many were lost trying to land. Nearly all those that took to the water without their clothes on were taken by sharks; hundreds of them were all round us, and I saw men taken by them close to me, but as I was dressed (having on a flannel shirt and trousers) they preferred the others. I was not in the least hurt, and, am happy to say, kept my head clear; most of the officers lost their lives from losing their presence of mind and trying to take money with them, and from not throwing off their coats." - Letter from Lt J.F. Girardot, 43rd Light Infantry, to his father, 1 March 1852.*[\[1\]](#)

The next morning the [schooner](#) *Lioness* discovered one of the cutters, and after saving the occupants of the second boat made her way to the scene of the disaster. Arriving in the afternoon, she rescued as many people as possible. It was reported that of the 643 people aboard the *Birkenhead* only 193 were saved. The actual number of personnel aboard is in some doubt, but an estimate of 638 was published in the *Times* newspaper. It is generally thought that the survivors comprised 113 Army personnel (all ranks), 6 Royal Marines, 54 seamen (all ranks), 7 women and 13 children but these numbers cannot be substantiated as [muster rolls](#) and books were lost with the ship.

This disaster was the origin of the phrase "Women and Children First!" which became standard procedure in maritime disasters, while the "*Birkenhead* Drill" carried out by the soldiers became the epitome of courageous behaviour in hopeless circumstances. In fact, that phrase appears in [Rudyard Kipling](#)'s tribute to the royal marines, "Soldier an' Sailor Too":

*To stand and be still  
to the Birken'ead Drill  
is a damn tough bullet to chew.*