

FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

SS Aracataca

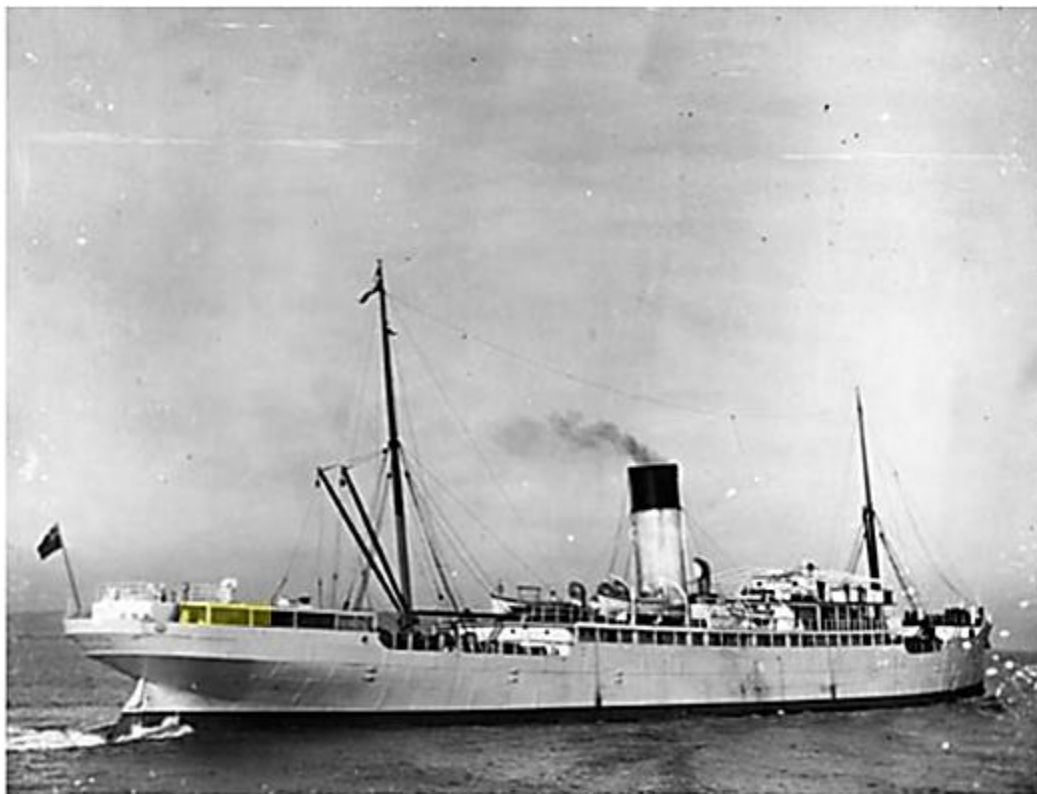
Type: Merchant Steam Ship

Built: 1911

Lost: 18 April 1917

Reason for Loss: Collision

SS Aracataca was built as a cargo steamship at Belfast by Workman, Clark and Company Limited, yard no 300, for Elders and Fyffes Limited of Garston. Launched on 5 January 1911, it was constructed[i] under British Corporation Survey for the highest class in their registry, and during construction, was under the supervision of Captain Bartlett, general manager of the steamship department, and Mr Prim, superintendent engineer of the company. It was 376 ft. 3 ins. (115m) long[ii], and had a beam of 48 ft. 5 ins. (14.75m), with a depth of hold of 29 ft. 1 ins. (8.86m). *Aracataca* was powered[iii] by 1 x 3-cylinder triple expansion engine, having 3 single ended boilers generating 413 nominal horsepower driven by one screw through a single shaft, at a nominal speed of 13.5 knots.



SS Aracataca (Image courtesy of Campbell McCutcheon).



FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

It was constructed of steel with a gross registered tonnage of 4,154 tons and 2,620 nett registered tons with ON129636. Bought primarily for the West Indies/British fruit carrying trade, its cargo holds were specially arranged for the carriage of fruit, being insulated throughout and equipped with refrigeration plant and fitted with cooling air ducts. It should be noted that the yard which built *Aracataca* was a pioneer^[iv] of refrigerated shipping, utilised by the West Indian banana trade, South American beef importation and many of the booming transoceanic trading routes. Large hatches with steam winches over the holds facilitated the specialised handling of fruit. Elders and Fyffes recognised that there was a demand for passenger accommodation on their routes and equipped *Aracataca* amidships with what was reported at the launch as comfortable accommodation^[v] for up to 12 passengers, including spacious and well-appointed state rooms, comprising a dining salon, a ladies' sitting-room and a smoke room plus a piano.

Only two weeks after launch, the *Staffordshire Sentinel* of Thursday 19 January 1911, included the following article:

“WEST INDIAN MAILS. New Service to Jamaica. The “Times” says: - We are informed that an agreement has been come to between the Post Office and Messrs. Fyffes Ltd., for a direct regular mail service between Bristol and Jamaica. This announcement will meet with widespread approval in the Colony, where the lapse this month of the Imperial Direct West India mail service, owing to the refusal of the Jamaican Legislature to continue pay its half share of the subsidy of £40,000, was viewed with alarm. After the renewal of the Royal mail contract, announced in the “Times” January 7th and 9th, an arrangement from which Jamaica was excluded, an agitation was started at Kingston in favour of a direct service with England. The arrangement now concluded is the result of negotiations which have been going on with the Post Office since October. It is provided that there shall be a weekly service in both directions, beginning on February 15th, and Messrs. Elders and Fyffes have agreed to carry the mails on a poundage system.

*No period has been fixed to the agreement, but it is assumed that it will as long the steamship service is found to be satisfactory. In order to ensure this, the company have rearranged their steamship sailings, and have placed on the mail service two new boats, as well as four of the fastest vessels of their present fleet, which have hitherto sailed between Bristol and Costa Rica. The two new vessels, each of 4,400 tons, are the *Mansanares* and the *Aracataca*. The period occupied in the conveyance of the mails between Jamaica and Bristol will be 14 days. All the vessels engaged on the service are 14-knot boats, but on the outward voyage, which will be made direct from Bristol to Kingston, they will steam below their full speed at 12 knots. The return service will include a call at Santa Marta, in Columbia. The vessels will steam at 14 knots, carrying with them cargoes of bananas to Bristol, whence they are brought by the Great Western Railway to London. The trade in bananas between the West Indies and this country will, of course, benefit considerably by the improved service. This trade, which has grown within the last ten years, has reached enormous dimensions, and Messrs Elders and Fyffes are now importing 4.5 million bunches annually”.*



FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The initial voyage with a cargo of bananas, 20 mailbags and passengers from Kingston to Bristol arrived on 9 April 1911 [vi] under the command of Captain Jones who had extensive prior experience with Elders & Fyffes. The passengers were reported to be loud in their praise of the boat and its accommodation, compared very favourably with the big liners. The same report [vii] alluded to the dockers at Avonmouth Docks in Bristol unloading the bananas being known to the corn porters and general cargo hands as “Banana Kings”. The bananas were green when landed and could be ripened if placed in purpose made vaults into which ethylene gas is introduced, thus artificially accelerating a natural process.

Aracataca, after its first commercial voyage, went into dry dock to be painted – the steel plates needed to have lost their “bloom” [viii] during the initial voyage before the paint could properly bond to the steel, and this was scheduled to take just under one week.

Thereafter, regular voyages [ix] plied across the Atlantic for the mails, fruit trade and passengers, taking just over four weeks for the round trip including the periods needed for loading and unloading. The majority of voyages were from Kingston to Bristol but several commenced at Puerto Limón, Costa Rica, then called at Kingston before departing for Bristol. In June 1913, and occasionally thereafter, the voyage commenced at Santa Marta, Columbia and arrived at Liverpool via Kingston. In 1913, *Aracataca* was managed by Henry F. Bartlett, 207 Deansgate, Manchester for the Elders & Fyffes office at 31 & 32 Bow Street, London and in 1969, Elders & Fyffes became the more familiar named Fyffes Group. These fruit carrying, mail and passenger voyages continued through into World War I during which *Aracataca* was armed with one stern mounted 12-pounder deck gun. The last uneventful voyage [x] arrived at Bristol on 17 January 1917.

On 10 March 1917, *Aracataca* was assaulted and damaged by gunfire from German submarine *U44*, 250 miles WNW of Fastnet at 51° 19'N, 16° 03'W when carrying general cargo from Port Limón, Costa Rica, to Garston, Liverpool. The *Aracataca* was nearing the Irish coast, when at 1 p.m. an enemy submarine [xi], commanded by Kptlt. Paul Wagenführ (Royal House Order of Hohenzollern), opened fire upon *Aracataca* from astern. The master, Mr. John H. Scuddamore, had carefully rehearsed his officers and crew for such an encounter [xii], and returned the fire with his 12-pounder, firing altogether forty rounds in reply to thirty-five from the submarine. Three times the ship was hit, the second shot from the submarine passing through the firemen's quarters, killing one man and injuring four others. Another shell struck the bridge, between the master and the second officer, injuring the latter; and the third passed through the funnel, and wrecked the galley. The master successfully dodged the remainder of the shots by his coolness and skilful navigation, noting the position of each splash, and zigzagging accordingly. He was well seconded by everyone on board, and in his report of the encounter he gave special praise to the chief steward for his first aid to the wounded, and to the two gunners, one of whom was the ship's carpenter, for their effective handling of the gun from a particularly exposed position. Some three-quarters of an hour after the attack commenced, a British war vessel arrived to give assistance, but already the submarine's gun had been silenced for some minutes, and



FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

the *Aracataca* had registered at least one hit. The merchant ship had outmanoeuvred and out-fought the submarine before help came to her. *Aracataca* made its way to Berehaven[xiii], Ireland. *U44* had 6 operational patrols before being rammed on 12 August 1917 by HMS *Oracle* off South Norway at 58.51N 04.20E and all 44 hands on board the submarine were lost.

Aracataca's fateful voyage[xiv] included a change of routine. Now under the command of Mr E.W. Castle, with a crew of 59, it was transporting a cargo of refrigerated meat from Liverpool to Dunkirk when it collided with Lamport & Holt Line's SS *Moliere*, ON137510, off Beachy Head, and sank with 8 fatalities. The survivors were rescued by two other steamers, one of them the *Moliere*, and landed safely. *Moliere* [xv] was larger at 7,206 tons, was sold in 1929 to the Nelson Line, taken over in 1932 by Royal Mail Line and re-named *Nela*, and scrapped in 1946.

The sailor from SS *Aracataca* killed on 10 March 1917 during the action with *U44* was JOHN HERBERT BUCK (21), Fireman and Trimmer, son of John William and Sarah Ann Buck, of Mount Pleasant, Pill, Bristol. He is commemorated at Tower Hill Memorial[xvi].

The rule for commemoration at one of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission memorials requires that the fatality must be due to enemy action. The following 9 crew of SS *Aracataca* who died while in service with the ship during the war are therefore not commemorated at one of these memorials, one being a natural[xvii] death, and the remainder consequent on the collision[xviii].

Sailor ANDREW YORE of 2 Raglan Street, Garston, who was born in Ireland. Died of tuberculosis in Hospital at Port Limón on the 16th July 1916, aged 23.

And from the collision:

Scullion E FLANNERY of 28 Great Georges Square, Liverpool. Aged 17.

Ordinary Seaman WILLIAM JOHN HUGHES of 33 Cecil Street, Holyhead, Wales. Aged 20.

Bosun F JONES of 62 St. Hilda Street, Kirkdale. Born at Birkenhead. Aged 47.

Assistant Steward ROBERT JONES of 33 Madryn Street, Princes Park. Born in Liverpool. Aged 16.

Assistant Steward J McCHESNEY of 65 Melrose Road, Kirkdale. Born in Liverpool. Aged 20.

Ordinary Seaman ANGUS ALOYSIUS PHILIP of 57 Bowden Road, Garston. Born in Bootle. Aged 17.

FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Seaman C SMITH of 6 Kent Street, Bristol. Aged 24.

Engineer's Steward ADOLPHUS STEINBERG of 43 Seymour Street, Liverpool. Aged 26. (His brother, 15-year-old Arthur Valentine Steinberg was lost on the Lusitania).

The wreck[xix] of SS *Aracataca* lies at a general depth of 54m on its port side, orientated at 121 degrees, bow to the South with her mainmast alongside on the seabed. There is a long scour to east of the wreck which in 1986 was 6.5m deep. In 1986, *Aracataca* lay 12.2m above the sea bed, and covered an approximate area equivalent to its original dimensions about one-third buried in the seabed. It is not a protected wreck and was identified by china plates bearing the name of Elders and Fyffes and a large quantity of bone from its frozen meat cargo being visible.

Finally, Aracataca (colloquially sometimes referred to as "Cataca") is a municipality located in the Department of Magdalena, in Colombia's Caribbean Region[xx].

Researched and Written by Forgotten Wrecks Volunteer Roger Burns.

Sources

[i] *Belfast News-Letter* - Friday 06 January 1911

[ii] <http://www.crewlist.org.uk/data/vesselsnum?officialnumber=129636&submit=search>

[iii] <http://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?80123>

[iv] <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/796/workman-and-clark>

[v] *Western Daily Press* - Tuesday 11 April 1911

[vi] The National Archives ref BT 26/455/59

[vii] *Western Daily Press* - Tuesday 11 April 1911

[viii] *Western Daily Press* - Tuesday 11 April 1911

[ix] The National Archives – reference series BT 26/455 through to 633 and series BT 165/922 through to 1702.

[x] The National Archives reference BT 26/633/89

[xi] https://www.uboaat.net/wwi/ships_hit/401.html

[xii] www.merseysiderollofhonour.co.uk/obits/ships/aracataca.htm

[xiii] <http://www.naval-history.net/WWI/NavyBritishShips-LocationsI0AttackedMNDateI917.htm>

[xiv] http://www.pastscape.org.uk/hob.aspx?hob_id=911873&sort=4&search=all&criteria=Aracataca&rational=q&recordsperpage=10

[xv] <http://www.theshipslist.com/ships/lines/lamport.shtml>

[xvi] <https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2980053/buck,-john-herbert/>

[xvii] www.merseysiderollofhonour.co.uk/obits/ships/aracataca.htm

[xviii] www.merseysiderollofhonour.co.uk/obits/ships/aracataca.htm

[xix] http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=MES6743&resourceID=1026

[xx] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aracataca>