



The Great Gale: RMS ATHENS *shipwrecked May 16th, 1865*

Look out to sea and you will notice a structure rising like a periscope above the waves. This is part of the engine block of the Royal Mail Ship (RMS) Athens wrecked in 1865.

A spell of warm weather and gentle breezes in the second week of May, 1865 may have lulled skippers anchored in Table Bay into a sense of false security but the local small craft boatmen of Cape Town most certainly recognized it as portend of a storm to come.

On May 15th the barometer began to drop and with it the wind shifted round to the northwest. Into the 16th the seas grew in height and Captains began signalling to shore for assistance. It was in running out extra anchors and cables that the first wreck occurred when the *Stag* manned by fourteen local seamen was swamped.

Throughout the next eighteen hours the storm - which came to be known as the "Great Gale" - raged and some seventeen ocean going vessels, thirty cutters and uncounted small boats were either stranded or wrecked along the shore of Table Bay with the loss of 60 lives.

One of the last to go was the RMS Athens. Just before 6pm, Captain David Smith signalled that his last anchor had parted and having raised a full head of steam intended making for the open sea, where he hoped to ride out the storm. As evening fell the Athens was last seen making little headway as it struggled to round Mouille Point.

At 8pm a messenger arrived at Cape Town Police Station to report that a ship was lying broadside on the rocks about 100 meters from the Mouille Point lighthouse and so close that men aboard could be heard calling for help. Onlookers ashore built a signal fire and were desperately trying to find lifebuoys and a Manby rocket apparatus with which to fire a lifeline to the stricken ship. All in vain, however, for just after half past nine, came the last cries from the Athens.

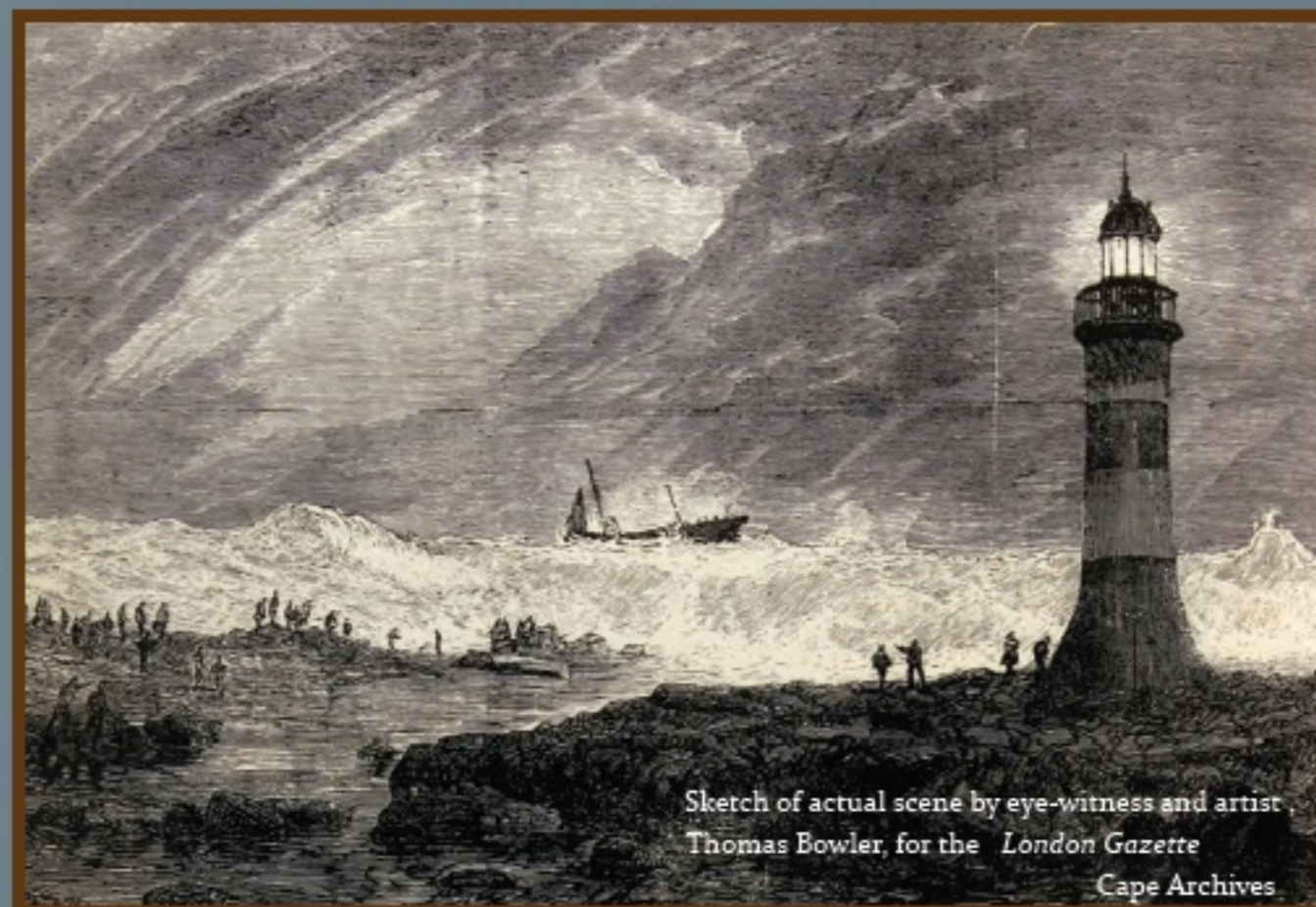
The first light of morning revealed that against all hope Captain Smith and his crew of 29 had perished. All that remained of the Athens was a pig which somehow managed to swim ashore and some machinery, including the still visible engine block before you. It was said that the wrecking was so complete that hardly a piece of timber too large for a man to carry away on his shoulder, remained.



UNION R.M.S. ATHENS
Lost with all hands during the great gale in Table Bay, 1865

The iron steam screw barque, RMS Athens, of the Union Steamship Company built in Liverpool in 1856 and seen here during her days as pride of the Royal Mail Service between Southampton and Cape Town.

Below the Athens is pictured on the fateful night of May 16th, 1865 - stranded on the rocks beyond the Mouille Point Lighthouse and meeting the full fury of the Great Gale



Sketch of actual scene by eye-witness and artist Thomas Bowler, for the *London Gazette*
Cape Archives



Painting by Otto Landsberg of Woodstock Beach littered with wrecks from the Great Gale of 1865.

"The beach beyond the Castle presented a mournful spectacle - waves breaking onto the stranded ships with foremast square sails set, perfectly upright on the beach....whilst those that had taken the beach broadside-on were continually drenched by seas washing over them and having lost their masts and bowsprits, were helpless as logs of timber"

Cape Argus May 17th, 1865

The engine block from the RMS Athens as seen from the grounds of the Granger Bay Hotel School



Here one will also find the remains of the second Mouille Point Lighthouse (seen in the adjacent sketch by Thomas Bowler) which was built in 1865 - decommissioned in 1908 and demolished in the 1920's leaving behind only the base

