

JIM BECK'S DIARY OF A SHIP'S DROVER

BY KATHLEEN SMART



Jim Beck with his sister and brother around 1941

The following article is a transcript of a presentation given to the Society by Kathleen Smart in 2002. It is an account of a journey, made by her brother, Jim Beck, in 1948, when he travelled to Australia in charge of an assortment of cattle and pigs. Kathleen's talk was based on a diary Jim kept during the voyage, on conversations she had with him and on notes of a talk he gave to a group in New South Wales.

Jim Beck was born on a farm in Cleigh townland, near Corbet, Banbridge in 1928, the fourth of five children. He attended Ballynanny Primary School and Banbridge Academy before undergoing training at Belfast Wireless College with a view to joining the Merchant Navy. However, because his hearing was deemed to be not good enough, he left the course and gladly returned home to Cleigh for, having grown up on a farm where his father bred Hereford cattle, his first love lay not at sea but on the land. A love of farming and animals lasted all his life.

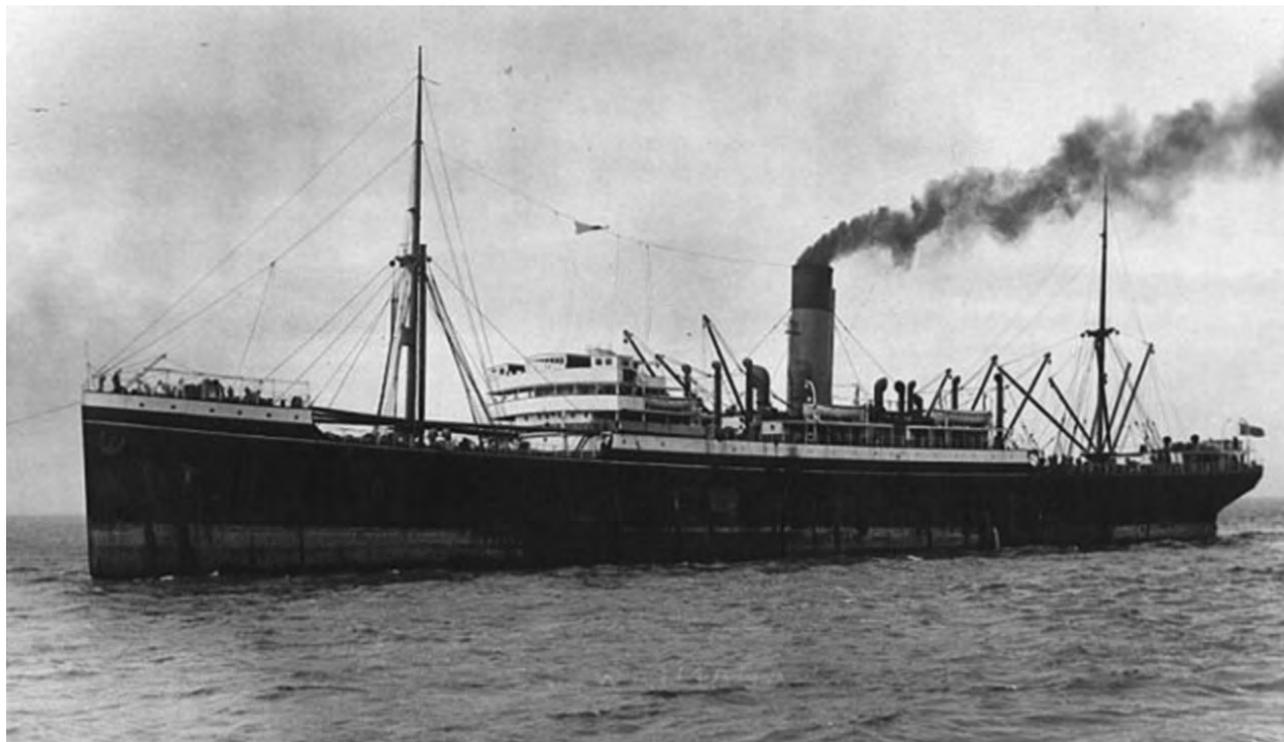
A drover is defined as 'a person in charge of animals in transit' and Australia's history is full of stories about epic journeys, where the early settlers moved across the country driving or "droving" herds of cattle or flocks of sheep. With the development of the railway system came the movement of stock by rail and the issue of a 'drover's ticket' to the person appointed by the owner of the stock, to take care of them on the journey. I had my first train 'drover's ticket' in 1950 for moving a consignment of cattle and horses from Wellington to Bundanoon, but my first experience as a drover came two years earlier, and it wasn't on a train. I had my first experience as a drover in 1948, when I took charge of a consignment of cattle and pigs aboard the S. S. Waimana, leaving Liverpool on March 9th, 1948 bound for Australia.

Perhaps I should begin by outlining my career prior to that. I was born on a farm near Banbridge and can well remember going up to the top of a hill on the farm to watch the German bombing raids on Belfast in 1941.

My father bred and showed Hereford cattle and, when the war was over, I had the good fortune to be given the opportunity to gain experience in cattle-handling in, what was at that time, the most famous Hereford 'stud' in the world. Situated at Marden in Herefordshire, it was known as 'The Vern'.

'The Vern' was owned by master-breeder Captain R.S. de Quincey and my training was overseen by Don Gordon, a canny Scot and master show man. During my time at 'The Vern', I met several Australians who tried to convince me that my future would be best enhanced by a move to Australia, but I rebuffed all their offers for, at that time, I had only one ambition and that was to return to Ireland to help my father and 'show' his cattle. So at the end of 1947, I duly returned home to Ireland and to my father's farm.

However, on March 1st, 1948, I received a telegram from Sir Charles McCann, the Agent General for South Australia. The telegram read, "Have a consignment of cattle and pigs leaving Liverpool on March 9th S.S. Waimana. Would be pleased if you would take charge of them." I had met Sir Charles McCann at The Vern and greatly admired him, so



S.S. Waimana

after a brief discussion with my parents, brothers and sister, the reply was, "Yes". After all, or so we thought, it was the chance of a lifetime, for my return as a member of the crew was guaranteed. Little did we know then that when I crossed the Irish Sea on March 8th 1948 I was embarking on a journey that would take longer and go further than we could ever have anticipated.

When I signed on, the cattle and pigs were being loaded, each in its own pen lashed securely to the after-deck. The consignment consisted of four heifers (two Herefords, one Devon and one Angus), and two bulls (one beef Shorthorn and one dairy Shorthorn) plus six gilts (un-bred female pigs, four of the Berkshire breed and two Tamworths).

The pens were lashed to the deck in such a way that opening doors would not work and so we had to make do with doors that could be lifted up each time access was needed. There was no water supply connected, so all watering, feeding and cleaning had to be done by hand.

My first lesson in a ship's drover's protocol came soon after we cast off from Merseyside. I was cleaning out the cattle pens and cheerfully slinging the manure over the ship's side, when I was promptly told to stop. It seemed that some of it had slid down the side of the ship and in through the open porthole onto the captain's pillow! From then on it was into a garbage bin first, lower the bin by rope to sea-level and then empty. In the first three days I had a visit from every member

of the crew complaining about the constant bellowing of the Angus heifer. She obviously had just been weaned shortly before departure and was missing her mother's milk and company.

The S.S Waimana was an old ship, having been built in Belfast by Workman and Clark in 1911. She had served in different capacities throughout two World Wars and had emerged unscathed. Her top speed was said to be eleven knots - with the wind and sea behind her and before departure, it was estimated that the voyage would take six to eight weeks, nine at most.

We were blessed with fine weather and smooth seas during the early part of the journey. I had a dread of crossing 'The Bay of Biscay' for I knew of its reputation for storms and rough seas, but it was quite smooth and by March 19th we had the Canary Islands dead ahead in the morning and dead astern in the evening. We didn't call there but then, at eleven knots, the scenery didn't exactly flash past!

The crew were very helpful although there were times when I had difficulty convincing some of them that the cattle and pigs were not "pets". I developed a routine of feeding and watering the animals before breakfast, cleaning out the pens after breakfast, watering again at midday and grooming cattle or washing pigs in the afternoon with a final feeding at 6pm. I'm not sure whether this routine contributed to the good health of the stock, but thankfully, I had no major problems. A bit of carpentry to improve ventilation and painting the roofs of all the pens white helped the

animals survive the heat and humidity as we sailed south.

By Good Friday, 29th March, we had crossed the Equator, but it was not until April 8th that we arrived in Durban, our first port of call. The main purpose was to take on 2,000 tons of coal. The coal was carried on to the ship by black women, each with a wicker basket on her back, held in place by a headband. There must have been 400 of them, all naked to the waist and wearing grass skirts. I was not so much overawed by the exposure of so many female breasts as by the display of man's inhumanity to man, for the women were supervised by a white man dressed in white with a revolver on his belt and a stock-whip in his hand.

The presence of livestock on a cargo ship created some interest in Durban and on the second (and last) day in port we had visits from press and radio reporters and made the front page of the 'Natal Mercury' with a photograph of me and one of the pigs, much to the amusement of the crew-members. ("The one on the left is the Irishman!")

Across the Indian Ocean was plain sailing for the first week but on April 20th at about 6 o'clock in the evening we were hit by a storm which was to wreck the decks and scare the day-lights out of both the livestock and me. The ship was turned into the storm and would stand almost on end when hit by 40 foot waves. It was really scary going down the face of a huge wave. The rudder and propeller would go up, out of the water, and the ship would vibrate with such violence that it seemed as though it would disintegrate at any moment.

I spent the night on the bridge with the captain as it was thought that the livestock and their pens would have to be cut loose if the risk of sinking were to increase. That decision didn't have to be made as all the pens broke loose and skidded around the deck until the storm abated just before daylight.

When the sun came up the sea was like a mill pond again but the deck was an absolute shambles. Some of the cattle and all of the pigs were out of their pens, but they were the cleanest animals on God's earth.

The storm, the repairs and the cold, wet weather that followed delayed the maintenance routine and was to have a lasting effect on my first impressions of Australia, for when we tied up in Fremantle, and the Aussie wharfies came on board to unload, the paint on our winches was not dry and the wharfies refused to unload and went on strike. The result was that we had to lie at anchor in Fremantle harbour for several days until the dispute was settled.

Eventually, on 5th May, 54 days out of Liverpool, we

were able to unload the pigs and deliver them to the West Australia Department of Agriculture Research Station on the outskirts of Perth.

Our journey then progressed to Adelaide and Melbourne where one Shorthorn bull was unloaded. From there it was on to Sydney where the remaining five cattle were delivered in good order to a very excited group of new owners. Seventy-six days, and a few hours, after leaving Liverpool I was able to go to the ship's purser for my pay, the princely sum of eleven shillings for eleven weeks' work! We had not taken as long as some of the earlier settlers but to me it seemed like a lifetime.

I never used my qualifications as a ship's drover again. Not long after, to prevent the spread of disease, the importation of live animals into Australia was banned and soon new technology put an end to the need to move animals across the world for breeding purposes. A few animals are moved for meat or milk production, or in the case of horses to compete in races, but a thermos container with frozen semen or embryos, satisfies the needs of livestock breeders and has long since eliminated the need for the ship's drover.



Jim Beck and his sister Kathleen Smart taken when Kathleen visited Jim for the wedding of his daughter Kathleen

Jim Beck's plan to return home as a crew-member aboard the Waimana was put on hold when he met Australian-born Lola Brown, "the first girl I met in Australia". When they married in 1955, Jim did return home with his new bride. However, work was very scarce and, having spent some time picking potatoes in England, they decided that there were more career opportunities in Australia. Once there, Jim commenced studying at Hawkesbury College and graduated with a degree in agriculture. He gained a position in the Department of Agriculture for New South Wales, eventually becoming Chief Agriculture Officer for the Province. He and Lola had four children, three girls and a boy. He died in 1995 and is buried in Camden near Sydney NSW, where he and Lola had made their home.