

Biography of James Cross Born 14 April 1860, died 9 May 1894

Written by Sandra Coney

At 10.45 on the evening of Wednesday 9 May 1894, a group of sailors from HMS *Orlando*, returning from a night on the town, waited at the Man O' War steps on the Queen Street wharf for a pick-up so as to be back on board their ship, lying out on the Waitemata Harbour, by 11 pm.

Lance Corporal Isaac Paget was sitting on the top step when he heard a splash and then silence. He went down the steps but saw nothing. William Lewis, the bugler from the *Orlando*, was also on the steps and heard the splash. "I went down the steps and got on one of the piles. I went into the water about one foot and felt someone pull at my leg. I reached down, but could not feel anything."

A lantern was brought to search, and William Watts, the Harbour Board's night watchman, threw a lifebuoy under the steps.

The *Orlando's* "liberty" boat arrived for the pick-up and at this stage it was realised that they were missing a seaman called James Cross.

The next morning, the Auckland Water Police searched for the body, using a grapnel, and found it near where Cross had fallen in the water. He was fully clothed in naval uniform except for his cap. He had 10 shillings and 5 ½ pence in his pockets.

The same morning, the *Orlando* left port for a cruise in the Hauraki Gulf, returning on Saturday 12 May.

The Coroner's Inquest was held on the Saturday at the Gleeson's Hotel in Customs Street West. Edward McKay, sergeant of the Auckland Water Police, reported on the fatality. He said that there were no marks of violence on the body, but that the froth around the nostrils and mouth of James Cross showed that he had drowned. Sgt McKay produced the lanyard James had worn around his neck.

While the media speculated that James had hit his head on a stringer of the wharf when he fell, the lack of injury on his body meant there was no evidence this had occurred. There was no discussion at the inquest as to whether James could swim: seamen who trained in the Royal Navy were usually taught to swim. There was considerable debate as to whether James Cross was sober but none of the witnesses said he was not.

Isaac Paget reported that James Cross was 34 years old, unmarried, and a native of England. In the newspaper, James was described as "carpenter's yeoman", meaning he worked for the ship's carpenter in keeping the vessel in good shape. The ship's carpenter had usually been a carpenter on land for some years before coming on ship, but James had learned his skills on shipboard.

John Abrey, an able seaman on the *Orlando*, was one of those who identified the body of his shipmate. He had known him for 11 years and attested that "he was on the whole, steady and sober". He also stated that he thought the Man 'O War steps were well-enough lit, there being some discussion as to whether the lighting on the wharf contributed to the accident.

The verdict of the Coronial jury, led by Dr Thomas Moore Philson, was that James Cross had “drowned, and suffocated”. A rider was added that the lighting on Man ‘O War steps be improved and a railing erected.

James Cross’s colleagues paid for a fine marble headstone, which was crafted by W Parkinson, monumental mason, and installed at Waikumete. The inscription reads:

In memory of J CROSS AB of HMS Orlando aged 34 drowned at Auckland May 9th 1894 erected as a mark of esteem by his shipmates.

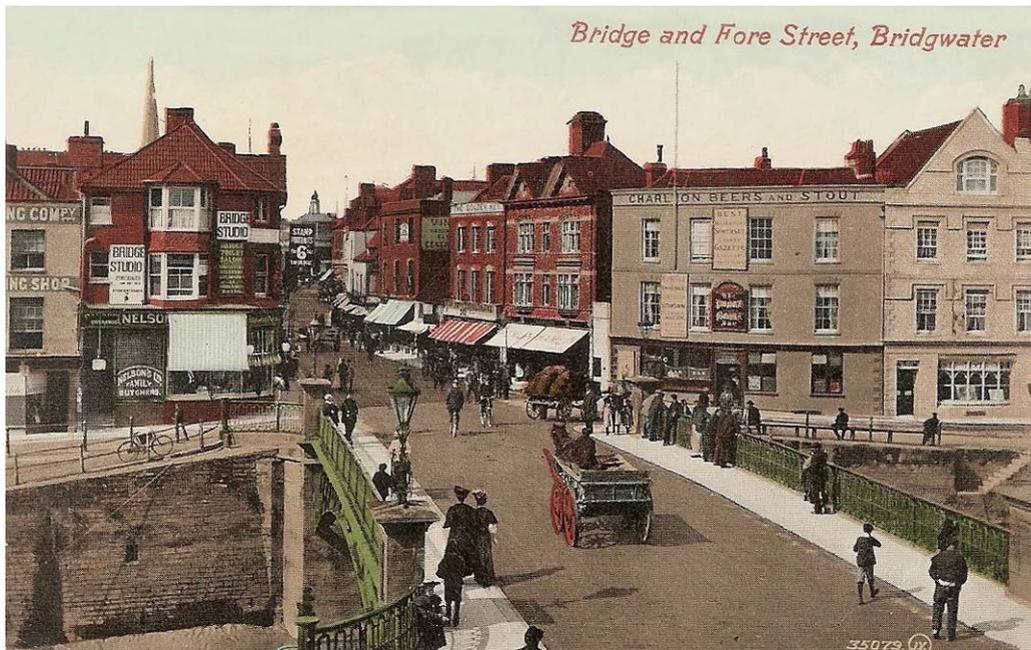


Crewmen on HMS *Orlando*. Photo: Ipernity, The Royal Navy

So what do we know about James Cross and the ship he was sailing on, HMS *Orlando*?

His death certificate gives little information except that he was born at Bridgwater, England. No parents are entered.

James Cross was born on 14 April 1860 at Bridgwater, Somerset. Bridgwater was the leading industrial town in Somerset at the time, with a port, docks, ship-building, flour mills, iron foundries, timber yards, and the main industry, clay tile and brick making.



James Cross was born at the Somerset town of Bridgwater

The 1861 census gives the occupation of James' father - also named James - as shoemaker - and he was aged 36. His mother, Catherine, aged 35, was born in Cardiff. James was the baby of the family being less than a year old at the time of the census. He had an older sister Catherine Jane, aged 8, and a brother William, aged 5. By the 1871 census when James was 10, the family had moved to Russell Town, Gloucester. James was still a bootmaker, Catherine Jane was 18 and a milliner, William 15 and a commercial clerk, and James 10 and a scholar. All the Cross children were getting a basic education.

On the 10 September 1875, James joined the Royal Navy as an apprentice. His height was recorded as 4 feet 11 inches (his adult height was 5 feet 5 inches), and he had light coloured hair, fair complexion and blue eyes. He was 15 ½ years old. The Navy at that time took boys from this age, so James had joined up as soon as he was able. His rank was Boy 2nd class and he went to train on HMS *Impregnable*. This ship was purported to be a near copy of Lord Nelson's flagship, HMS *Victory*, at the Battle of Trafalgar and saw action during the Napoleonic Wars before being put in the reserve fleet and then rated as a training ship based at Devonport. She was 60 metres in length with 98 guns.

After a year, James Cross graduated to Boy 1st class and spent periods on a number of ships: HMS *Royal Adelaide*, HMS *Duke of Wellington*, HMS *Active* and HMS *Flora*.

On the 14 April 1878, his 18th birthday, James became an Ordinary Seaman aboard HMS *Active*, a Volage-class iron screw corvette launched in 1869. His “character” was described at all times as “exemplary”, “very good” or “good”. At this stage of his career James was required to be physically fit and hard-working at a variety of tasks on board ship. On 1 January 1879 James was promoted to Able Seaman, a milestone reached when a sailor had worked for over three years..

On the 11 March 1881, James Cross was back on HMS *Duke of Wellington*, the flagship of the Port Admiral at Portsmouth. The *Duke of Wellington* was powered both by sail and by steam and was described as a magnificent sight when in full sail. She was 73 metres in length, displaced 6071 tons, and had 131 guns. When launched in 1853, she was the most powerful warship in the world and was the flagship for the Crimean campaign.

During his year on the *Duke*, James Cross got himself into some trouble. His character reports deteriorated to “fair” and “indifferent” and, although the reason is not recorded, James spent some days in the Lewes Naval Goal. The navy had taken over a former civilian gaol at Lewes as it was conveniently located half way between the ports of Chatham and Portsmouth. It was generally viewed as a rather grim institution.

From April 1882 to August 1884 he was on HMS *Minotaur*, where he spent four separate periods in Lewes Naval Gaol, on two occasions for 42 days. The *Minotaur* was the lead ship of the Minotaur-class of armoured frigates, the longest single-screw warships ever built. She was five-masted, 124 metres in length, displaced 10,798 tons, had 28 guns, and a crew of 800. At the time James Cross was on board, she was the flagship of the Channel Fleet.

James Cross was back on HMS *Duke of Wellington* in 1884 and in the next few years he served on HMS *Tamar*, HMS *Undine* and HMS *Nelson*.

HMS *Undine* was based at Australia Station, and the *Nelson* was its flagship while James was on board, so we can place James Cross as being based in Sydney from 1885 to 1889. Australia Station was at Sydney Harbour and was the British naval command responsible for the waters around Australia, including New Zealand, parts of the Pacific and Indian Ocean, and south into Antarctic waters.

This was the station from which a number of ships came to New Zealand to participate in the New Zealand wars in Taranaki, the Waikato and Tauranga. One was HMS *Orpheus*, the station flagship, which sailed to New Zealand to participate in the Waikato Wars, but which foundered on the Manukau Bar in 1863, with the loss of 189 lives. In the late 19th century, warships from Australia Station regularly went to New Zealand and visited ports in both the north and south islands.

Between 1889 and May 1891, James Cross served on HMS *Duncan*, HMS *Wildfire* and HMS *Northampton*, based out of Britain. HMS *Wildfire* was the base ship for a naval shore establishment, also called HMS *Wildfire*, based at Sheerness, Kent. HMS *Northampton* was a Nelson-class armoured cruiser, steel-hulled fitted with a ram and a crew of 560. She was 85 metres in length, 7750 tons, with 18 guns. She was in reserve at the time James Cross served on her.

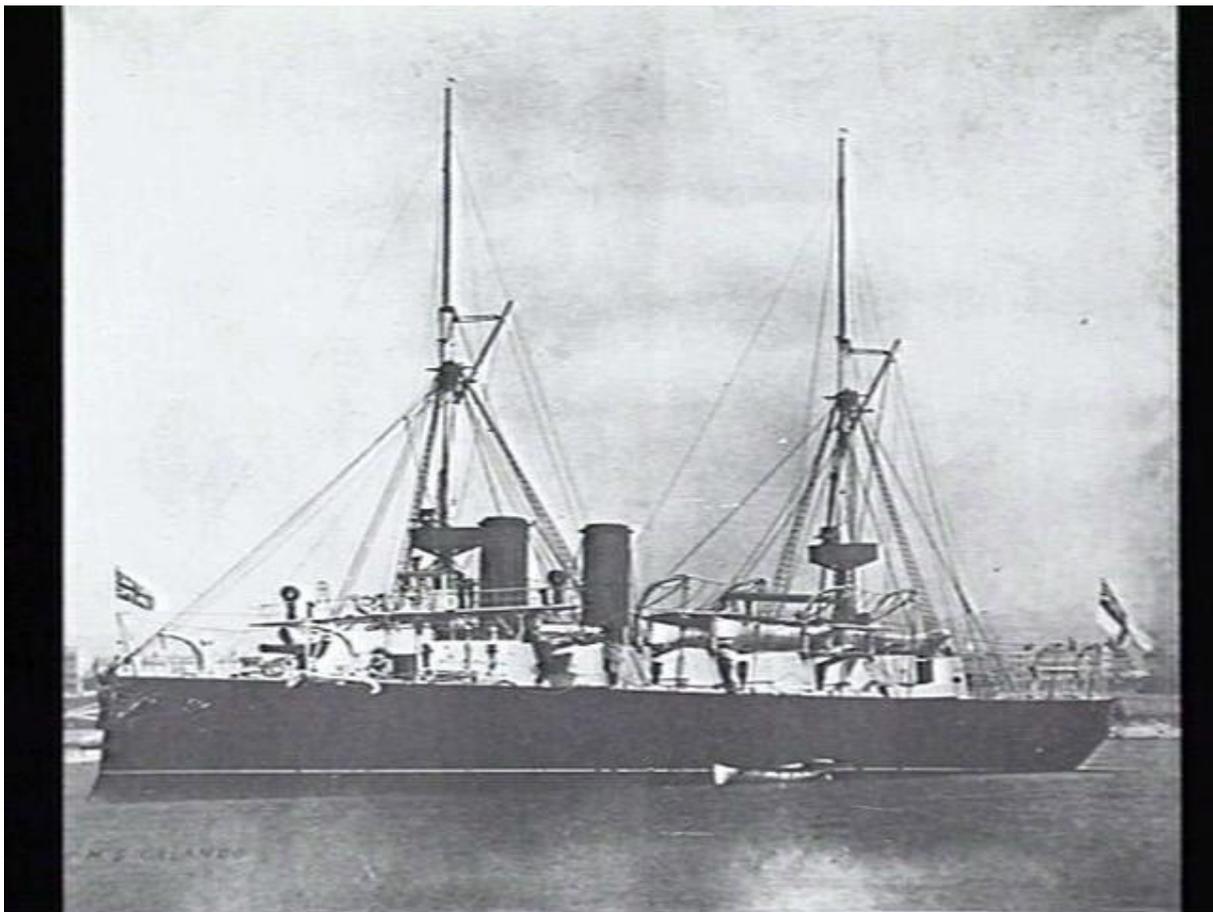
During this time he would have been able to catch up with his family. His sister Catherine had married James Peacock and was living in London. By 1891 she had had six children, four boys and two girls, though one daughter was short lived. Another son and another daughter were born after

this. James' brother William had married and working as a consulting engineer in London. He had a son and a daughter (he later had a second son).

By 22 May 1891 James Cross was on HMS *Orlando*, the flagship for the Australia Station. The *Orlando* was the lead ship of the Orlando class of first-class armoured cruisers, and was launched in 1886. She was 91 metres in length, 5500 tons, with 18 guns, and 6 torpedo tubes. She could run at 17-18 knots, a good deal faster than the other boats James had served on. Early in 1894, HMS *Orlando* did the voyage from Lyttelton to Wellington in nine hours, a speed the *Timaru Herald* called "phenomenal". Her crew numbered 484 and she was commanded by Charles Ramsay Arbuthnot.

The trip on which James Cross drowned was from Sydney, arriving in Auckland on the morning of 8 May. James drowned the next evening. On about 20 May the vessel left for Wellington, after which she was to return to Sydney.

The *Orlando's* most famous engagement was in 1900 when it played a key role in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in China. The ship was the first to arrive on the scene when trouble arose, and it was her Naval Brigade which first undertook the defence of Tientsin. A replica of a bell captured from the Taku Forts forms part of a memorial to HMS *Orlando* in Victoria Park, Portsmouth. She was sold for scrap in 1905.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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HMS Orlando about 1890 before her funnels were raised.

Naval Historical Collection, Australian War Memorial

In November 2015, Cross's grave in Waikumete was vandalised beyond repair. The estimate for a replacement is \$5355.

Staff at Waikumete and Friends of Waikumete Cemetery are undertaking fund-raising to raise the amount needed.



James Cross headstone before it was vandalised in 2015

Sandra Coney

December 2015

Sources

England Census, 1841-1901

England and Wales Non-Conformist and Non-parochial Registers

Death Certificate, James Cross

Newspapers: NZ Herald, Evening Post, Herald, Sydney Morning Herald, The Argus

National Archives ADM/188/100

Archives New Zealand, Coroner's Inquest, James Cross, 1894

Wikipedia: Information on vessels and Australia Station

