



Thyatira at Melbourne, Australia, 1877, from the AD Edwardes Collection - courtesy of The State Library of South Australia (PRG 1373/3/39)

# The Thyatira



Stanley Bruce

**N**amed after an ancient Greek city, now known as the Turkish city of Akhisar (meaning 'white castle'), she was the first composite ship built by Walter Hood & Co, Shipbuilders, Footdee, Aberdeen, and the first composite ship built for George Thompson's Aberdeen (White Star) Line. A composite ship is one constructed using a combination of wood and iron, which made it much stronger than wood alone. All of Hood's ships built up to this date were constructed of wood.

Thyatira - the 29th ship Walter Hood built for George Thompson - was purposely

made for trade with Australia and China. Built under special survey by Lloyds Register of Shipping, she was classified, in 1867, as '17A1' - the highest classification Walter Hood had received on any of his ships up to this date.

On her maiden voyage, she made the passage from London to Melbourne in 77 days. It was a very fast passage at that time, as other ships were typically taking between 80 and 110 days. She took 96 days to return, but in 1881 made her fastest-ever passage to Melbourne in only 75 days.

The Aberdeen (White Star) Line was

**August 2017 marks the 150-year anniversary of the launch of the Aberdeen-built clipper ship, Thyatira.**

established in 1825 by George Thompson Junior (c1804-95), aged only 21 years. He attended Aberdeen Grammar School, and, prior to opening his own company, worked in the Aberdeen office of the London Shipping Co. Thompson's company was initially set up to run sailing ships carrying emigrant passengers to Quebec/St Lawrence, Canada, and returning with timber. Some of the timber imported would have been used locally for shipbuilding.

By 1837, the Aberdeen Line had a fleet of 12 sailing ships and, around 1840, they started to sail to the Far East, New Zealand

and Australia. It is said that Thompson never insured his ships against loss; rather, he reinvested the money in maintenance, safety, and in buying new ships.

From 1840 to 1881, Walter Hood built 43 ships for George Thompson's Aberdeen White Star Line - that's one every year, plus one. They were fine-looking vessels, admired in ports all over the world for their green-painted hulls; white masts, yards, bowsprit and blocks; grand, white figureheads; snow-white decks, gold stripes and scroll work, and wealth of brass fittings. There was an obvious reason why Hood's built so many ships for Thompson's: in 1842, George Thompson bought into the company of Walter Hood & Co and became a principal partner.

In 1854, Thompson's son-in-law, William Henderson, established the White Star Line's London office, at No7 Billiter Square, London. It was from here that Thyatira and other Aberdeen Line ships sailed to Melbourne/Sydney and onwards to Shanghai/Foochow/Whampoa and back.

Thyatira had quite an eventful life, sailing 29 years before sinking in dramatic circumstances:

**Basil Lubbock**, in his book *Colonial Clippers* (1921), tells the story of second mate Mark Breach, who had newly joined the ship's crew in London and was overseeing the stowage of cargo, when he spotted a visitor on board smoking a pipe. Breach, ignorant as to the man's identity, politely asked the gentleman to extinguish his pipe as smoking was not allowed due to the risk of fire. Without disclosing his identity, the gentleman apologised and immediately put his pipe out. After the visitor had left, the first mate asked Breach what he was talking to Mr Thompson about. Breach was rather worried when he learned it was the ship's owner, Stephen Thompson (son of George), whom he'd told off. Later, the first mate told Breach that "*Stephen Thompson had been very pleased and prophesied that he would be a good servant to the company*". Breach later became one of the company's best-known captains.

**On 29 October 1872**, the wife of Captain John McKay gave birth to a daughter on board, while sailing in the Indian Ocean.

**On 17 September 1879**, *The Melbourne Argus* newspaper reported: "*At Williamston*



Railway Pier, Williamstown, c1883 - photograph by Charles Nettleton (1826-1902) - courtesy of The State Library of Victoria (Image no H82.2462)

*Court, three men belonging to ship THYATIRA charged with disobedience of orders on 29th August, when vessel was at sea. Defendants had declined to wash down paint when ordered. Their excuse that weather was too rough. Sentenced to seven-day imprisonment*". There was no verbal warning in those days - it was straight to the sheriff and then off to prison.

**On 26 January 1882**, at midnight, en route from Melbourne to London with a cargo of wool, Thyatira collided with the 26-year-old *Atmosphere* (sailing under a British flag), en route from Liverpool for Valparaiso with coal. The *Atmosphere* sank quickly; however, all her crew, except for the steward (who, it is thought, died on board in the accident), were taken on board the Thyatira. While Thyatira lost her jib boom and some spars in the collision, her composite design was much stronger than the other, conventional wooden, ship and she suffered less damage.

**On 24 October 1889**, *The Melbourne Argus* reported that an inquest was heard regarding sailor John Shand, aged 45 years, who supposedly drowned at Williamstown, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, by falling between the ship and the harbour pier. At the time, Williamston was the major cargo port of Victoria.

**In 1894**, Thyatira was sold to JW Woodside & Co, Belfast.

**On 16 July 1896**, she left London, bound for Rio de Janeiro under the

command of Captain Winterton, on what was to be her last passage. She was carrying general cargo, including 800 packages of dynamite. Survivors reported an uncontrollable fire on board, and the captain, recognising the danger posed by the dynamite, ordered the crew to lower the lifeboats and abandon ship. Thanks to his swift decision, Thyatira's entire crew survived. The ship was said to have split in half when the dynamite exploded, and it sank in the darkness of night. The wreck site is reported as Pontal da Barra, Maceió, State of Alagoas, Brazil.

**In 2012**, the wreck of Thyatira was accidentally found in 30 metres of water, by Brazilian diver Fernando Vagner, who was sent down to free some entangled nets belonging to local shrimp fishermen.

Hopefully, in the light of this discovery, we will hear more about the ship in future.

Thyatira	
Rig	Ship, three masts, square-rigged
GRT	962 tons
Length	201'6"(61.42m)
Breadth	33'10"(10.31m)
Depth	21'6"(6.55m)
Figurehead	Unknown

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