The First Landing

The Hong Kong agents had considered Robe as an alternative Chinese disembarkation place to Adelaide due to its closer proximity to the goldfields. The agents kept the decision to try landing in Robe completely secret so that the Victorian government could not interfere. On 17 January 1857, when the *Land of Cakes* sailed into Robe's Guichen Bay flying a British flag, Robe's inhabitants were taken completely by surprise. The ship anchored and as Thomas Drury Smeaton the Manager of the Robe Branch of the Bank of South Australia wrote *those whose eyes happened to be open perceived a ship!! A ship actually coming into Guichen Bay and crowded with passengers!! Before many hours the population of Robe was doubled. It was well that all the passengers were alike and indistinguishable, all Chinese, all men, all with moonfaces, all with pigtails*[1]. There were in fact 264 Chinese passengers on the Land of Cakes. Not only was this number greater than the population of Robe, it was the first time that most of Robe's inhabitants had ever seen a Chinese person. At first local observers thought that the passengers were women due to their long pigtails.

The news spread quickly and a large crowd gathered on the foreshore. The ship's captain, Captain Miller, having realized that the waters near the newly constructed jetty were too shallow for the *Land of Cakes* to berth, was rowed ashore to meet Henry Melville to explain the reason for this ship's presence and obtain help in ferrying the Chinese ashore. Miller explained that landing the Chinese in Robe would avoid the Victorian Poll Tax and that he wanted the Chinese to be disembarked quickly as he was concerned about the safety of his ship in Guichen Bay. He said that the Chinese had money and would pay to be taken ashore. As the two lighter vessels usually used for transport were already full of wool, Melville and shipping entrepreneur George Ormerod encouraged locals with boats to assist in the ferry operation on the understanding that *each man can make his own ferrying charged*[2]. The Chinese had no alternative that to pay what was asked, often 8/- to £1, which seems excessive in comparison to the £12 fare for the whole trip from China. A local observer reported *the plan adopted was for anyone who had a boat to go off and get the Chinese…, make them pay as much as they could, and even (it is said) take the money by force from some, … leaving him to settle with the remainder of the boatload*[3]. Generally, the seamen unloaded the Chinese passengers' baggage by throwing it overboard into the tender boats as they drew along side, sometimes missing with the baggage landing in the sea. Those Chinese who were hesitant to board smaller craft, or who complained about the treatment of their luggage, or who didn't have any money to pay, were thrown overboard to swim ashore as best they could[4]. The treatment of the Chinese by a ship's crew was so bad that one night in March, 1857, the Robe constabulary rowed out to the William Miles to arrest four sailors for their behaviour when off-loading the 649 passengers and their belongings. The charges were heard at the Robe courthouse, which is still standing in Smillie Street, and the sailors were fined 5 pounds each for their *brutal acts of violence against these poor, unoffending creatures*[5].

The Chinese Invasion

From the arrival of that first ship, Robe was inundated. The Hong Kong agents had become aware of the opportunity to land at Robe and avoid the tax, and the word was out. A local recorded that is *a fortnight*

---

[1] Smeaton, Thomas Drury; *Our Invasion by Chinese*, 1865 (when he was Manager of the Robe branch of the Bank of South Australia), Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered

[2] Cawthorne, Ellen Mary; *The Long Journey*, 1974, Hansen Print, Naracoorte, South Australia, page 6

[3] Smeaton, Thomas Drury; *Our Invasion by Chinese*, 1865 (when he was Manager of the Robe branch of the Bank of South Australia), Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered

[4] Cantrill, JL; *Captain Charles Philip Brewer*, Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered

[5] Rolls, Eric; *Sojourners; Flowers & the Wide Sea*, 1992, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, page 135

since a large vessel, The Land of Cakes, Captain Miller arrived here discharging 265 Chinese. Two schooners from Launceston arrived last week with a similar freight; and yesterday evening a large vessel, called the Cornwall, 800 tons, Captain W Dawson, arrived direct from China, with 807 emigrants, a proportion of whom proceeded on to Melbourne with the vessel. Captain Dawson reports at least six more vessels chartered direct for this port from China, one a very large ship. He thinks this will become the leading port of arrival from that country, even should the duty Chinese emigrants in Melbourne be taken off[6]. The Chinese far outnumbered the 100 to 200 Robe residents, so it must have been overwhelming for the locals with one contemporary reporting that *there was an air of improbability about the whole affair*[7]. It happened very quickly with 3 ships arriving on one day on the 27 April 1857 and disembarking 1300 Chinese passengers in total. *The Young American, for example, 2,000 tones brought 1,000 Chinese (some landed in Melbourne)… performing the passage from Hong Kong to Robe in 35 days*[8]. There had already been 1513 Chinese passengers landing in the preceding 6 days. It is no wonder that the local Robe people soon referred to the influx as *The Chinese Invasion* and to their visitors as *Celestials*. The Chinese considered themselves to be celestials, as they believed that their emperor was divine and China was the centre of the universe and as such a Celestial Empire.

Shipwrecks in Guichen Bay
Not all the landings at Robe were according to plan. Henry Melville was given an additional title and duties as *Receiver of Wrecks* due to the number of ships that were broken up after being driven onto the limestone reefs in Guichen Bay. After an uncomfortable journey from China, the threat of being shipwrecked in Robe must have been another hardship for the stoic Chinese. *The Phaeton,* an American ship sailing from Hong Kong on her second voyage and carrying 260 Chinese, was wrecked on 1 February 1857. She arrived in the morning, but mismanagement of her sails and strong winds meant she was driven onto the shore. There was too much surf to land her Chinese passengers in longboats and for a time life-rafts were used. The wind moderated in the evening into the surf, by early the next morning everyone had landed safely. However, the wreckage was there for some time. Father Tenison Woods, who had arrived in Robe on 17 March, 1857, observed *Robe looked lonely and desolate and the debris of the wreck of the Phaeton scattered along the beach did nothing to cheer the prospect*[9]. *The Sultana*, journeying from Hong Kong and arriving on 18 March 1857, was under the captaincy of the First Mate, with her Captain having died on the passage out. The *Sultana* struck the rocks at the base of Cape Dombey on the entrance to Guichen Bay. Due to the heavy weather, the First mate was not able to see any identifying points. It is not clear if all were safely rescued. It was reported that sixteen sailors were drowned when the Dutch Barque, *Koenig Willem II* encountered a southwest gale which grounded the ship on Long Beach on 30 June 1857. Terrific seas washed over her and she was completely wrecked. The Chinese passengers had been safely unloaded, but the crew were still onboard trying to keep the vessel safe while waiting for calmer weather to continue the voyage. Twenty-five of the crew left the ship by longboat, but Captain Giezen was stranded on the ship when the painter broke before he alighted. He ended on the ship when the painter broke before he alighted. He ended up being one of the lucky ones as the ship broached in the stormy seas and only nine of the crew managed to struggle to shore through the breakers on the longboats[10]. The Captain was later able to drift to shore on a cask

---

[6] *Adelaide Observer*, 7 February, 1857, page unknown
[7] Smeaton, Thomas Drury; *Our Invasion by Chinese*, 1865 (when he was Manager of the Robe branch of the Bank of South Australia), Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered
[8] Cawthorne, Ellen Mary; *The Long Journey*, 1974, Hansen Print, Naracoorte, South Australia, page 8
[9] Clifford, G & G; Lecture; *Ten Years in the Bush 1866 by Julian Tenison Woods, Abridged Version,* Penola Historical Selections, Penola, South Australia, pages 40, 41
[10] Loney, Jack; Wrecks at Robe, 1979, Ken Jenkin Printer, Geelong, Victoria, pages 5-8

after the wind had changed[11]. There are still remnants of these shipwrecks in Robe accompanied by their legends. Two cannons were salvaged from the Phaeton and installed at the Flagstaff near the Robe jetty, where they were fired on important occasions, to alert the township that a convict has escaped from the gaol, or to call the volunteer rescue crew to lifeboat practice. One cannon was destroyed by practical jokers when it exploded after being filled with gelignite, the other disappeared to a private property and its whereabouts is unknown[12]. The cannon that is installed on the Royal circus, its muzzle sensibly filled with concrete, was salvaged from the *Koenig Willem II*. This wreck was purchased by Mr. J Chambers of Robe in 1857 for £225 and subsequently salvaged. Its teak scrolled doors were bought for the construction of the Caledonian Inn in 1859 and can still be seen today. It is believed that the sixteen sailors who drowned on the *Koenig Willem II* were buried in coffins in the sandhills and that the graves were exposed by the winds 75 years later at which time they were re-interred[13].

---

[11] Cawthorne, Ellen Mary; *The Long Journey*, 1974, Hansen Print, Naracoorte, South Australia, page 13

[12] *Chronicle*, 13 April 1933, page 96

[13] Moran, Vivienne; *Southern Ocean Shipwreck Trail – Lost off the Coast*, 2000, Heritage South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia, pages 32, 33, 34