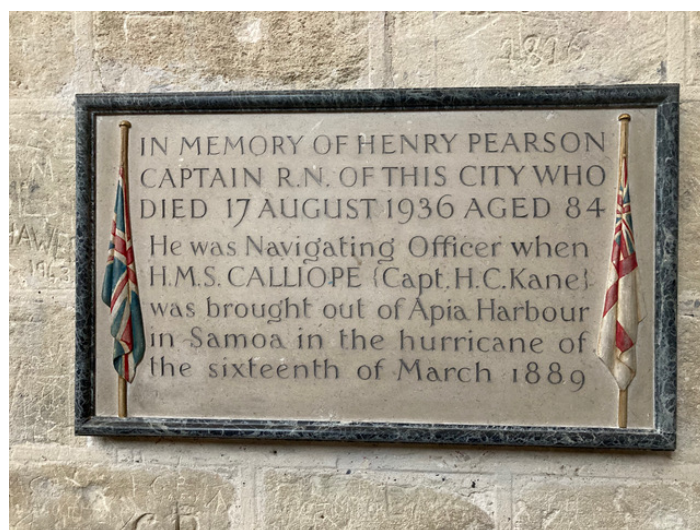


Captain Henry Pearson, RN and the Great Samoan Hurricane

By Ian Glenday and Tom Watson

Behind the furthest pillar in the north-east corner of the Cathedral's North Transept is a rectangular memorial tablet dedicated to Captain Henry Pearson, R.N. 'of this city' whom, it states, was 'Navigating Officer when H.M.S. Calliope {Captain H.C. Kane} was brought out of Apia Harbour in Samoa in the hurricane of 16th March 1889.' Captain Pearson died in 1936 and the tablet was unveiled at the Cathedral's annual Festival on 13th July 1940.

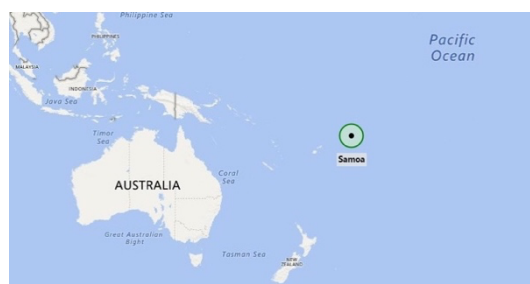


The Pearson memorial tablet

Now, more than 130 years later, what was then called the Great Samoan Hurricane is no longer remembered and neither are the exploits of HMS *Calliope*. However, in the late 19th century, the ship's escape from Apia Harbour was big news and seen as a sterling (and stirring) example of British skill, bravery and engineering succeeding under the greatest pressure when Americans and Germans had failed. It was celebrated at the time in newspapers and magazines, a parliamentary report and even in an Australian ballad. The captain and his crew were lauded as heroes. Later, the story was kept in the public eye through books, school history teaching and, latterly, in stamps and websites. In this article, HMS *Calliope*'s story will be retold, and the life and career of Henry Pearson explored.

HMS Calliope and the Great Samoan Hurricane

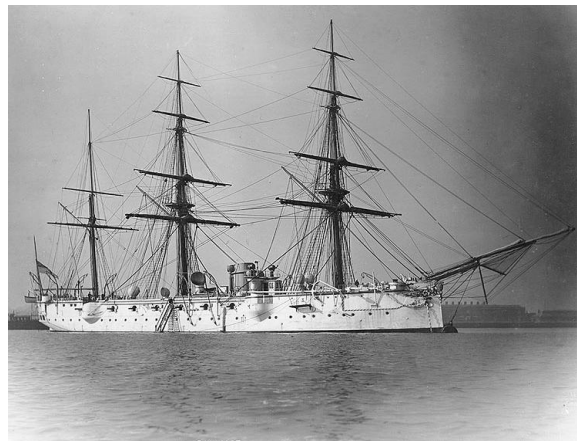
To discover what happened, it is necessary to investigate events in Samoa in 1889. Samoa, an island group in the central South Pacific, was one of the few unclaimed territories



available for colonisation by the major powers, who all wanted coaling stations, cable stops and raw materials for their respective empires. And, of course, to spread Christianity.

In 1889, the Germans had engineered a bloody civil war in the Samoa islands between the (pro-German) Tamasese and the Mata'afa, the latter of whom had emerged triumphant. Stung by the loss by their protégés to the Mata'afa and determined to redress the balance in their favour, the Germans dispatched a squadron of three ships to Apia. Their move was countered by the Americans who also sent three ships. While a conference was convened in Berlin to discuss the future of the Samoans, none of whom were invited, the German and American ships crammed into the small harbour at Apia, maintaining an uneasy truce as their national representatives vied for control ashore. On the orders of the Foreign Office in London, the Commander in Chief of the Australia Station in Sydney dispatched a ship, HMS *Calliope*, to Apia to observe proceedings and represent British interests.

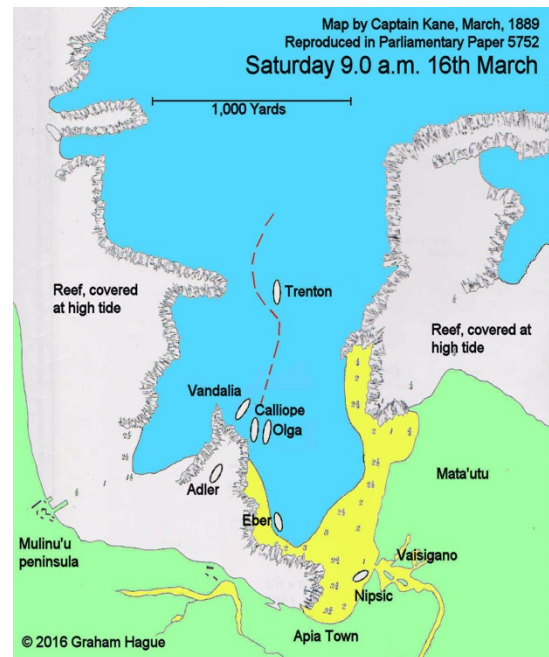
HMS *Calliope* (pictured) was an almost brand-new iron- and steel-sheathed cruiser. Launched at Portsmouth in 1884, *Calliope* had a length of 235 ft, a beam of 44 ft 6 in and drew just under 20 ft. With a displacement of 2770 tons, she was rated at 4,020 IHP and 14.6 knots from her single screw, carried an armament of four 6-in and 12 5-in guns as well as nine machine guns, and had a complement of 291. In common with most other steam-powered ships of the time, she was also barque rigged for sail. She sailed from England to join the Australia Station at the end of 1887. *Calliope* was under the command of Captain Henry Coey Kane when she steamed for Apia, 2400 nautical miles away, in February 1889. Lieutenant Henry Pearson, then aged 37, was the cruiser's Navigating Officer.



When it arrived in Apia Harbour, *Calliope* joined the three German warships, three American warships and numerous merchant ships. As it was the hurricane season,¹ the warships should not have been there and would not have been without the colonisation imperative. So, when a hurricane warning came, all the ships were crammed into a small, wide-open harbour. The direction of the onshore wind meant they were all in danger of being trapped on a lee shore and potentially sunk in the harbour. However, because of the tense political situation, none were prepared to steam out to safer open water. Despite getting the hurricane warning two days in

¹ In strict meteorological terms, there are tropical cyclones in the central and southern Pacific Ocean and not hurricanes.

advance, all stayed at anchor in order to protect their national interests. Henry Pearson's letter to his wife² says that, despite warning Captain Kane, the skipper believed his powerful steamer could ride out the storm. *Calliope* prepared by taking down its masts and rigging on to the deck and getting its steam engines running. An horrendous hurricane soon came upon them, the wind blowing at more than 100 miles per hour. The plan of the harbour shows the situation: there was a narrow entrance faced by the hurricane winds blowing straight in, with surrounding reefs a continuous threat. After the hurricane set in, it was too late when the ships tried to leave. They had no choice since their anchors were no longer holding them in position against a tremendous sea. USS *Trenton* was the first to attempt to steam out but got no further than the tight harbour entrance before being blown back ashore and wrecked. Next the smaller German warship *Adler* was wrecked when it was blown ashore with many dead. Pearson described its fate: 'The next moment we saw her lifted bodily and thrown on her beam end, on top of the reef.'³



This is the point when HMS *Calliope* achieved international fame by escaping. In virtually zero visibility, due to rain, and realising that the ship's anchors were dragging, Captain Kane ordered full steam and the ship's engineer blocked off the boiler safety valves order to maximise power. Pearson, who was at the helm,⁴ vividly described when the *Calliope* struggled to get forward motion: 'For some minutes we did not make any headway, but I managed to keep her head to the sea and wind by working the helm from side to side.'⁵ The British cruiser squeezed past USS *Trenton* with a reef just 40 yards away. 'We expected every moment something would go, but everything held on and so we plugged on ...'⁶ and gradually the ship left the narrow harbour entrance at one knot and into the open sea. The *Calliope* had taken eight hours to travel two miles, but they were safe.

As they passed the stricken *Trenton*, its crew cheered the *Calliope*: 'a very generous act on their part as we could see they had lost their rudder and screw, and their fires

² "Hurricane In The Pacific", *Winchester Cathedral Record* 46 (1977), p. 20-22. It was Henry Pearson's granddaughter Mrs Hubert (Anne) Madge who shared Henry Pearson's letter with the *Record*. See Notes.

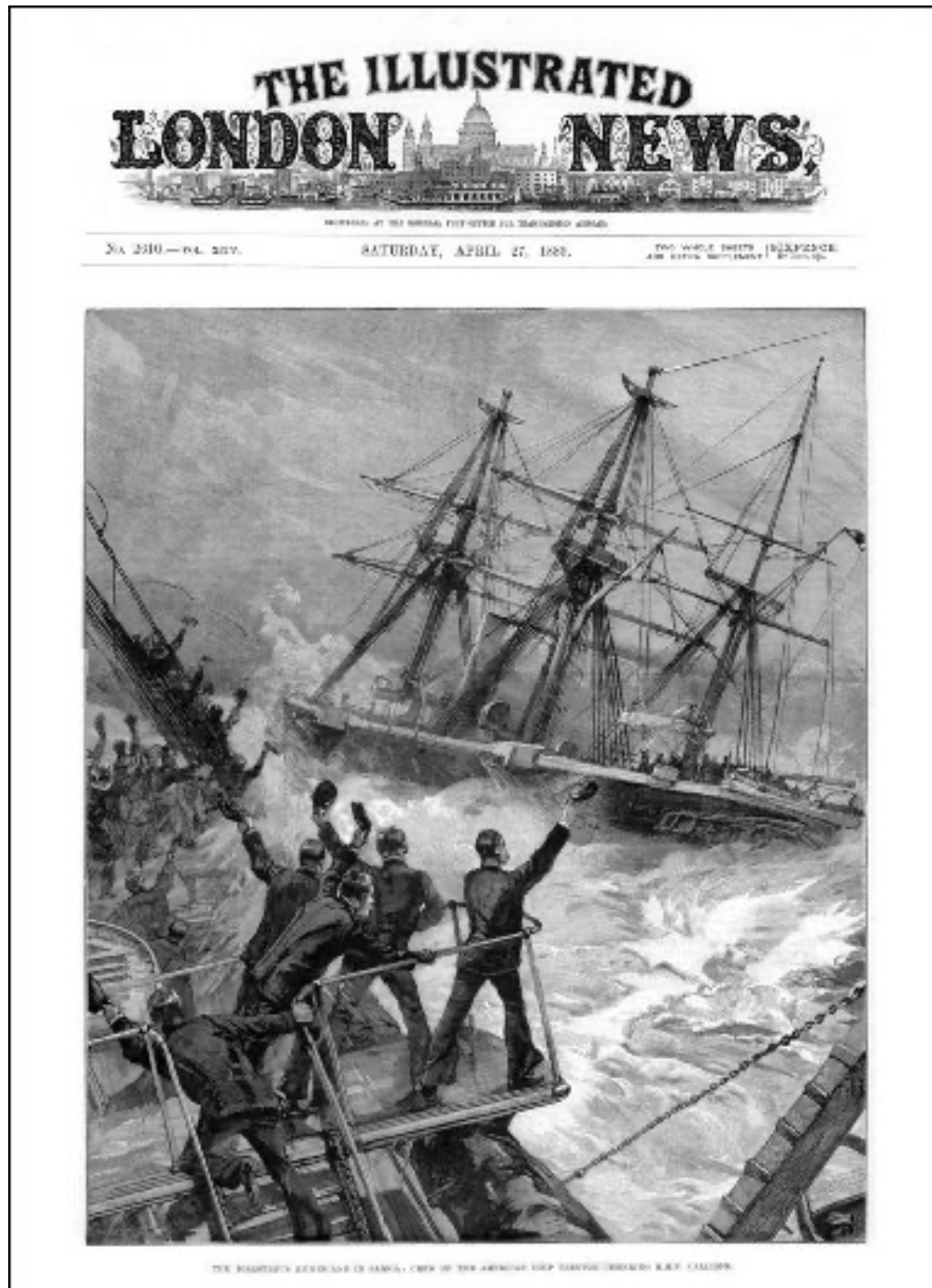
³ Henry Pearson, "Letter to J.O. Burgess, CMG", 9th April 1889, Unpublished.

⁴ "Captain H. Pearson, R.N." (obituary), *The Times*, August 18, 1936, p. 12

⁵ Pearson, *Letter to Burgess*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

had been put out by the seas flooding through her lower deck ...⁷ The *Trenton*'s act was celebrated on the cover on the *Illustrated London News* on April 27, 1889 (below).⁸ During the drama, Henry Pearson had been wearing pyjamas beneath his oilskin and seaboots. By the night of the escape, he was so worn by the ordeal that he 'dropped insensible from fatigue ... (and) slept like an Egyptian mummy'.⁹



⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ The *ILN* incorrectly shows the *Calliope* passing the *Trenton* on its starboard side, instead of port side.

⁹ *Ibid.*

After two days, when the wind reduced a little, *Calliope* returned to Apia to a scene of total devastation. The *Trenton*, USS *Vandalia*, *Adler* and another German ship, *Emden* and nine merchant ships were wrecked with the loss of 150 lives. Two others, *Nipsic* and *Olga*, had been run ashore on the only patch of sand in the harbour.

The stress upon all the seamen had been great. In Pearson's letter to his wife, he admits that it affected their apparently dauntless captain who, when he was about to address his crew on their return to Apia harbour 'burst out sobbing like a child for about a minute, and I think we were all unable to speak,' before recovering to make a strong speech to his crew and then 'bustled about as busy as ever, the same hard, unemotional man he always was.'¹⁰



No date has been found for this formal photograph of HMS *Calliope*'s officers and senior NCOs. However, the bearded Captain Kane can be identified in the centre of the seated row. His First Lieutenant is to his left, and Lieutenant Navigator is to his right. It may be that the Navigator is Henry Pearson and, if so, is the only photograph known of him.

Within days the cable telegraph made the saga into an international event. When *Calliope* returned to Sydney, she was greeted by a large flotilla of welcoming boats and ferries. The captain and his officers were interviewed for local and national

¹⁰ *Hurricane in the Pacific*, pp. 21-22.

newspapers and journalists filed glowing reports by telegram on Captain Kane's feat of leading the warship to safety while all around him failed. It was presented as a great Imperial triumph of national character, Christianity, seamanship and British engineering.

Henry Pearson who had advised his captain to get out to sea before the hurricane arrived, told him to get steam up in Apia harbour and had helmed the warship on its perilous escape received little credit for his role. In Kane's report which was published as a *Parliamentary Paper* on May 30, 1889, Pearson receives a minor 'special mention' and had 'assisted me much by his advice'. Captain Kane was later promoted to Admiral.

The *Calliope's* officers were a gilded group with eight of them, including midshipmen (the most junior officer rank), rising to great heights in the Royal Navy with two Admirals, two Vice Admirals and four Rear Admirals. Others, including Henry Pearson, retired as Captains. Even the ship's Royal Marine Lieutenant finished his career as a Major General. Having the Great Samoan Hurricane on service records clearly aided successful naval careers.

Celebration in print and online

Calliope's exploit was widely reported in Australia and New Zealand and was even the subject of an imperialist poem written by Australia's famous bush poet A.B. "Banjo" Paterson and published in 1897.¹¹ His *Ballad of the Calliope*¹² told the story of the ship's escape from Apia in rhyming verse, starting in the first stanza:



By the far Samoan shore,
Where the league-long rollers pour
All the wash of the Pacific on the coral-guarded bay,
Riding lightly at their ease,
In the calm of tropic seas,
The three great nations' warships at their anchors proudly lay.

The 15-stanza ballad goes on to refer to the 1884-launched warship as the 'old Calliope on which the flag of England flew'. It had enduring appeal and was included

¹¹ Paterson was actually a solicitor in Sydney and deeply involved in the city's literary and publishing life. He is credited with writing the lyrics of 'Waltzing Matilda'.

¹² A.B. "Banjo" Paterson, "The Ballad of the Calliope", first appeared in *The Antipodean*, 3 (Christmas 1897), pp. 102-104. The journal was edited by A.B. Paterson and George Essex Evans and published by Angus & Robertson.

in Paterson's second book of verse, *Rio Grande's Last Race and Other Verse* (1902). It also appeared for forty years or more in readings for Australian 13- and 14-year-old students and other anthologies of Paterson's work. As recently as 1961, *Great Seamen* written by Oliver Warner included a chapter on 'Captain Kane At Samoa' along with the exalted company of Francis Drake, Captain Cook, Admiral Nelson and Ernest Shackleton in its ten chapters.¹³ In 1989, Samoa issued a set of four stamps for the 100th anniversary of the Apia hurricane.

Pearson's Life and Career

Henry Pearson was born at Darjeeling in Bengal on 1st August 1852 where his father Francis was employed in the Bengal Civil Service. He entered the Royal Navy in 1866 as a cadet at HMS Britannia, moored at Dartmouth, and was promoted to Midshipman in early 1868. He rose to Lieutenant by 1877 when he undertook training as a Navigator. Between postings he married Caroline Blanche Harrison at Cottingham, near Kingston-Upon-Hull in 1880. The 1881 Census showed they were living in a lodging house in Portsmouth, where their daughter Edith Sybil was born that year.

In July 1886 Lieutenant Navigator Pearson was transferred to the Asia station in China to join the recently commissioned HMS *Calliope* which was soon transferred to the Australia station in Sydney. Pearson's service on the *Calliope*, although not mentioned in the Parliamentary Papers report, was highly rated by Captain Kane. His naval record¹⁴ includes these laudatory comments:

24 Mch 89 Captain Kane praises [Pearson] for conduct during the Great Samoan hurricane & states was much assisted by his advice

5 Jun 1889 ... was noted for most favourable consideration"

On his return from the *Calliope* posting, Pearson was promoted to Commander in 1890. However, by then, his personnel record included comments by commanders, including Captain Kane, that while Pearson was a navigator of very high standard his eyesight was very poor. A typical assessment, written in the terse naval style, was:

1st May 90 good navigator, very zealous and attentive, short-sighted which may impact his efficiency as a pilot.

A later captain was blunter and wrote in 1896 that 'owing to defective eyesight', Pearson would be 'most untrustworthy as a pilot'.

As a result of his sight problems, Pearson's career in the Navy ended on 1st August 1897, but he was promoted to Captain shortly before and retired on a pension of £355

¹³ Oliver Warner, *Great Seamen* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1961), 155-165.

¹⁴ Henry Pearson's service records can be found at The National Archives, ref: ADM 196/18/40 and 196/39/257.

a year. At some time in the 1890s, the Pearson family moved to 1 St James's Crescent in Winchester, which was to be Henry's home until his death. There is no evidence of a Winchester connection for the Pearsons, as neither had been born or raised in the area. In his *Hampshire Chronicle* obituary,¹⁵ the newspaper wrote that "he possibly settled in Winchester owing to the close relationship of his wife to Mr J.S. Furley".¹⁶ Henry's widowed father Francis had returned from Darjeeling to Ealing in west London. It was Caroline Pearson's address in the 1891 Census.

The 1901 Census recorded the household as being composed of Henry ("Retired Capt. RN") aged 48, Caroline (46), Edith (19) and two servants. Ten years later, the Census showed that Edith has left home. She married John G. Matthew of the Sudan Civil Service in Winchester in 1912. Caroline, known as Blanche, died in 1919 and Henry stayed on in the house whose address was changed to 4 St James's Lane shortly after World War I.

After his retirement from the Navy, Pearson was active in Winchester as a town councillor, a local leader of the (now Royal) British Legion and a regular attender at the Cathedral.¹⁷ He did not like having his picture taken, which was noted in his *Times* obituary,¹⁸ and may be the reason there is only one image which can be speculatively linked with him. He was an early member of the Friends of Winchester Cathedral, with his name listed in the first membership register published in third edition of *Winchester Cathedral Record* (1934).¹⁹ Henry Pearson died on the 17th of August 1936, aged 84, after a fall. The funeral was held at St Michael's Church and his ashes were interred in a family plot alongside his wife and daughter (No. 2969 in Block 40) in West Hill Cemetery directly across the road from his home. (See photograph)



Memorial tablet

In his will, Captain Pearson left £500 (equivalent of a modern £25,000) to the Cathedral for 'the upkeep of the fabric of Winchester Cathedral and the beautifying of

¹⁵ *Hampshire Chronicle*, 22nd August 1936, p. 9.

¹⁶ John Sampson Furley was a Winchester College housemaster (Chernocke's) from 1894 to 1909, and author of five books on history. He later became a local councillor and was Mayor of Winchester (1910-11). Furley was born in Hull in 1855 and may have known Mrs Blanche Pearson (née Harrison) whose family moved from Wisbech to Cottingham, near Hull, when she was young.

¹⁷ *Hampshire Chronicle*, 22nd August 1936, p. 9.

¹⁸ Pearson, *Times*, August 18, 1936: 'It was characteristic of him that he would never discuss the feat with strangers and that many times he refused to be photographed, although his story and experience were readily given to writers on sea topics'.

¹⁹ "Friends of Winchester Cathedral" (membership register), *Winchester Cathedral Record* 3 (1934), p.30.

the services.²⁰ The decision to install a memorial tablet for Captain Pearson was made by the Dean & Chapter meeting on 23rd February 1937: 'It was resolved that £450 be appropriated to the Heating and Lighting Account and that £50 be reserved for the Mariner's Chapel including the cost of a tablet to Captain Pearson.'²¹ However, there was little progress on the tablet until mid-1939, which coincided with the 50th anniversary of *HMS Calliope*'s feat. This was celebrated with an article in *The Times* on 16th March and a commemorative dinner, which included two surviving midshipmen from 1889 who had both reached flag rank. A privately published book, *The First Commission of HMS Calliope January 25th 1887 – April 30th 1890*, written by Captain E.W. (Kim) Swan appeared that year.

After a delay of two years, the Cathedral architect, Tom Atkinson, took up the task of preparing the memorial tablet and wrote to the Admiralty on 15th July 1939 seeking information on Pearson's role in *HMS Calliope*'s escape from Apia harbour. A reply on 25th July confirmed that he had been Navigating Lieutenant at the time and had been commended by his Captain for 'special mention'.²² Designed by Atkinson and made by Lawrence A. Turner of London in Portland (Cottonfield) stone, the tablet was unveiled and dedicated on a pillar in the North Transept rather than the Mariner's Chapel (now known as the Fisherman's Chapel) during the annual Cathedral Festival on 13th July 1940.

There was a final twist when Atkinson wrote shortly after, in anguish, to Turner with the news that the date of Pearson's death on the tablet was wrong, which Dean Selwyn had noticed. Atkinson wrote: 'This is a most horrible nuisance. What can we do?' Turner solved the problem by sending 'a man' who re-carved the numbers to the correct date of 17th August 1936. It was an excellent piece of work as the change is not visible.²³

Although Pearson was not a Wintonian, it was Winchester and the Cathedral which gave him the recognition that continues to this day.

Notes

HMS Calliope is now a Naval Reserve shore establishment (or 'stone frigate') at Gateshead on Tyneside. Until 1951, it was based in the hull of the 1884-built warship which was the third naval vessel of that name. Captain Swan, who wrote the 1939 book on its first commission, was the commanding officer of the establishment which was the drill ship of the Tyne Division of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve.

²⁰ The will of Henry Pearson dated 1932, HRO 5M62/55, p. 840.

²¹ Chapter meeting of 23rd February 1937, HRO CD/301 Winchester Cathedral Chapter book, 22nd March 1929 to 26 December 1939, p. 290-291. The Heating and Lighting Account was concerned with installing new electric lighting, in place of some gas lights, and replacing the toxic coke-fired heating system.

²² Atkinson papers, HRO DC/E7/1/44, and DC/E7/1/45.

²³ Atkinson papers, HRO, DC/E7/1/48.

Mrs Hubert Madge, née Anne Matthew and Henry Pearson's granddaughter, married Lieutenant-Colonel Hubert E. Madge in Winchester in 1948. He was a son of Canon Francis Madge, who was Cathedral Librarian for decades until his death in 1933. Canon Madge had conducted the funeral of Blanche Pearson in 1919. The Madges were long-standing members of the Friends until their deaths in 1987 (Hubert) and 1993 (Anne).

The *Calliope* story was particularly preserved in New Zealand as the ship's coal, which fueled its overloaded steam engine, had been sourced from Westport on South Island's west coast. In 1936, the ship's steering wheel was presented by the Admiralty to the Auckland War Memorial Museum and is now on display at the New Zealand Maritime Museum in Auckland.

There is a half-model of HMS *Calliope* in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich: <https://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/67093.html>.

Acknowledgment

The authors are very grateful for the assistance of the Cathedral Archivist, David Rymill of the Hampshire Record Office, in navigating the Cathedral archives and other local resources.

There is an extensive website about the Great Samoan Hurricane and HMS *Calliope*, established by Graham Hague, for which the authors are most grateful. It can be found at <http://www.grahamhague.com.samoanhurricane.shtml>.