

Sovereign Hill Education

A Safe Passage

Research Notes for Primary Schools

Phoebe Emmeline Macpherson sailed from Liverpool in 1853, with her family, bound for the rich goldfields of Ballarat, Australia. She was eleven years old. She was accompanied by her parents, four sisters and two brothers.

Phoebe and her older sister, Eliza Jane, were very excited as their vessel, "The Royal George", sailed past the crowded docks of the Mersey River and headed for the ocean. Their excitement however, soon turned to terrible sea-sickness, as they experienced the unfamiliar pitching and rolling of the wooden vessel. It was some days before they were able to take some salted pork, ship's biscuits and a little fresh water.

The captain had decided to follow the Great Circle Route to Melbourne, as this provided the fastest passage. It followed the arc of a circle and took his ship into very high latitudes (near Antarctica), where the winds blew strongly. It also, sometimes, took his vessel perilously close to dazzling icebergs.

Captain Finlay used his chronometer (a special clock) to measure the longitude of their position (east-west), but the latitude (north-south) was judged by the sun and the stars. Fortunately, Captain Finlay had safely brought three other shiploads of hopeful immigrants to the Antipodes (Australia) before, and he was a skilled mariner.

Sailing in the "Roaring 40's" (40 degrees south), they encountered enormous seas. The spars (timber masts and sail supports) howled like deep organ pipes. The boiling sea was covered with foam, spray filled the air and visibility was poor. Phoebe, Eliza and the other 324 passengers were confined below decks, with the hatches battened down. It was terribly crowded, the air was stale and filled with the perpetual crying of young children. Everyone was very frightened.

After seven days, the storm abated (calmed) and once again the families could take some fresh air on deck. But the long three months of the journey so far had taken their toll. Four young children and two babies had died and one seaman had been washed overboard in the storm. All had to be buried at sea – a sad and lonely sight!

Now that the weather had improved, some of the sailors had time to teach the young boys some of their hobbies. Rope fancy work was popular and so was intricate scrimshaw (carvings made on whale bone or teeth) and one "old salt" by the name of Dawson, had painted a beautiful design on the lid of his sea chest. Inside this sea chest, he had a small supply of sought after items – pocket knives, watch chains, buckles, needles and thimbles – which he was hoping to sell, for good profit, in Melbourne town.

Two weeks later, a cry of joy and relief was heard from the watch, as the light of Cape Otway was sighted in the distance. The weather was fair and the further journey to Melbourne was busy with packing and excitement once again. Now the journey to the goldfields would really begin – perhaps a fortune would be made!

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