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The Final Weeks of Service and Wreck of PS *Comet*, 1820

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PS *Comet*, Europe's first commercial steamship, launched in 1812, was rebuilt to new dimensions in 1819 with improved machinery, and wrecked in 1820. These facts are known, but not very much accurate detail exists about its wrecking. Many books and articles on the *Comet* repeat the same basic information, in some cases with minor variations and ambiguities which only cloud the issue. This article focuses on the last weeks of its service in December 1820, and examines the events leading up to its loss. It includes records not previously mentioned in any accounts; Saleuhan, previously thought to be Sallachan, has been correctly placed; and the maker of the replacement engine and boiler has been identified.

Key words: Henry Bell, *Comet*, rebuilding, groundings, Saleuhan/Salachan, Corpach, Craignish Point, wreck, steamship, Thomas Hardie

Europe's first commercial steamship, PS *Comet*, launched in 1812, was rebuilt to new dimensions in 1819 with improved machinery, and wrecked in 1820. These facts are known, but not very much accurate detail exists about its wrecking. Many books and articles on the *Comet* repeat the same basic information, in some cases with minor variations and ambiguities which only cloud the issue. This article focuses on the last weeks of its service in December 1820, and examines the events leading up to its loss.

There appear to be no first-hand accounts of *Comet*'s actual wrecking on Craignish Point, Argyll, on 15 December 1820; neither Henry Bell nor Captain Bain seem to have recorded the events. The minister of Craignish, Francis Stewart, just may have been an eyewitness, although his letter is open to interpretation. Four accounts are secondary at best, although that by Captain Bain's sister, Mrs Buchanan, is probably the most authoritative.¹ The suitably journalistic account in the *Glasgow Herald* of 22 December 1820 was copied piecemeal by other newspapers. William Thomson, Crinan Canal engineer at the time, wrote his account 20 years later, not always accurately.² And in old age John Robertson, builder of *Comet*'s first engine, was interviewed by John Buchanan in 1853.³ These four accounts appear to be the main source for all subsequent books and articles, often quoted with variations which require much research to trace and check the original source for accuracy. Although brief, reports of two earlier groundings in December shed new light on the causes of *Comet* breaking apart so rapidly.

Rebuilding and lengthening

Comet, built by Henry Bell in 1812 and only 43 feet long by 12 feet beam, was

¹ *The Christian Leader*, 12 Oct. 1882.

² Morris, *The Life of Henry Bell*, 153–8.

³ National Library of Scotland: NLS Ms. 2645, 'Notes of a Conversation by John Buchanan with John Robertson' (1853).

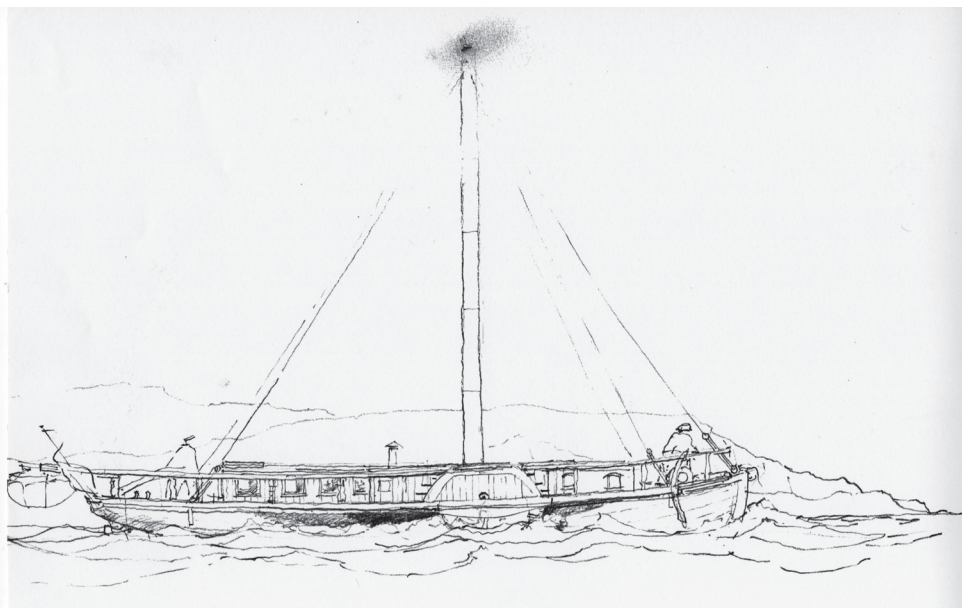


Figure 1 Reconstruction of 'Comet' after the 1819 rebuild, drawn by David Graham based on the work of the late Donald Watson (Watson, 'From "Comet" to "Caledonia"', 42-4)

Europe's first practical steamship. It had an engine of 3-Nominal Horse Power (NHP)⁴ built for workshop use and a boiler that was only made watertight by horse dung. It was the forerunner of a shipping revolution, but the pioneering Bell was under-capitalized and *Comet* was too small and underpowered to compete with the larger, more powerful vessels which rapidly followed. In 1812 only *Comet* was operating; by 1819 there were 25 steamships on the Clyde, so Bell sought to open up a new route with no competition. With his usual enthusiasm he envisaged a new Hebridean service, initially from Glasgow to Fort William and later to Stornoway, in the Outer Hebrides. But for these more open waters he would need a larger, more powerful vessel.

From late 1818 until mid-August 1819 *Comet* was on the beach at Helensburgh, where it was rebuilt to new dimensions (figure 1).⁵

Comet was lengthened about the year 1818. Mr. Taylor informs us that this operation was performed at Helensburgh on the beach west of the Baths Hotel, the chief carpenter being certain James Nicol from Cartsdyke, who acted under Bell's own superintendence.⁶

The Greenock Advertiser of 8 December 1864 opined that

4 NHP was an early estimate of power developed by James Watt, calculated from the cylinder bore and the speed of the piston. It bore no relation to the actual power produced.

5 Certificate of Registry, 10 Feb. 1820, 'said vessel having been altered and rebuilt.' And see Lavery, 'The Rebuilding of British Warships', 5; Bellamy, 'Unravelling the Mystery of the *Comet* Engines'.

6 *The Christian Leader*, 12 Oct. 1882, 644. Robert Taylor was clerk to Henry Bell.

... it is proper to state that there were three vessels of the name on the Clyde – 1st, Bell's *Comet*, afterwards dismantled; 2nd, the boat lost on the 20th October,⁷ 1820, by striking on a sunken rock on the point of Craignish; and 3rd, the unfortunate vessel which in 1825 was run down by the Ayr steamer.⁸

Comet was probably not dismantled per se, for Bell was always short of cash and there are no other contemporary accounts of dismantling, only lengthening. Later reports stated *Comet* broke in two at the point where it had been lengthened, which was by 30 feet 4 inches.⁹ From the lines of the original 1812 design drawn by its builder John Wood, it was probably split somewhere near the original aft engine room bulkhead, i.e. before the planking began to rise to the stern. The 1819 machinery space is recorded as 24 feet, making the new forward and aft saloons about 21 feet long each.

It was certainly rebuilt, as it was lengthened from 43 to nearly 74 feet, and its depth in the hold increased from 5 feet 9 inches to 7 feet, necessary to accommodate the larger boiler and engine. This was not an unusual practice as many of the first generation of steamships seem to have been found to require extra length, although whether for additional capacity or to improve seaworthiness is not always clear.¹⁰ In *Comet*'s case, its lengthening and rebuilding were for both these reasons.

The engine power was increased from 4 to 14 NHP and its draught subsequently increased by at least a foot in part due to the heavier machinery.¹¹ John Robertson stated his original engine was replaced by one of 6 NHP, but he was mistaken. *Comet* was rebuilt specifically for the Glasgow–Fort William run, where a 6-NHP engine would be totally unable to cope with the seas and currents found in the less sheltered waters outside the Clyde. In 1820 an engine of 14 NHP is recorded and it can now be said with confidence that it was built by Thomas Hardie at the works of Anderson, Caird & Co. in Arthur Street, Crawforddsyke (now Cartsydyke), who also made the boiler.¹²

Following its rebuild *Comet* was required by the 1786 Shipping and Navigation Act to have a new Certificate of Registration.¹³ This was granted on 10 February 1820 with the following dimensions.

Length	73 feet 10 inches
Depth	7 feet
Draught	5 feet
Breadth	11 feet 6 inches (with paddle boxes, 15 feet 2 inches.)
Tonnage	29 ⁷⁹ / ₉₄
Engine	14 HP

⁷ In fact 15 December 1820.

⁸ *Greenock Advertiser*, 8 Dec. 1864. This was *Comet II*.

⁹ Certificate of Registry, 10 Feb. 1820.

¹⁰ Bain, 'Employment of the Steamship', 201.

¹¹ 14 NHP is about 30 BHP.

¹² Lumsden, *The Steam Boat Companion*, vi. Cleland, *The Rise and Progress of the City of Glasgow*, 240. See especially Williamson, *Memorials of James Watt*, 228. I am most grateful to Dr Martin Bellamy for this reference.

¹³ *Comet*'s 1813 Certificate of Registry was 'delivered up and cancelled on account of an increase in the dimensions and Tonnage arising from the said vessel having been altered and rebuilt'.

Effectively, *Comet* was a new ship, with a probable speed of 6.5 knots, but William Thomson, Crinan Canal Engineer, was rather dismissive of Bell and his rebuilt *Comet*, commenting, 'Mr Bell made his appearance with his *Comet* under the best repair she was capable of, and with such improvements as the engine and machinery would admit of.'¹⁴

Glasgow–Fort William service

This larger and more powerful *Comet* commenced its new Glasgow to Fort William service on 6 September 1819, sailing from Glasgow on Thursdays and from Fort William the following Monday. By December passengers were too few and the weather so bad that the service was suspended for the winter after its arrival at the Broomielaw in Glasgow on 15 December. As Bell wrote to Sir Hugh McInnes on 23 December,

she only came in to the broomlaw on Wednesday last bein the last trip for this sasson as their was not passangers going to pay her expenses – and as this is a sasson that in general is very stormy weather.¹⁵

On 31 August 1819 Bell had advertised *Comet*'s new Glasgow–Fort William service in the *Glasgow Courier*, stating that 'he intends to dispose of a number of shares in the said steam boat.' No doubt the rebuild had drained Bell's account, for he continued to sell shares in the vessel; to be legal this required annotation on the Certificate of Registry, done the following day, 11 February. The certificate shows a mixture of new shareholders, largely West Highland landowners, but including a few merchants and a surgeon from Fort William; a family from East Kilbride; a widow; Captain Bain with one share; and Henry Bell retaining ten shares. The 36 shares were at a nominal value of £50 each, although Bell often gave a discount as inducement to buy.¹⁶ A committee was formed from the shareholders to administer The Comet Steam Ship Company, commencing from 1 January 1821, with Bell as Superintendent, or manager. On 24 November 1820 Bell sold his last remaining shares in *Comet*, no longer having any financial stake in the vessel.

Comet commenced the 1820 season on 31 March with a crew of seven under Captain Robert Bain, on 30 shillings per week all the year round. As well as an engineer, fireman, pilot, carpenter and steward there was 'Donald McDougall, piper; 'six shillings a week and his meat'.¹⁷

The new route to Fort William called at many intermediate places, including Greenock, Gourock, Rothesay, Tarbert and Ardrishaig on the Clyde, then Crinan, Easdale, Oban, Port Appin and Fort William. There were also 'request' stops, for an additional fee. With no competition *Comet* made a handsome profit,

up to the 4th December of that year the traffic receipts amounted to upwards of £1,900, the expenditure being short of this sum by about £640. Had the *Comet* lived the shareholders would have received good dividends. As it was, however, the profits referred to must have been more than swallowed up by the efforts

¹⁴ Morris, *Life of Henry Bell*, 155.

¹⁵ Osborne, *The Ingenious Mr Bell*, 148.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 162; Ransom, *Bell's Comet*, 89.

¹⁷ Osborne, *The Comet and Her Creators*, 44.

made to save the vessel after she went ashore at Craignish Point.¹⁸

A dividend of 37 per cent was declared in November, but whether it was paid is unclear as 'Bell's finance required quite as much engineering as his steamboat'.¹⁹ In lieu of cash one shareholder, Captain Stewart, received his dividend to his credit as part payment of a new share.

As superintendent of the Comet Steam Ship Company, Bell wasted no time in advertising that 'The success of the *Comet* steam boat, between Glasgow and Fort William, has been such as to induce a resolution on the part of the owners to set another steamboat on foot.'²⁰ All too soon, however, the successful summer season was over. Revised winter sailings were advertised in the *Inverness Courier* on 19 October 1820, 'During the Winter Season . . . the *Comet* will sail from Glasgow to Fort William; and will return to Glasgow, from Fort William, on the following Monday'. But in December, a series of disasters struck.

Groundings

On Monday 4 December 1820 *Comet* sailed from Glasgow on its normal winter fortnightly run; on board were 41 passengers, although not all were bound for Fort William. *Comet* probably spent that night at Tarbert, transiting the Crinan Canal the next day and with Tuesday night at Crinan. After stops at Luing and Easdale, *Comet* would have arrived in Oban about noon on Wednesday 6 December.²¹ After calling at Lismore and Port Appin the next stage to Fort William would normally be about four hours, but as the *Inverness Courier* later reported,

We are sorry to learn that the *Comet* Steam Boat, on her voyage to Fort William the week before last [i.e. the night of 6/7 December], was drifted on the shoals near Ardgour, where she lay during the night, making so much water that it was necessary to keep the pump constantly going. As soon the day dawned every effort was made to land the passengers, which was happily accomplished.²²

A slightly different account was based on conversations with Mrs Buchanan, Captain Bain's sister. She was his junior by 13 years, and often sailed with him on the Clyde in *Comet*.

It was in the month of November, 1820 [it was December] late enough in the year for such a tiny vessel that the *Comet* set out on her last voyage to Fort-William. As they were approaching their destination, a fog encircled them, and the *Comet* struck upon a rock. They got her off, however, a leak being the result of the mishap. They reached Fort-William in safety about the 4th of December [In fact, on the 7th]. Captain Bain advised Bell to lay her up at Corpach for the winter, and get her thoroughly repaired, but Bell resolved to return with her to the Clyde, and being very pertinacious he stuck to his resolution come what

¹⁸ *The Christian Leader*, 12 Oct. 1882.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9 Nov. 1882.

²⁰ *Caledonian Mercury* 16 Oct. 1820.

²¹ Assuming a speed 6.5 knots and a daylight length of 7½ hours. All tidal and celestial information from UKHO EasyTide.

²² *Inverness Courier*, 28 Dec. 1820, three weeks after the event.



Figure 2 The shoals of Inverscadle Bay, Ardour (Admiralty Chart 1426, 1865, courtesy UK Hydrographic Office)

might. So the leak was patched up.²³

This account suggests *Comet* struck an isolated rock and seems to be the basis for all subsequent reports of it striking a rock, or two rocks, although none reference the actual source.

Mrs Buchanan was interviewed in her eighties, over 65 years after an event at which she was not present, so it is understandable that she may be mistaken over the actual sequence of events, as she was with the month and date, for the loch fairway is clear of dangers, other than close inshore. However, on entering fog a prudent mariner would reduce speed or stop; considering these two accounts together, it is most likely that the pilot, James Rowan, did just this, and *Comet* was then 'drifted onto shoals'. The shore of Inverscadle Bay largely dries out and is littered with small boulders, so that on grounding it was indeed 'struck upon a rock', thus springing a leak and spending the night of 6/7 December aground, as reported in the *Inverness Courier* (figure 2).

Comet probably floated off at high water about 06.30 on Thursday 7 December and sailed for Fort William at first light. It would have arrived before noon and landed its passengers before anchoring off Fort William. However, in the early hours of Friday 8 December, it was reported that

The *Comet* steam boat which plies betwixt Fort-William and Glasgow, met with an accident on Friday last, while at anchor at Fort-William, by being driven from her anchorage, in a violent gale of wind, to a bank some distance, where she received some damage in her bottom.²⁴

Admiralty chart 1426, Loch Eil, surveyed in 1841, marks an anchorage off Fort William. Studying the charts and with references in *Comet's* account book to

²³ *The Christian Leader*, 12 Oct. 1882.

²⁴ *Inverness Courier*, 14 Dec. 1820.

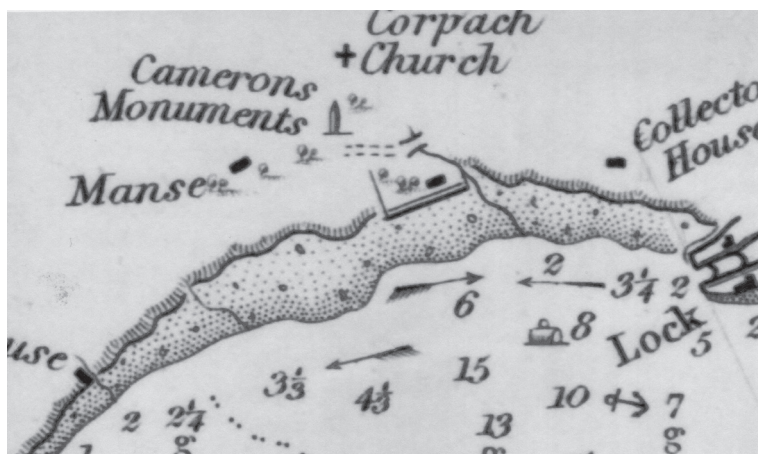


Figure 3 Corpach saltwater mudflats, Saleuhan (Admiralty Chart 1426, 1865, courtesy UK Hydrographic Office)

Corpach, it is probable that *Comet* went ashore at high water just west of the Caledonian Canal lock.

Saleuhan/Corpach

Captain Bain's records survived the subsequent wreck and the account book for *Comet* was later written up for 1820 when all the information was available.²⁵ In the account book is an entry for 8 December, 'pd 7 men 1 day at Saleuhan – 17 6'.²⁶

Saleuhan has previously been taken to be Sallachan, whose Point and Bay lie in Ardgour, 2 miles south of Corran Narrows, but from simple geography this cannot be so. This misinterpretation appears to stem from an article in 1882, where the author, who saw the account book, misread Saleuhan as Salachan and wrote, 'Salachan is the promontory near the entrance to Lochiel, a few miles from Corran Ferry.'²⁷ This misreading of Saleuhan and subsequent misidentification as Sallachan Point is usually quoted as fact, leading to confusion surrounding the actual events.

There is no Saleuhan on any map, old or new, but after extensive consultation I believe the entry is a phonetic transcription of the Gaelic word *Sàl-lathachan*, (salt water mudflats), which lie below Corpach church. The 25-inch Ordnance Survey map of 1892 shows two saltings, one each side of the Church, and local residents confirm that 'below the church the shore is mud and sand' (figure 3).²⁸ Brigadier John Macfarlane, a native Gaelic speaker, tells me that: Phonetically, *Sàl-lathachan* is sa L La. n where a Gaelic thick L precedes or follows a broad vowel; if pronounced quickly by a local it could sound like Saleuhan.²⁹ This is what Captain Bain duly recorded.

²⁵ Possibly by Captain Bain but more likely by Robert Taylor, Bell's clerk. Glasgow Museums, T.2006.5, *Comet Account Book 1820*; McOwat, 'Henry Bell's *Comet*'.

²⁶ Glasgow Museums, T.2006.5, *Comet Account Book 1820*, entry for 8 Dec.

²⁷ *The Christian Leader*, 9 Nov. 1882. Lochiel at this date was considered to run from Corran Ferry north to Fort William then west to include the present Loch Eil.

²⁸ Paul and Joy Biggin, pers. comm.

²⁹ Brigadier John Macfarlane, pers. comm.

All the evidence points to *Comet* being aground at Corpach, somewhere below the Manse or Church. Captain Bain and his crew made strenuous efforts to assemble the men and materials necessary for a salvage attempt as his accounts show.

	£	s	d
Dec 8 pd 7 men 1 day at Saleuhan	—	17	6
Dec 11 Boat from Fwilliam to Corpach	—	3	—
Expende of Landing Materials at Corran from the <i>Glenaladale</i> ³⁰	—	5	—

A later, undated, entry explains the 11 December entry.³¹

	£	s	d
Paid for taking up wood barrels etc, from Corran to Fwm & Corpach	1	1	—

This relatively high sum implies a considerable amount of materials, and the barrels may have been secured at low water by ropes under the hull to increase the ship's buoyancy when the tide rose. The fact that the materials were taken to Corpach further indicates *Comet* was aground near there.

		£	s	d
12th	19 men 3 tides Docking & (etc.)	7	2	6
		(i.e. 2s. 6d./tide)		
	4 [men] 2 tides, 2 per tide	1	—	—
	6 [men] 8 tides	6	—	—
13th	4 [men] 1 tide	—	10	—
	for Mending a Boat Employed	—	5	—

From the large number of men employed and the entry of 'Docking &' I suspect they were digging a channel to refloat *Comet*, probably achieved on the 13th or 14th. The Caledonian Canal was nearing completion, so maybe they were able to employ navvies.³² From tidal data *Comet* refloated either about noon on the 13th or, at the latest, on the 00.10 high tide of Thursday 14th, for it sailed for Oban that day, after nearly a week aground. Captain Bell's sister stated that her brother had urged Bell to lay up at Corpach for the winter to get her thoroughly repaired, but Bell, 'being very pertinacious he stuck to his resolution come what might' and insisted they return to the Clyde.³³ There was a competent shipyard at Corpach, as the *Glenaladale* sloop, at over twice *Comet*'s displacement, had been built there in 1813. No doubt Bell would later regret having ignored Captain Bain's advice and his own decision, probably taken as he was due to hand over the ship on 1 January 1821 to The Comet Steamship Company.

Comet was clearly not seaworthy, for in Oban four men were employed pumping overnight on 14/15 December. The next morning a pump-maker had to be employed

³⁰ The *Glenaladale* sloop of 75 tons, built 1813 'at Corpac' (sic), wrecked Co. Clare 1823. *Liverpool Mercury* 19 Dec. 1823.

³¹ Glasgow Museums, T.2006.5, *Comet Account Book* 1820, p.66.

³² Opened fully in 1822; *Comet II* was the first steamship through from sea to sea, Captain Bain in command.

³³ *The Christian Leader*, 9 Nov. 1882.

for repairs, probably taking some hours.³⁴

		£	s	d
15th	4 men 1 night pumping Oban	—	10	—
	Pumpmaker	—	4	—
	7 Barrels Coals	—	14	—

Unknown to Bell, disaster was hours away.

Wrecking

Comet sailed from Oban on Friday 15 December, but we do not know exactly when. Sunset that day was at 15.45; at 6.5 knots it is nearly four hours sailing to the Crinan Canal, so a prudent mariner would have sailed before noon to ensure arrival at Crinan before nightfall and closure of the canal. High water at Oban was at 14.20, so maybe Captain Bain delayed sailing to catch the ebb tide; maybe he was making more repairs, or maybe Henry Bell was busy ashore drumming up support, and money, for the larger new vessel soon to be built. In all probability repairs to the pump took longer than expected, which, in addition to embarking coal, delayed their departure. Whatever the reason, *Comet* was delayed.

The wind was strong and from the east/south-east as *Comet* caught the ebb tide south and headed for Crinan and the Clyde. So it was well into dusk when it entered the Dorus Mor at 16.30, three miles short of Crinan and safety. It was four days before full moon, so even if there was cloud cover it would not have been totally dark, and the outlines of land and the islands would have been visible.³⁵

The ebb was running at about 6 knots when *Comet* turned to pass through the Dorus Mor and met the full south-east wind, gusting to gale. We know it was leaking badly, so maybe its bilges were full and it was slow to answer the helm when hit by the wind, but whatever the circumstances, it ran aground. Although written over six decades after the event, an article based on conversations with Mrs Buchanan, Captain Bain's sister, probably gives the most accurate reason.

... and they started for the Crinan Canal, which, doubtless, they would have reached safely enough had the weather proved propitious. As they approached Craignish Point, a blinding snowstorm with accompanying mist came on in the midst of which the *Comet* went ashore. There were no passengers, Bell himself being reckoned one of themselves. He was lame, and great difficulty was experienced in getting him safely ashore. Mrs. Buchanan tells us that Captain Bain lost all he had, except one little box containing a change of clothes.³⁶

News of the accident reached Glasgow several days later and on Friday 22 December 1820, the *Glasgow Herald* reported the event.

We are sorry to state, that the *Comet* Steam-boat on Friday last, on her way home from Fort-William to Glasgow, at half-past four in the afternoon, while passing through Dorishmore, at the point of Craignish Rock, was struck with a strong gust of wind, which laid her on her beam-ends: and in ten minutes, owing

³⁴ Glasgow Museums, T.2006.5, *Comet* Account Book 1820, p.67.

³⁵ On 15 December 2018, with % cloud cover, it was not fully dark until 17.00.

³⁶ *The Christian Leader*, 12 Oct. 1882.

to the great current of tide and high seas and wind, was laid broad-side on the rocks . . . On Saturday morning she was a complete wreck.

With its paddle boxes it is unlikely *Comet* was actually laid on its beam ends, and it is more likely that it ran aground bow first, not broadside. This is corroborated by evidence from the minister at Craignish, Francis Stewart.³⁷ Although it is unclear if he actually witnessed the wrecking, he wrote a letter in the spring of 1821 describing the events, indicating that he was certainly there shortly thereafter.

On a day of chill rain, with some threat of Snow, the Wind being East by South-East. I happened to be visiting certain of my people who dwell by the sea coast, where the 'Steam Boat' can be observed to pass by the Dorus Mor, or 'Door' in the English, on the way south to the Haven at Crinan. The tides at this place being at all times Strong were on this day exceeding in Strength; and, the Wind making South-East and blowing almost a Gale, the Boat was sore tried in the passage of the narrow channel between the Point of Craignish and Islet lying off it. Thus the Mariners in their Pride putting their trust not in the Winds Of Heaven but in Fire and Smoke and such Devices, were taken in the Whirl Of Waters and their Craft dashed violently upon the rocks on the Point of Craignish. In the Divine Mercy the Men escaped safe to land; but, being battered by the seas, their boat broke in sunder, part drifting out to be engulfed the Whirlpool and the forepart remaining fast upon the rocks.³⁸

William Thomson, Crinan Canal engineer at the time, provides further confirmation in an account written some time after the event.

. . . the weather being then very unfavourable for a boat of such limited power as the old *Comet* was; yet making a favourable passage till entering the Dorus More, and rounding the point head of Craignish, she was met by a strong easterly wind, from which she had been previously comparatively sheltered, by which, and a rapid current which prevails there, her head was forced about towards the land, and her bow run ashore between the rocks, which fortunately admitted Mr. Bell and his companions to get safe ashore. The boat soon after parting in two, the after part floating towards the gulph of Corryvreckain, and the bow resting where the accident occurred, from which part of the machinery was afterwards recovered.³⁹

The author sailed these waters for many years and ran a boat of similar length to *Comet*. As a seaman and navigator, the author has considered most carefully all of the accounts, together with the weather, tides and currents on the day. Two comments are the most pertinent. William Thomson, Crinan Canal engineer at the time, wrote that 'rounding the point head of Craignish, she was met by a strong easterly wind, from which she had been previously comparatively sheltered'. From the north there are two courses into the Dorus Mor with leading lines to avoid the rocks (figure 4). Thomson's comment indicates *Comet* had followed the easterly one, gaining shelter from Craignish Peninsula. One very familiar with these waters wrote that

37 *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*, vol. 4, 1923, 3.

38 Letter written in the spring of 1821, reproduced in the *Glasgow Herald*, 31 Aug. 1912.

39 Morris, *Life of Henry Bell*, 153-8.

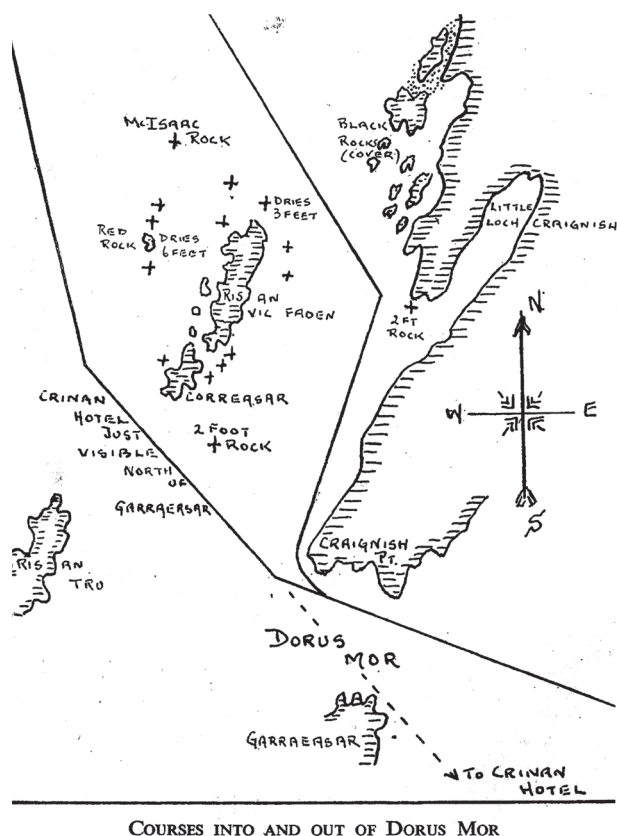


Figure 4 Course into and out of Dorus Mor (Courtesy of the Clyde Cruising Club Sailing Directions, 1960)

The ebb flows through the *Dorus Mor* in a huge S bend coming off Craignish Point straight south for about halfway across before it turns east and then across the mouth of Loch Craignish. In a strong easterly on an ebb tide there would be substantial turbulence just off *Rudha Nan Traigh* and I would be tempted to turn east inside it as soon as possible after the point. There is a bit of a shelf, but not a lot, before deep enough water.⁴⁰

Captain Bain's sister provides the most likely reason for the grounding. 'As they approached Craignish Point, a blinding snowstorm with accompanying mist came on in the midst of which the *Comet* went ashore'. Approaching from the north-east, Captain Bain would need to turn east south-east to pass through the *Dorus Mor*, passing close to land in order to avoid the overfalls in mid-channel. Blinded by the snowstorm off Craignish Point, he turned too soon and hit the western extremity, *Rudha na Traigh*. A key factor in the grounding was most likely the poor steering characteristics of these early steamers, with both paddles attached to the one engine with no differential gearing. They had a tendency to want to go straight on and Captain Bain would have found his little low-powered ship virtually uncontrollable in these conditions.

⁴⁰ Mike Murray, Crinan, pers. comm.

Comet would not have grounded in total darkness, albeit night was swift in coming. It was under power when it struck, and with the bow firmly aground and the stern unsupported by a rapidly falling neap tide, the ship soon broke in two:

She had been lengthened in the interval of her first starting, at Helensburgh. The operation was clumsily performed, and, on her going ashore on the occasion referred to, the old part speedily separated from the new, and she became a total wreck.⁴¹

There is no doubt that *Comet's* hull was weakened by the two groundings at Ardgour and Corpach, and split in two at the point where it had been lengthened. The forward part with the machinery remained wedged on the rocks, while the after part floated off towards the Corryvreckan. Boats were later hired to search for the aft section, but no trace was found, and it is likely it sunk soon after floating off.

Salvage

It was a mile to the nearest farm and several miles to the hamlet of Ardfarn. At such an isolated spot it took time to hire boats and local men, but for silver and generous amounts of whisky they were found. The men of Craignish and Crinan must have felt thankful for the wreck.

Comet was wrecked on Friday, 15 December. By Tuesday a salvage team had been assembled, and the account book records the work as follows.⁴²

		£	s	d
19th	4 men 3 days at Craignish from Crinan with a boat	1	10	—
21st	Hire of a Boat from Craignish to Luing to look			
	after wreck	—	5	—
	whisky to boatmen	—	2	—
22nd	Boat from Luing to Scarba & Craignish	—	7	6
	Whisky to ditto	—	3	—
25th	Two Large Boats 3 days trying to get up Engine &c	6	—	—
	paid Jas Campbell for himself & small boat 5 days	1	4	—
	Paid Donald Brown for spars & 6 days	1	—	—
	Charles Maclean for 5 days	—	13	6
	Alex. Campbell for 4 days	—	10	—
	Dugald Campbell for 4 days	—	10	—
	Donald McLardy for 8 days	1	—	—
	4 men from Kirkton 3 tides	1	10	—
	3 men from Airdes & 3 Crinan	2	5	—
	Whisky from 15th to 25th December to people			
	employed at Craignish	5	18	6

At 7 shillings per gallon this equates to 17 gallons of whisky, for 20 men over ten days, about five bottles per man.⁴³ Given they were working in a cold Argyll winter, in water much of the time, and trying to salvage an engine of roughly three tons, this

⁴¹ Williamson, *Memorials of James Watt*, 234.

⁴² Glasgow Museums, T.2006.5, *Comet Account Book* 1820.

⁴³ *Blackwoods Magazine*, Dec. 1820.

does not seem that unreasonable. But one account commented:

The West Highland boatmen, it would appear, had, like their boats, a good carrying capacity . . . suggestive either of the magnitude of the undertaking, of the severity of the weather, of the aforesaid carrying capacity of the men employed, or of all three.⁴⁴

The minister of Craignish, Francis Stewart, gave an eyewitness account of Bell's endeavours.

He spoke much of the salving of the machine left stuck on the Point at Craignish, and I took boat and voyaged with him to look upon the same, but the chance of salvation is small should one of our South-Westerly gales spring up on a day of Spring tides.⁴⁵

Salvage attempts went on until the bow section slid into deeper water on 25 December, probably lifted by the winds and spring tide as predicted by the minister, and all further work was abandoned. A small amount of machinery may have been saved to be reused, but given the isolation of the wreck site this seems very unlikely. However, the ship's bell and compass were saved, and are now on display at the Riverside Museum, Glasgow.

Henry Bell wrote in 1824 that

The *Comet* was lost in the 1820, December the 15, at the mouth of the grate Dallishmore, on the west coast of Scotland, hands and passengers all saved, . . . and . . . I gatt my third steam boat burnt down to the watter ege . . . which non of the two were insured, therefore my loss was upwards of £3,000, besides I was brought to a grate loss in open up all the difrent grounds single-handed without.⁴⁶

If Bell is to be believed, *Comet* was not insured, but he was then lobbying hard for a government pension, being ill and hard up. Whether Bell or the Comet Steamship Company bore the loss is unclear, although one account thinks it was the latter.

So perished the *Comet*, amidst copious libations of Highland liquor, and doubtless many an oburgation in the Highland tongue. So perished the *Comet*, and with it the hopes of Bell. He was just beginning to reap the fruit of his experiment when it withered before his eyes. So too perished the investments of its shareholders who had never received a penny of dividend, and one of whom can recall today, with a smile, the loss of his early savings on the first steamboat.⁴⁷

Search for the wreck

The recorded wreck site of *Comet* is off Rubh' an Lionaidh, the south-east tip of the Craignish Peninsula, but given the evidence above it is more likely off Rubha na Traighe, the south-west tip. In 2018 a small group of us in Argyll tried to locate the

⁴⁴ *The Christian Leader*, 16 Nov. 1882.

⁴⁵ *Glasgow Herald*, 31 Aug. 1912.

⁴⁶ Letter in 1824 from Henry Bell to a Birmingham newspaper reprinted in *The Engineer*, 332, 11 May 1877.

⁴⁷ *The Christian Leader*, 16 Nov. 1882.

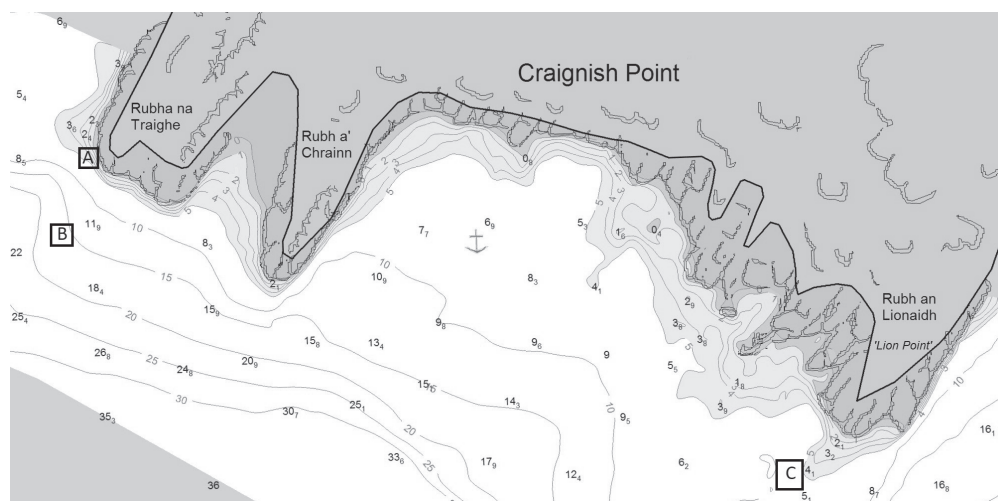


Figure 5 Antares chart of the *Dorus Mor*. A is the possible point of grounding, B is where the flywheel was lifted and C is the recorded wreck site. (UKHO and CANMORE: $56^{\circ}07'44''\text{N}$, $005^{\circ}36'24''\text{W}$)

wreck by side-scan sonar and proton magnetometer surveys; these produced one contact, albeit several hundred metres from the recorded wreck site. Dives in the strong currents encountered man-sized boulders with dense kelp growth but found no wreck. However, Dougie Yuill, a local creel fisherman, later pinpointed the spot where, 15 years ago, he had snagged and brought to the surface an old flywheel about 6 feet in diameter (figure 5). He was well read on the *Comet* story but unfortunately his rope broke before he could get it inboard. He had also recovered an old anchor near that spot, consistent with it breaking loose as *Comet* slid down the steep slope. Although the wreck has not yet been located, further attempts are anticipated.

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Tony Dalton has been involved with the sea since the age of 13. He was a navigating officer in the Royal Navy; a pioneer marine fish farmer in Argyll; and ran cruises to the Hebrides. The onset of motor neurone disease 30 years ago gave him time for research and writing.

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