

Interpretive by BALCLUTHA's
panel standard compass —

F181-1

The Standard Compass was the master compass aboard ship and was located as far as possible from the steel deckhouse and other magnetic attractions which might affect its accuracy. Errors in the steering compass (located further aft, just in front of the steering wheel) were carefully checked against this, the Standard Compass, every time the course was changed.

Mounting a pivoted magnetic needle in a compass bowl was a European invention of the 13th Century, followed in the next few centuries by mounting the needle on a swinging card. (The Chinese had been using a primitive lodestone compass for a century prior to the appearance of the improved European instrument).

These first compasses were often in error, and over the centuries increasing use of iron in ship construction made these early instruments even more erratic. It was not until the decade before BALCLUTHA was built that Sir William Thomson, later Lord Kelvin, found a way to compensate for these errors. The frugal Scotch shipowners of BALCLUTHA's day did not immediately take advantage of Sir William's improved compass, as evidenced by the remarks of a retired ship master:

"The compass of my first three square riggers, the ASHMORE, the DEE, and the FALLS OF GARRY showed errors, not merely in degrees, but in points, and, in the last named vessel, during a magnetic storm in southerly latitudes the compass needle did not point any particular direction worth mentioning, certainly not to magnetic north."

so

"A good standard compass was unusual in those days that in December of 1905, in Freemantle, I made a special visit to the beautiful four masted barque QUEEN MARGARET to see and admire a real Sir William Thomson's compass which one of her apprentices had been blowing about..."

