

## Aabshar-e-ilm Tutoring Agency - FREE ENGLISH NOTES

### BIRKENHEAD DRILL

**The Birkenhead:** The Birkenhead was a troopship. It carried troops across the seas.

**The Voyage:** In February 1851, more than a hundred years ago, it happened to be sailing to Cape Town in South Africa. It was carrying soldiers and their families on board. The voyage had been uneventful so far; the sea was calm as it was sound asleep.

**The Passengers:** There were 630 passengers on the ship. Of these, 460 were soldiers and 170 were women and children. The soldiers were young and inexperienced. So were the few officers. Needless to say, they were not used to facing dangers.

**The Hidden Rock:** An unknown rock lay hidden under the sea, forty miles from Cape Town. It was like a wild creature of the ocean, lying in wait for its prey.

**The Prey:** The prey was the troopship Birkenhead. It was approaching fast. It was quite unaware of its fate.

**The collision:** At two O'clock, in the early morning of February 25th 1851, the Birkenhead struck the hidden rock. Ten minutes after, ship sank forthwith. The other half, however, remained afloat, worst of all; only three of the several lifeboats were left in a useful condition.

**The Passengers after the collision:** Awakened by the sudden crash, the unfortunate passengers ran out of their cabins and crawled to the deck of that half of the ship that was still afloat. For the time being at least they were safe.

**Certain Death:** Almost all the passengers faced certain death. Only 180 people could find room in the three lifeboats, 60 in each. The rest had no chance of life. The treacherous waters would drown them or else the hungry sharks would devour them. There was every cause for panic, for life is sweet.

**If a Panic:** If there had been a panic on the Birkenhead, not one of the 630 people would have been saved. All would have struggled to get into one of the lifeboats. Many would have been crushed under feet. Many would have been pushed into the sea. Boats might have been overloaded and sunk. The strongest would have won their way to the boats. The weakest – woman and children, the old and the sick – would have been left to their fate. Such things had happened before. But, strange to say, there was no panic on the Birkenhead. The troops showed remarkable discipline and great heroism.

**Women and Children First:** "Women and children first", was the order of the day. The soldiers and sailors stood on the deck in proper drill order, line upon line, rank by rank. The boats were lowered. The women and children filled them. As they sailed away, the men calmly awaited their fate with set faces.

**Discipline and Gallantry:** These brave souls set an example of discipline and gallantry. The heroic action of the commander of the troops can hardly meet a parallel anywhere. He was hanging on to wreckage. He saw two young sailors struggling in the water. He pushed the wreckage towards them. The three hold on to it. It was not strong enough for all three. So he let go his hold and himself chose to die.

One of the survivors reported that the determination of all hands was far more than could be effected by the best discipline. Everyone did as directed. Everyone was loyal to himself and to his duty. And never was a word of hoard.

The meaning of the Birkenhead Drill: Ever since Birkenhead Drill – Woman and Children First has been the order followed on all ships that are in danger. “Birkenhead Drill” mean today “to stand and be still’ facing certain death, so that weaker ones may have a chance of life.

#### **Question and Answer:**

##### **Q.1.**

**Ans:** The Birkenhead sank forty miles from Cape Town on 25th February 1851.

##### **Q.2.**

**Ans:** The Birkenhead was carrying soldiers and their families.

##### **Q.3.**

**Ans:** The Birkenhead was wrecked because it struck a rock hidden under the sea. The rock was hidden under the sea. It was unknown & undiscovered. It was not shown in the sea maps. So the crew of the ship was not to blame.

##### **Q.4.**

**Ans:** When the ship struck against the rock, most of the lifeboats were damaged or destroyed. Only three were in a useful condition. Each boat could carry just 60 passengers. So there was lifeboat accommodation for 180 people in all after the collision with the rock.

##### **Q.5.**

**Ans:** Yes, there was enough room in the lifeboats for all the women and children on board. The women and children were only 130 in number but there was lifeboat accommodation for 180.

##### **Q.6.**

**Ans:** If there had been a panic on the Birkenhead, not one of the 630 people would have been saved. All the passengers would have made wild efforts to get into the boats. Men, Women and Children would have been crushed under feet. They would have pushed one another into the sea. The boats might have been overloaded and sunk under the weight. Such things had happened in panic before. The same would have happened again.

##### **Q.7.**

**Ans:** The sailors showed perfect discipline and great heroism. They stood at attention as if a drill. With set faces, they awaited their fate calmly as the boats sailed away with the women and children.

##### **Q.8.**

**Ans:** Only a few of the men left on the sinking ship was rescued. They struggled to the surface of the sea and held on to pieces of wreckage. A rescue ship arrived on the scene and picked them up.

**Q.9.**

**Ans:** The commander of the ship acted with great heroism. He was hanging on to wreckage in the sea. He saw two young sailors struggling in the water for their lives. He pushed the wreckage towards them. All the three held on to it. Soon the commander realized that the wreckage was not strong enough for all three. So he let go his hold and himself chose to die.

**Q.10.**

**Ans:** No, the troops on board the Birkenhead were not experienced. They were not used to facing danger. An officer of the troops rescued by the rescue ship reported that the troops behaved with gallantry and discipline unto the very last.