

Fastnet 100 anniversary.

Early ship navigation depended on visibility to take bearings from land, or from coastal lights. Ships on the high seas and out of sight of the land relied on being able to see the sun or the night sky to fix their positions. Once deprived of this visibility ships were blinded and forced to navigate largely by guesswork and experience. Many paid the price for such navigation with their lives as their ships were dashed to pieces on storm-tossed reefs or crippled on jagged rocks on hostile shores. A ship leaving a port was virtually adrift on the ocean wild and wide and had no connection with the outside world until she eventually touched land. Wireless began to make its debut in the early 1900s. Range was limited and signals were often fuzzy. Early wireless-sets could only be operated by trained wireless-operators proficient in morse code. The value of wireless was soon recognised, it could link a ship at sea to the land, it could deliver weather forecasts, it could give ice warnings, it could summon assistance to a ship in distress; ships no longer sailed in the great unknown.

The English lighthouse service was founded in 1514 and bore the cumbersome title of The most Glorious and Undivided Trinity of St. Clement in the Parish of Deptford in the County of Kent. In time the name was reduced to the more manageable Trinity House. For a three-hundred-year period Trinity House continued with the practice of chartering or subcontracting lighthouse building and operation to private persons.

Coastal lights in the early years consisted mainly of coal-fires burning in open grates. These grates were set on high coastal towers or purpose-made cottage-like buildings with stone corbelled roofs. The roof supported an overhead platform to accommodate a coal-burning fire-grate. The Old Head of Kinsale has a wonderful examples of such a building. These coal-fires had poor range and often dimmed to flicker or quenched in heavy rain; they also had voracious appetites for coal. Many unscrupulous owners were more concerned with maximising their profits than concern for the safety of mariners whose lives were supposed to protect by lighting their fires nightly. The method was unreliable and failed time and time again as fires often remained unlit.

Ship-owners were outraged at the loss of their ships and the lives of their crew men which had been sacrificed to the slipshod practices of so-called light keepers who had failed to carry out their nightly obligations.

Trinity House took action; by 1836 they had bought out all privately owned lighthouses at a cost of over one-million pounds. The express purpose was improve the service and safeguard life at sea. In time, discoveries in science allowed for refinements and improvements in lighthouse design. Oil replaced troublesome coal. Lamps were made brighter, optics were improved by use of reflectors and lenses to concentrate light-beams so that they could be projected for great distances out to sea. Mechanisms were designed to rotate these beams to sweep the entire ocean at their feet.

To be continued.

Mizen wrecks notes for speech. (page 1)

Lighthouses, beacons, fog signals and other safety devices came into being in attempt to stem the haemorrhage of ships and sailors lives being sacrificed to the sea.

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No where in Ireland are the bones of old shipwrecks more concentrated than off the Mizen Head. I would like to mention a few for your interest.

In 1796 a fleet of forty-three French ships set sail for Ireland under the guiding hand of

Wolfe Tone. One of those ships, L,Impatiente, while bound for Bantry Bay was blinded in a snow blizzard on Christmas Eve and dashed to pieces on the rocks on the southern side of the Mizen Head. Out of a total of 570 men only 7 survived. Several hundred horses also perished. The next day it was reported that the bay was full of wreckage and not two planks remained together.

My name is Paddy O'Sullivan and it is my great privilege and honour to be invited here today to say a few words.

I would like to talk about a chapter of the Mizen Head's maritime history spanning a twenty-nine-year period from the 1880s to the early 1900s. That chapter might well be regarded as one of catastrophe and disaster for ships and men alike. It was a chapter of shipwrecking and drowning on an unprecedented scale. It was a chapter finally brought to a close by the efforts of the Irish Lights Commissioners when they installed a fog-signal facility on the Mizen Head.

No where off the coast of Ireland are the bones of old ships more concentrated than off the Mizen Head.

The 1880s saw a time of great change on the high seas. Wooden ships with sails began to give way to iron steamships driven by engines. For the next twenty-five years the Mizen would claim seven of these big iron ships and numerous lesser ships as they fell prey to the savage moods of the Atlantic.

On 27 January 1881, The 3,000 steamship , Bohemian, departed Boston en route to Liverpool with a cargo said to weigh 2,500 tons and consisting of bales of cotton, barrels of flour, bacon, apples and, seventy head of cattle. Her crew consisted of fifty-seven people all told. By 6 February she encountered heavy weather as she approached the coast of Ireland. However, the Calf light was clearly visible. Soon afterwards wind increased from the southeast and heavy fog descended causing the Bohemian to misjudge its position and crash heavily onto the rocks in Dunlough Bay on the Mizen Head. As the ship began to sink rapidly the captain ordered its four life-boats to be launched; two were crushed and their crews drowned as the crippled ship lurched sideways before making its death-plunge to the deep. The third lifeboat, containing captain Grundy and some sailors, was sliced in two by a falling mast, all its occupants were drowned. The only surviving lifeboat plucked swimmers from the sea pulled away from the scene in a dangerously overloaded condition: it had twenty-three occupants on board, most were naked as they had been in their bunks when the ship crashed.

Perishing winds and driving sleet numbed sailors hands causing oars to slip away from their grasp. As they drifted aimlessly on the high seas, two sailors died of exposure during the night and were heaved over the side to ease the crowding problem. As dawn

broke the bewildered sailors noted the distant cliffs of Dunmanus Bay, they had drifted six miles during the night. Local people spotted their plight of the shivering mariners and rendered every assistance in putting out boats to tow them ashore where they received every kindness by being brought to their houses and given food and dry clothing. The coast guard set out to inspect the remains of the Bohemian, its mast were still over water. The coastguard observed a lone sailor clinging to the the rocks at the foot of Cahir Island. As waves washed over him he clutched desperately for grip and, as the wave receded his raised a hand to wave frantically for help. The rocket apparatus was summoned to the scene and fired two ropes across the rock - neither reached the unfortunate mariner. By dawn the following morning he was gone. In total thirty-five people had perished on the Bohemian. The ship had slipped beneath waves and in its wake left a bay filled with floating cotton barrels, bags of flour and sides of bacon. Disaster struck a final blow as a local man attempting to grapple some bacon ashore was swept off the rocks and drowned.

A mere three years later on 10 November 1885, the 2,000 ton Iberian bound from Boston to Liverpool with cattle and general cargo again encountered fog causing the ship to crash heavily on Bird Island in Dunmanus Bay. The ship flooded rapidly and sank by stern. Despite a heavy groundswell, Captain Maxwell was able to launch all four lifeboats and put his fifty-six crewmen safely ashore.

A few short years later, on 27 October 1889 the brand new ship Queensmore departed Baltimore in the USA bound for Liverpool with a varied cargo consisting of 900 cattle, 2,000 bales of cotton, 850 tons of copper matte in sacks, 60,000 bushels of wheat, lard, flour and church organs. All went well until 5 November when it was realised that a portion of the cotton cargo had caught fire. All hands set to work for three frantic days and nights but failed to get the fire under control.

As the Queensmore caught sight of Cape Clear its decks and steelwork had become unbearably hot; captain Freney saw no options but run the ship ashore in attempt to save life and cargo. In final desperate attempt to save his ship he ordered large number of live cattle and a considerable amount of cotton to be jettisoned to allow a final attempt to subdue the fire. His perilous efforts were further confounded by the arrival of blinding fog. Captain Freney now realised that his situation was hopeless; he ordered his seventy-seven-man crew to launch the lifeboats and depart the burning ship. While no life was lost only eleven bullocks were saved. The burning ship drifted aimlessly for days in Dunlough Bay before being badly holed by bumping onto Bully Rock off Three Castle Head. A spring tide released the Queensmore from its rocky anchorage allowing it to drift out to sea and sink in the bay.

Many expressed concern about the ongoing carnage of shipping and human life; something should be done they opinionated; shouldn't a lighthouse or fog signal station be erected on either the Mizen Head or Three Castle Head?

As debate and discussion raged on, Neptune, the God of the sea, showed his anger once more on May 1888. A 1,000-ton sailing barque named the Cherwell had departed Chile

with a cargo of nitrate bound for Cobh.

Not having seen the sun for five days, the captain lost his bearings and ran his ship up on Three Castle Head. So rapid did his ship sink that her crewmen had to jump into the icy sea to gain the lifeboats. Two drowned with the ship and seventeen were saved.

On November of 1896 another large 3,000-ton iron ship, The Memphis, ran up on the rocks no more than 500 yards from the Bohemian. She was bound from Montreal to Bristol with 380 head of cattle and general cargo.

Five men stepped from the ships bows onto the rocks only to be washed off and drowned in the heavy seas washing over the ship. Three climbed up the masthead to escape the seas foaming over the ship's deck. After nine desperate hours all three were rescued. Out of a total of forty-seven people on board, eleven were lost. Again fog was the culprit.

In a never-ending cycle of disaster yet another iron steamship, The Oswestry, while ploughing through thick fog in 1889 ran into the sheer cliffs just north of the Mizen Head bridge. The captain reversed his engines to no avail; his ship was stuck fast and flooding rapidly. The seas were calm and all made it to safety. Salvage commenced immediately to recover the Oswestry's valuable cargo of copper ingots.

From 1896 onwards, frequent representations were made to The Irish Lights Commissioners to highlight the need for a fog-signal station on the Mizen. Their pleadings fell on deaf ears. In desperation the Board of Trade were petitioned but pointed out that it was a lighthouse matter and referred the petitioners to Trinity House. Eventually, Trinity House gave way - ten years since the first representations were made. The Irish Lights Commissioners were directed by Trinity House to proceed with the erection of a fog signal-station station on the Mizen Head.. By 1908 work was well under way. However, Neptune would have his grand finale by casting another large steamer ashore on the rocky cliffs of the Mizen.

On 5 December 1908, the 8,000-ton steamship, Irada, departed Galveston in Texas bound for Liverpool with a valuable cargo of cotton. Several days before the ship reached the Irish coast, bad weather and heavy fog set in making it impossible for the navigator to fix his position. The Irada subsequently struck the tall cliffs of the Mizen with such force that his engine-room immediately flooded and his ship broke in half. All was lost as Roberts grabbed his loud-hailer and shouted the order abandon ship.

The only woman on the ship, a young Stewardess, was secured in ropes and lowered over the side to a waiting lifeboat. Just at that moment the Irada rolled on its side crushing the young girl, The captain and four sailors lost their lives in a similar fashion. Morning saw the daily droves of tradesmen plod to their place of work as they constructed the new fog signal station; they were amazed to see the bay littered with wreckage. On closer inspection they could barely believe their eyes; sixty-three men were clinging for dear life to the base of the four-hundred-foot sheer cliffs. The

workman soon busied themselves lowering ropes to the terrified seamen beneath; one by one each was brought to the the surface.

Soon the fog signal station was completed and undoubtedly saved countless more ship losses and human lives as it boomed its mournful tones through the impenetrable fog. The Mizen's long chapter of catastrophe had finally come to a close.

Finally I would like to say that we have a reminder of that black chapter in the Mizen Head's past: The Irada propeller which you will see outside.

The end.

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