

Penlee: the loss of a lifeboat

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the loss of the Penlee Lifeboat and the Union Star. Simon Fleming looks back at the events of that tragic night.

This December marks the 25th anniversary of a tragic event that sent shockwaves of sadness and sorrow through Mousehole and Cornwall.

The disaster occurred on December 19, 1981, off the south-west coast of Cornwall, when the Penlee lifeboat went to rescue the stricken ship Union Star in stormy seas. Both boats were lost - leaving 16 dead, eight from each vessel.

Yet could disaster have been averted, and who were the crew on that fateful night?

On that night 25 years ago, the Dublin-registered ship Union Star was on its maiden voyage from the Netherlands to Ireland, with a cargo of fertiliser. It carried a crew of five, including the captain Henry Morton. Also on board was Morton's family: his wife, Dawn, and their two teenage daughters - travelling together so that they could spend time together over Christmas.

The Union Star began to experience a problem with its engine about eight miles east of the Wolf Rock. Critically, the boat was unable to restart its engines, and help was made available from a nearby tug. However, Morton spurned the offer since he was reluctant to spend a sizeable amount of money on salvage; a decision that would go on to have crucial consequences.

Soon after, in the high seas, the fuel supply of the Union Star became infiltrated with seawater. The weather conditions continued to deteriorate, and the cargo ship issued an emergency distress signal to the coastguard in Falmouth.

Fighting against hurricane force winds reaching 95mph, the Union Star was being blown towards the rocks of Boscawen Cove, near Lamorna. The conditions were so severe that a Royal Navy Sea King helicopter despatched from RNAS Culdrose was unable to perform a rescue mission.

So the lifeboat Solomon Browne, a wooden 47 foot Watson type lifeboat, manned by eight men from Mousehole, was launched into treacherous seas from Penlee Point. The crew comprised very experienced seamen, chosen from 12 men who had volunteered to work on the lifeboat that night. Due to the appalling conditions, only one man from a family was allowed to board the Solomon Browne.

In pursuit of the coaster, the Solomon Browne, led by Coxswain William Trevelyan Richards, ventured head on into the storm. The lifeboat endeavoured to rescue those on board the Union Star, making several attempts before getting alongside the stricken vessel. On two occasions, the lifeboat was hurled on the ship's deck and was slammed into the side of the vessel. Operating in monumental waters, with a 50 foot swell, the lifeboat rescued four of the eight people on board the Union Star, before retreating. The lifeboat then returned to launch one more effort to save the last four members of the crew when tragedy struck.

For it was after this point that the Solomon Browne was not heard of again; radio contact was lost.

There were no eye witnesses to the disaster, yet it is believed that the Union Star encountered a massive wave and overturned. With such towering waves, the lifeboat would have catapulted towards the Union Star's hull and then driven against the seabed. Under such an impact, the Solomon Browne would have broken up. Absolutely no one could have survived the stormy seas.

The crew of the Sennen Cove lifeboat endeavoured to search and rescue. However, it was not feasible to navigate around Land's End in such seas. A lifeboat from St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, made its way over to participate in looking for survivors. The lifeboat of The Lizard crossed Mount's Bay in the force 12 hurricane, sustaining structural damage as a result of its efforts. A search was also carried out by helicopters from RNAS Culdrose.

Tragically, both the Union Star and the Solomon Browne succumbed to the strength of the seas. There were no survivors. Of the 16 lives lost, only eight bodies were retrieved. Debris from the Solomon Browne made its way on to the shore, while the upturned Union Star lay marooned, stranded on rocks to the west of the Tater Du Lighthouse.

Sadly, the crew of the Solomon Browne all left behind family, children and friends in Mousehole.

Coxwain William Trevelyan Richards was posthumously awarded the Royal National Lifeboat Institution's Gold medal, while the other members of the crew - second coxswain/mechanic James Stephen Madron, assistant mechanic Nigel Brockman, emergency mechanic John Robert Blewett, crew members Charles Thomas Greenhaugh, Barrie Robertson Torrie, Kevin Smith and Gary Lee Wallis - were all posthumously bestowed with bronze medals. A gold medal service plaque was also given to the lifeboat station in recognition of outstanding bravery.

The devastating loss of these men on the Solomon Browne and the passengers and crew of the Union Star ushered in a period of local and national grief. A public appeal raised more than £3 million.

An inquiry established that no one was to blame for the disaster; the catastrophe had occurred due to the extreme weather conditions. However, a new law was introduced after the inquiry that granted the coastguard the authority to issue a Mayday and arrange salvage for the captain of a ship in distress.

Anyone living in Cornwall that day was stunned by the news. The tragic memory of ordinary men, most with wives and children, risking their lives still lingers. The preparations for Christmas compound the sadness as it is a season when everyone thinks of their loved ones.

Twenty five years on and the scars may have healed, but the memory of those who lost their lives remains as painful as ever for the inhabitants of Mousehole. A tribute can be found in the Parish Church of Paul, near Mousehole.

Other poignant and heart-rending accolades have also been made. Penzance Town Council established a memorial garden next to the boathouse at Penlee Point in memory of the lifeboat crew 'who gave their lives in service'.

This year there will be a Sunday Service commemoration of the disaster at Paul Church on December 17.

Every year on December 19, the world-famous Christmas illuminations of Mousehole will be switched off at 8pm for an hour as a sign of remembrance.

Not a day goes by without a volunteer crew, just like the Penlee lifeboat, showing their bravery, selflessness, skill and courage to help save others at sea. So far this year, the Penlee lifeboat has made 42 services and provides a vital role for those in danger on the seas. The RNLI is one of the public's favourite charities. In many places, whether by the sea or inland, one can see the boat shaped collection boxes. This Christmas, with Penlee in mind, it would be fitting to give a little to the men who give a lot.

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