A wee bit of maritime history... 25

PAST
Portaferry And Strangford Trust

SKULMARTIN

Looking out from the County Down coast, between the Copeland islands and Dundrum Bay across the Irish Sea, you can enjoy beautiful views of the Mull of Galloway and the Isle of Man. Sailing in the same waters is more complicated. Currents, reefs, and rocks exist that are a constant danger to shipping.

One such reef is located off Bally-walter and is called Skulmartin Rock, anciently Skyr Martyn. The name derives from the old Norse word 'sker' meaning reef. The Rock is only visible below the half-tide.

Between 1803 and 1883, at least 15 ships ran aground on the Rock. Some were setting out for Jamaica, others for Australia, and still others simply plying the Irish Sea. They all foundered on Skulmartin Rock, causing the loss of human lives and valuable cargo.

Shipowners and others with shipping interests repeatedly lobbied the Dublin authorities seeking to have the reef marked with warnings. From as early as 1760, attempts were made to place buoys at the reef, but these were ineffective as warnings, being black and the bells inaudible in storms. The situation became so critical that in 1866, a RNLI lifeboat was stationed at Ballywalter.

Shipwrecks continued on Skulmartin and in 1884 with the encouragement of the Glasgow Shipowners' Association, a delegation of businessmen travelled from Belfast to Dublin to meet the Commissioners of Irish Lights and discuss building a lighthouse. Two serious problems emerged from this discussion: the cost and the time needed to build it.

Therefore, on January 1,1886, a lightship named Princess Alexandra was moored off the reef to warn shipping about the Rock. It had a white fixed light and a fog-horn which sounded every ten minutes with a distinctive two-second warning. The light was visible for 10 miles.

In 1909, a new ship was moored off Skulmartin. This replaced the fixed white light with a revolving red light. The fog-horn sequence remained the same. The crew consisted of six sailors and one captain. They came from across Ireland; Wexford, Dublin, Antrim, and local villages on the Ards peninsula.

At 6:15 a.m. on September 12, 1914, the SS Devonshire, sailing from Liverpool, collided with the lightship the 'Torch' and caused damage below the waterline. The 'Torch' was towed to Belfast for drydock repairs.

Between 1923 and 1939, there were constant attempts to remove the lightship, but the Belfast Harbour Board resisted all such plans.

In October 1963, an agreement was reached for a high focal plane buoy, with a 20-foot mast and light, to be moored off the Rock. It too would be visible for about ten miles.

Therefore, on Friday, June 9 1967, the last Skulmartin Lightship 'Guillemot' was removed from its anchorage at the reef. The new buoy was anchored instead. Ships using the Irish Sea had more sophisticated navigation gear, GPS maritime satellites and the like to guide them. A crewed lightship was no longer necessary. The Skulmartin lightships were obsolete.

The crew of a Lightship consisted of a Master and six men on board and a Master and three men ashore off duty. In 1911 the full line out for the Skulmartin vessel *Brilliant* was as follows:

Nicholas Murphy	Master	Wexford
George Conway*	Mate	Portaferry
Henry Merron	Carpenter	Portaferry
William Curlett	Lamplighter	Ballywalter
George Roddy	Lamplighter, Naval Reserve	Dublin
Patrick Convery	Fogsignalman	Portaferry
Thomas Delaney	Fogsignalman	Wexford
Hugh Murphy	Fogsignalman	Ballywalter
Matthew McMurran	Seaman, Naval Reserve	Antrim
Robert Roche	Seaman	Wexford
John Patrick Perth	Seaman	Dublin

*see over

*The Mate of the *Brilliant,* George Conway, was born in Portaferry in 1856, and at the age of 14 went to sea on the schooner *Harbinger* which belonged to local merchant James McDonnell and traded to Liverpool. He remained on this vessel for 15 years, and in 1885 he entered service with Irish Lights.

When the Master, Nicholas Murphy , was transferred to the South Arklow Lightvessel in 1912, George was appointed Master of the Skulmartin until he retired in 1917 after 32 years of service. George Conway died in Portaferry in 1951,

George Conway (1856 - 1951)

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