

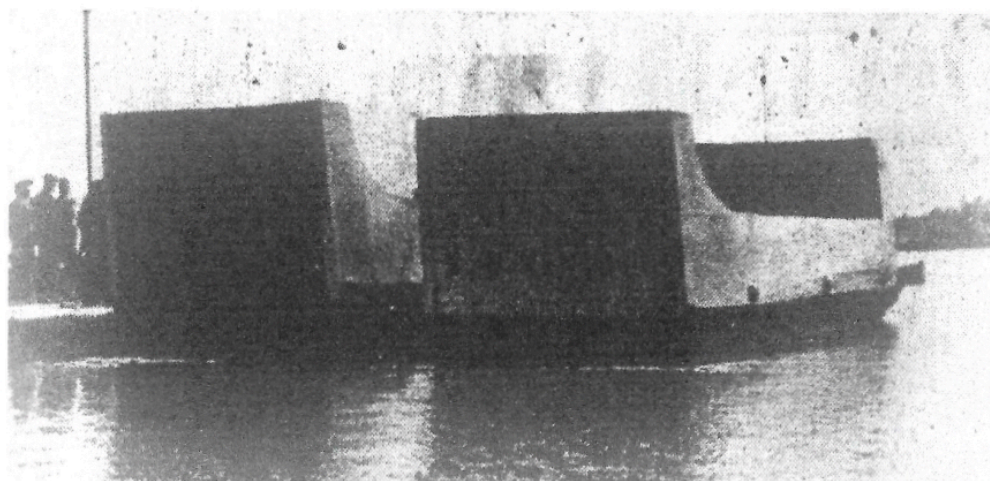
A wee bit of maritime history... 26

FREE



The Fatal Ferry Journey, 1947.

We know that in Portaferry there was already a ferry in existence in the 1100s when John de Courcy bestowed to the church in Downpatrick all the rights of all the ferry crossings, with the exception of the one that plied between Strangford and Portaferry. It was a passenger ferry, powered by sail or oars, which could also carry the odd sheep or cow. For hundreds of years this was the means of travel between the ports of Portaferry and Strangford and by the 1800s many boatmen had suitable boats and sat at the bottom of Ferry Street waiting for passengers who wished to cross.

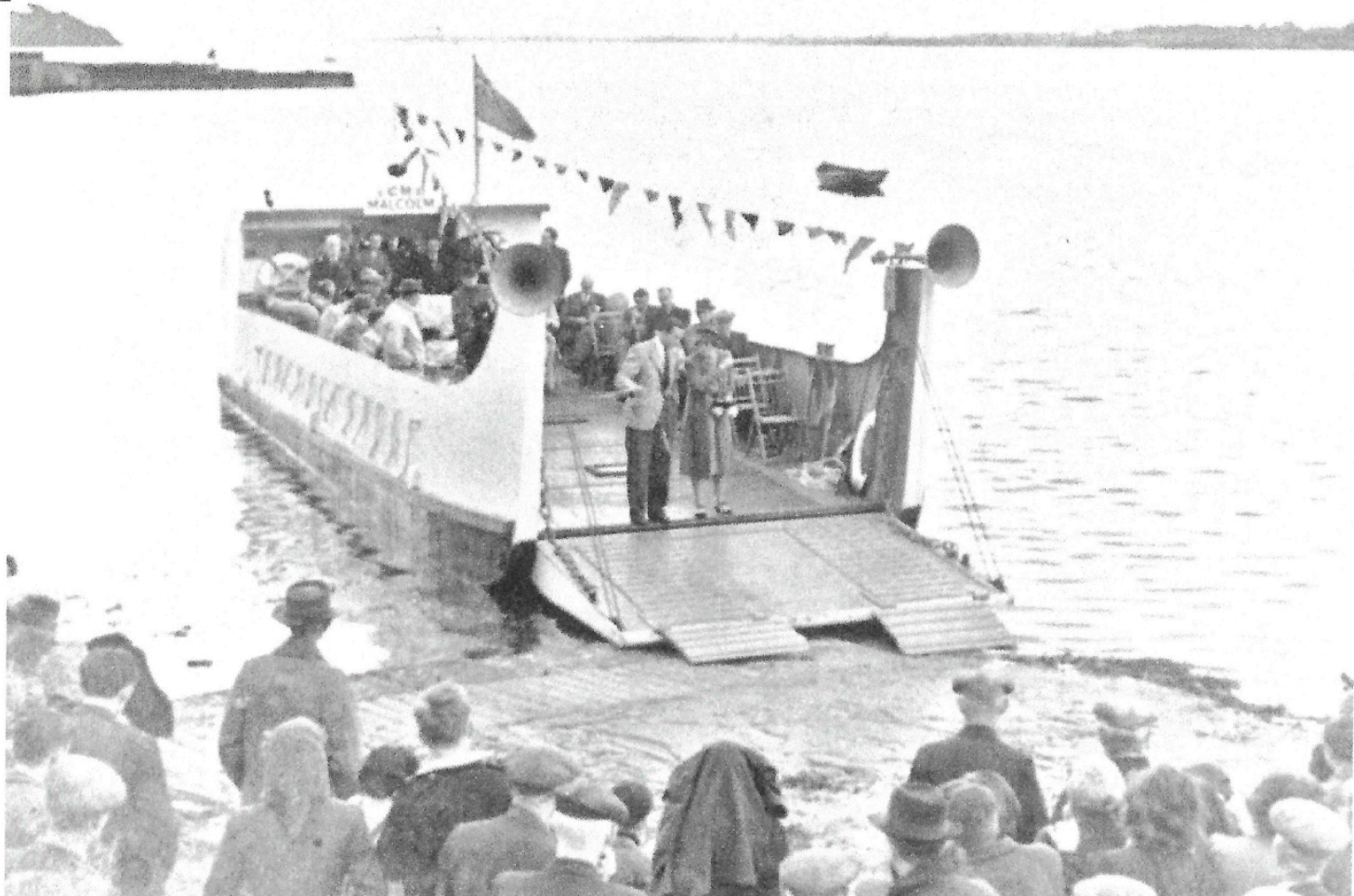


In 1946, a local man, Chandos Leigh, bought two surplus landing craft, seen arriving below. He named them *Malcolm* and *Sylvia* after his two children.

The Second World War was over, and there was a ready market for surplus army and navy equipment. It was an enterprising idea then to buy landing craft and use them as ferries between Portaferry and Strangford. They were designed to carry all sorts in most conditions. So began the first car ferry.

Each landing craft had been 'used during the war for the landing of 20-ton tanks, is capable of taking the largest bus or lorry, and has accommodation for four small cars or three large ones on each trip.'

BNL 3 June 1946



The new landing craft ferry was launched by Lady Nugent and Chandos Leigh on June 1, 1946. Lady Nugent was presented with a gift by Thomas Hutton, skipper. The first car on board was Mrs. Leigh's Alvis. (below)



Early on 23rd December 1947, three workers at the Portaferry House Estate, Robert Ritchie, Robert Denvir and Robert Drysdale, were instructed to move a cow and a pig with its litter to the Strangford side. Using a tractor and trailer, they took the livestock to the ferry slip opposite Ferry St. in Portaferry.

The ferry was loading, and a lorry belonging to the Northern Ireland Road Transport Board was already on board. The lorry was loaded with feed meal and parked in the centre of the ferry, limiting space. The workers left the tractor and trailer in Portaferry and boarded with the cow. Two went to the starboard bow end, and Bob Drysdale, held the cow between the lorry and the port side of the craft.

Shortly after leaving Portaferry, Bob Denvir, noticed a slight list to port. Was the lorry too heavy? Was it not truly centred? As it continued the list developed. About 200 yards from the slip the helmsman decided the matter was so severe that he should return to the nearest port. He started to turn the landing craft back towards Portaferry, and as he did so, the craft capsized.

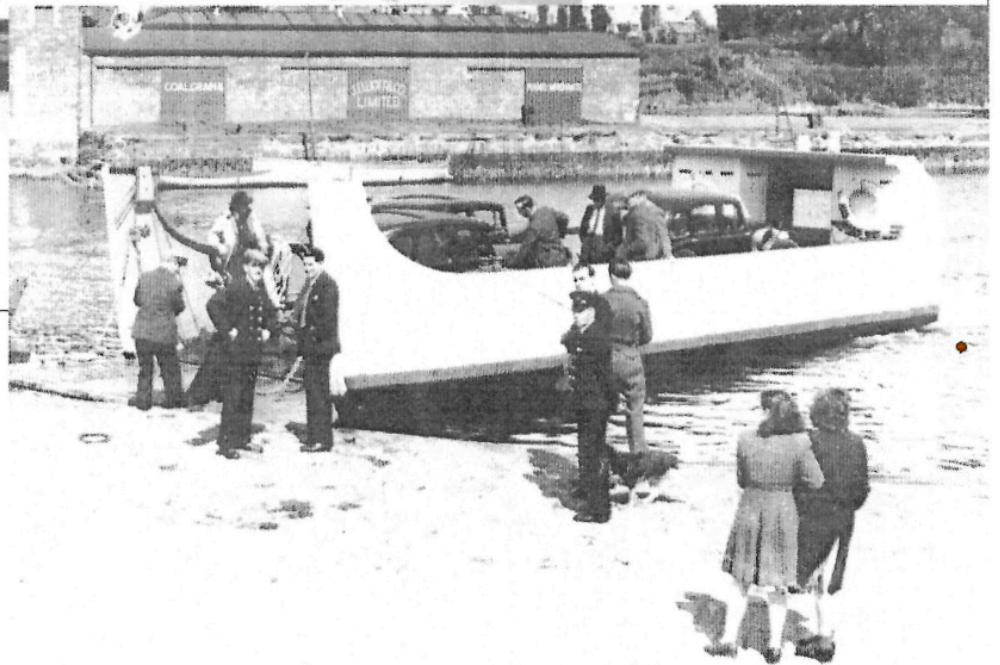
In a chilling eyewitness account, Denvir, one of the survivors, records:

"...The port side went under first, and the lorry overturned. As this happened, Bob Ritchie and I fell onto the upturned chassis of the lorry and went under it. We were both sucked under for what seemed to be about ten seconds. From this depth, I looked up and saw the bow of the barge swaying to and fro. As we shot to the surface, we missed the edge of the ramp door by about three feet. Had I hit it, I would certainly not have survived. Although I could not swim, I managed to make my way to the capsized boat and pulled myself onto the upturned hull. I then reached down and pulled Bob Ritchie, another non-swimmer, onto the hull beside me. At this stage, it became apparent that there were only four of us accounted for: Bob Ritchie, Bobby Mullan, James Bowan, the lorry driver and me. Bobby Drysdale was missing. We were on the upturned hull for between five and ten minutes. While standing there, we did not feel wet or cold, but as soon as we were rescued by George McDonnell of Strangford with his passenger ferry, we started trembling and shivering with cold and shock....."

Word of the accident quickly spread through both villages. Crowds gathered. The capsized ferry was towed to the old Saltpans for inspection, and at low tide, Bob Drysdale's body was found under the hull. He was buried in Ballymanish Cemetery on Christmas Day 1947.

The owner immediately retired the second craft. Car ferries only recommenced in 1968, when the current sequence of large ferries was inaugurated.

The landing craft entering and leaving Strangford.



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Passengers 1s 6d return	



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