

Eighteen perished in *Isle of Erin* tragedy

One hundred years ago, this month, the barque *Isle of Erin*, en route to Uruguay, was wrecked off North Ronaldsay.

Lorraine Shearer looks back at the tragic event, which led to the introduction of a wireless station for the island.

Residents of North Ronaldsay watched helplessly from the shoreline as the *Isle of Erin* was tossed about by raging seas on an October day, 100 years ago, this month.

The conditions were too rough to send out the island's open boats and the British sailing ship's plight could not be communicated to where help might have been available, owing to the lack of a telegraphic link.

The *Isle of Erin's* distress flag was spotted, and rockets were fired, as the ship's master, and his crew, battled to save the ship, and their lives.

For two hours it appeared that the barque had managed to secure an anchor, but moving torchlights from the iron-built ship indicated she was drifting, out of control, and perilously close to Seal Skerry.

It is thought that she passed the reef undamaged, but soon afterwards the lights disappeared.

A subsequent inquiry into the loss of the *Isle of Erin*, and 18 crew and passengers, recommended a wireless station for North Ronaldsay. This was installed within a few years.

William Doon Angus, of Stenness, was just 25 when he went down with the ship, a century ago on October 19.

A stone was erected to his memory in the Stenness churchyard.

He was mate on board the barque, which was carrying a cargo of coal from Sunderland to Monteideo, in Uruguay.

The vessel, which was built in Glasgow, in 1875, was owned by Charles Malcolmson, of Buckie, and the master was William McMinn, of Hawick, in the Scottish Borders.

Tragically, the master had taken his wife, Jean, and their two-year-old son, Robert, with him on the fateful voyage. In the records, Mrs McMinn appears as stewardess, and the child as purser.

It is understood that Mrs McMinn had appealed to her husband on numerous occasions to take her with him on his long voyages. This time he had given in.

In all, 18 people perished.

Mr Arthur, the principal lighthouse keeper in North Ronaldsay, was able to provide a narrative of what he saw:

"The vessel was sighted between 3pm and 4pm, at a distance of about four miles east south east of the lighthouse. From the fact that she was pitching and rolling in the trough of the sea, and appeared to be at the mercy of wind and waves, it was concluded that she was unmanageable.

"Her masts were all right, and if she had rather more canvas spread than was necessary, the sails appeared in good condition, though lacking the trim appearance which these present when a vessel is under control."

The lighthouse keeper continued: "A fresh south-easterly gale was blowing at the time and the atmosphere was dense with rain and haze.

"I cannot say that the hull appeared to be deeper in the water than I should have expected of a laden vessel, but there was a decided, though by no means heavy, list to starboard.

"In the gathering gloom of the evening, the barque, which seemed to be moving at a very slow pace, gradually became lost to view. Nothing more was seen of her until 7pm, when the firing of a rocket, and the exhibition of torchlights, showed that at the turn of the tide, the vessel had drawn dangerously near the island and was, indeed, in a most perilous position."

He went on: "The vessel herself could not, of course, be seen, the night being pitch black; but the fact that during the next hour or so several rockets were fired from the same spot indicated that the vessel had dropped anchor to save her from destruction."

"By 8pm, or 9pm, the vessel's torchlights had moved — the cable having undoubtedly snapped, the lighthouse keeper explained.

"She was lowly drifting, with wind and tide, past Dennis Point. About 9.15pm, the flare lights showed the distressed vessel to be in dangerous proximity to Seal Skerry; but it is believed that no damage was sustained in passing

this dreaded reef, as the torchlights were again observed about 10pm a mile or more to the north-west of the Skerry."

He said the ship would then be carried clear of Orkney in a north westerly direction.

As to what was wrong with the *Isle of Erin*, the keeper suggested two possibilities.

"Either her steering gear had completely broken down, or perhaps a still more dreadful state of matters existed in there being no one on board capable of navigating her.

"The following story, which is current here, will explain my meaning. On the day in question certain Sanday men, on the look out for ships, observed the barque approaching the land under a press of canvas and going at a terrific speed.

"When in the act of tacking, a short distance off Start Point, the vessel was suddenly thrown on her beam ends, but gradually righted again."

Wreckage from the *Isle of Erin* washed ashore on North Ronaldsay, including a mast and oars, an empty pillow, some reels of cotton, a lady's slipper and fragments of a stringed musical instrument. A named part of the ship was also found.

"Our utter inability to render assistance to this ill-fated vessel once more shows the necessity for the extension of the telegraphic system to the island."

Had they been able to communicate with Kirkwall, on seeing the condition of the barque, valuable lives and property could have been saved, he believed.

One of the crew, from Peterhead, was prevented from sailing after being arrested in connection with a charge of theft just before the ship sailed.

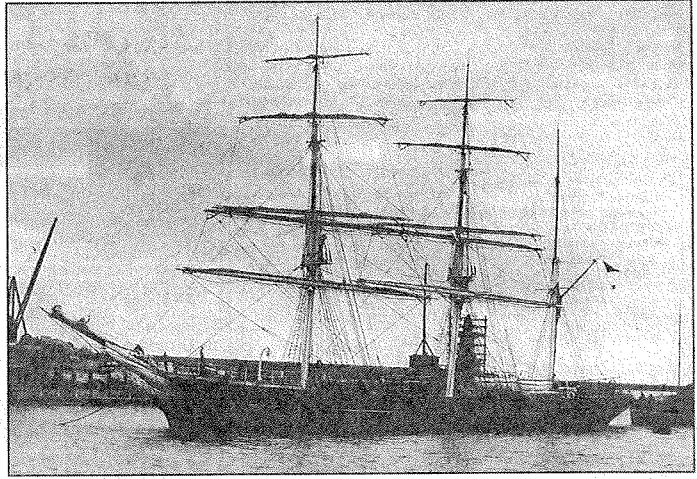
As a young boy in North Ronaldsay, John Muir watched the *Isle of Erin* in difficulty. In later life, he took part in a radio interview for the BBC, recalling his memories.

"I still remember, as I stood there on the shore, watching the ship in distress. By 10.30pm, the rockets and lights had disappeared."

The radio broadcast was to touch the heart of one woman — the daughter of the ship's master, a Mrs Annie Laidlaw.

"It was so emotionally distressing to hear someone bringing back the past," she said, also in a radio interview by the BBC.

"It robbed me of both parents and my infant brother."



The *Isle of Erin* is pictured in Sunderland a few weeks before her loss during October, 1908, in a gale off North Ronaldsay.



William McMinn — a well-respected sailor and master of the *Isle of Erin* — and Mrs Jean McMinn, who died, along with her youngest child, Robert, aged two. The master's surviving children, Davie and Annie McMinn, are pictured right, in a photograph taken a few years after the 1908 tragedy.



Mrs Laidlaw's son, Ronald, says his mother never really spoke of the tragedy, that left her, and her older brother, Davie, orphans.

"I wish we really had sat down and talked about it before she died," he said.

Ronald, 73, a retired quantity surveyor from Hawick, became interested in finding out more about the *Isle of Erin* several years ago.

He has a number of postcards and telegrams sent by his grandparents shortly before they died.

Jean McMinn wrote to Jen Henry, of Sussex: "Here we are started out on our voyage. Think of us tomorrow, our first Sunday at sea. It will be a new experience to me at least — no sound of Sabbath bells to awake us.

"This is a last goodbye, dear Jen. I know your thoughts, and your prayers, will be with us. I will be anxiously looking for letters from you when we arrive, the passage will only be two months.

"Robert is as happy as he can be, shouting the orders after the men. 'Steady' the pilot shouted and Robert took up the word at the pitch of his voice. We are well out on the open sea and it is bitterly cold, only half past eight. Fondest love dear Jen from us all. Goodbye for three months, until you get my first letter."

William McMinn also wrote a postcard to his sister.

"Dear Liz, just a parting card to wish you and Jamie and the children goodbye. Jean is alright up on deck fine. Robert is happier than ever he has been before, laughing and singing around like a wild man. It is a head wind but won't last long, so goodbye from Jean, Robert and myself."

Ronald says several members of his family are planning to get together to remember their forebears on October 19.

"We visited North Ronaldsay two years ago. That was our first visit. The story is extremely interesting. My grandfather had quite

a history. He had some adventures at sea. He was shipwrecked on Tierra del Fuego in July, 1893, when he was 17 years old; he went to sea at 14."

William McMinn was a highly-regarded seaman, with crews regularly asking to be able to sail under his command.

A board of trade inquiry into the loss of the vessel was held at the Sheriff Court House, in Aberdeen, over two days in May, 1909.

The court found that the loss of the ship was "probably caused through her being brought suddenly to the wind in a gale of wind and heavy sea under a press of canvas in order to avoid running ashore, whereby she probably received serious damage, and when very possibly some of the crew may have been washed overboard or seriously injured while at lee braces."

The Liverpool-registered *Isle of Erin* was 202.5ft long with a gross tonnage of 941.16 tons. She was purchased 13 years previously, by her owners, for £3,200.

According to the inquiry Thomas King, of Sanday, was the first person to observe the ship, which, at that time, was heading straight for land.

It is assumed that the ship spotted the shore as the helm was promptly put down and the vessel brought suddenly to the wind and sea, labouring heavily.

The top gallant sheets were let go, but no other attempt seems to have been made to further reduce the upper sail of the vessel.

The inquiry heard that it appeared as if the efforts of those navigating her had been "paralysed by some catastrophe".

She drifted out of sight of those on Sanday, and by 3pm was sighted from North Ronaldsay.

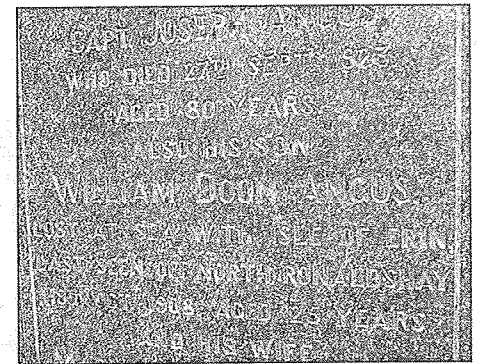
It was in rough Orkney seas, the inquiry concluded, that the ship most likely foundered on the night of October 19.

Those who perished:

- Captain William McMinn, his wife and son, Robert;
- Mate — William Doon Angus;
- Boatswain — C. Birkeland;
- Steward — T. Hasse;
- Carpenter — G. Wedis;
- Seamen — William Hunter, William Hughson, Thomas Bullen, Ola Halderson, Julius Heilscher, Kenneth Ross, Even Elvassen, John Prost and Lesley Geddes;
- Apprentices — Albert Cockbain and Harold Spencer.



Some of the crew of the ill-fated *Isle of Erin* — master William McMinn is pictured centre row, second from the left.



The headstone in memory of Stenness man William Doon Angus, who died when the *Isle of Erin* sank, 100 years ago this month.