

## Lifeboat on Stronsay - Sinking of SS Athenia , 3 September,1939.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1939, war was declared between Great Britain and Germany. On the same day, the 13,500 ton passenger ship SS Athenia was on route from Liverpool to Canada with 1147 passengers and crew on board. The majority of the passengers were women and children, many refugees from Europe, as well as tourists from the USA and Canada returning home. At 11a.m. the news was broken to the passengers that a state of war now existed between Great Britain and Germany. The declaration of war was not entirely unexpected, and by 1p.m. as a precaution, the ship's 26 lifeboats had been prepared and were ready to be launched in the unlikely event of any disaster.

The Athenia was now about 300 miles from Liverpool, well out into the Atlantic and bound for a neutral port (Canada did not declare war for five more days). She was an unarmed passenger ship which had set sail before the declaration of war, and although alarmed by the turn of events, none of the passengers could imagine anything really happening to them.

At 7.39p.m, SS Athenia was torpedoed by a German U-boat (U30) captained by Oberleutnant Fritz-Julius Lemp. Although under strict orders from Hitler to avoid any confrontation with civil shipping, it was later stated in Lemp's defence that he thought the SS Athenia was an armed and converted merchant ship, as it was sailing without lights in a zig-zag formation. A second torpedo misfired, forcing the U boat to submerge to avoid being struck by its own torpedo, and on resurfacing a third torpedo was fired which also missed. Lemp realising his mistake, rapidly left the scene, and failed to report the incident to his superiors until September 14<sup>th</sup>.

The SS Athenia took several hours to finally go down. Most if not all the lifeboats were launched, although of the Athenia's passengers and crew, 112 were killed (93 of them passengers) in the initial explosion or died later as a result of the sinking. Three British destroyers Electra, Escort, and Fame, together with two merchant ships City of Flint and Southern Cross, and the Norwegian vessel the Knut Nelson, all attended the scene over the ensuing hours, rescuing more than 1000 survivors from the lifeboats and the sea.

The German High Command initially denied any responsibility or involvement in the incident, even going so far as to accuse the British of deliberately sinking the ship in order to encourage the USA to enter the war

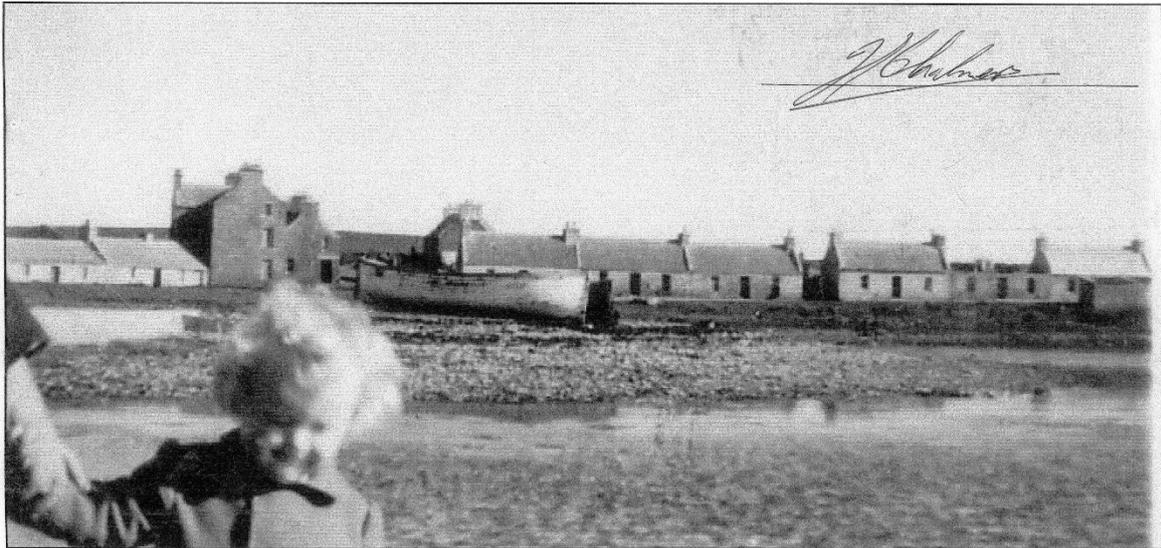
against Germany. The spectre of the sinking of the passenger ship Lusitania in the 1<sup>st</sup> World War haunted the German military command, and they feared that the sinking of the Athenia would have grave consequences on world opinion. As it happened this did not materialise, although it did effect German naval tactics particularly in the early part of the war. Hitler issued an order that under no circumstances were attacks to be made on passenger ships, even those in convoy, regardless of nation, thus causing confusion to U-boat commanders as to the vessels they were permitted to attack - for passenger ships sometimes carried troops, and freighters passengers.

Some months later an empty lifeboat found its way to Shapinsay, one of the northern isles in Orkney, having apparently drifted on the currents from the north Atlantic to the waters off Deerness where, it is believed, it was seen and towed into Shapinsay by a father and son fishing-boat team both of whom have since died. At some time during the early 1940's this lifeboat was acquired by Captain Dennison of Shapinsay, and used for carrying egg-boxes and the like between the islands.

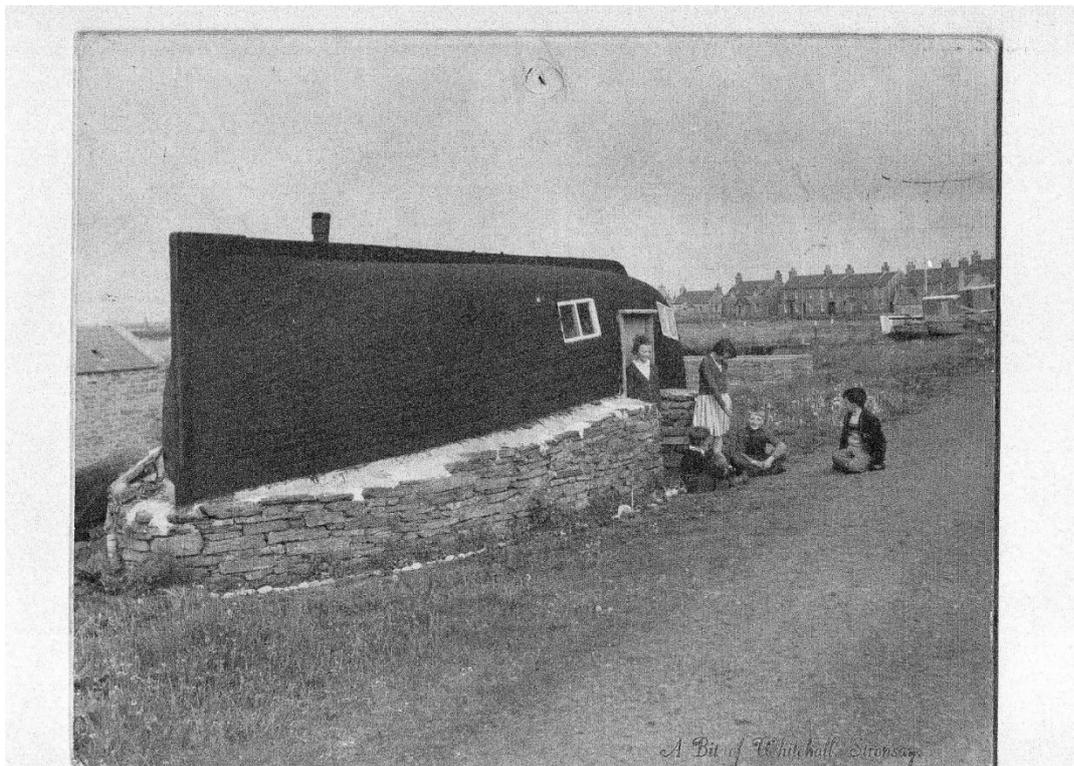
During the late 1940's the boat was used for the collection and transportation of seaweed, used in the manufacture of iodine, soap, and fertiliser, with the processing factory on Stronsay. The boat had no engine and had to be towed, and was commonly known as 'Desperate Dan' in view of its substantial weight and awkward handling.

In 1949 the sea-weed processing factory closed down, and the lifeboat was acquired by Mr J Chalmers of Seafield, Stronsay, who moved it from the foreshore at Lower Station to the foreshore at Seafield, and converted it into a 'houseboat', where it has remained to this day.

In 2004, with the agreement of Mr Clive Martin, the present owner of the lifeboat, enquiries were undertaken to confirm the identity and origin of the lifeboat, with written statements provided by witnesses familiar with the boat during the 1940s and '50s, which established beyond reasonable doubt that the lifeboat was from the SS Athenia. Since then, several of these witnesses have since died, and we owe them our gratitude for their invaluable help in identifying the lifeboat.



"Athenia" lifeboat at Lower Station, Stronsay. (PRE 1949)



"SSAthenia" lifeboat, converted to house-boat, foreshore, Seafield, Stronsay.  
(late 1950's)



“SS Athenia” lifeboat - on foreshore at Seafield, (1995/6)



“SS Athenia” lifeboat on foreshore at Seafield, Stronsay. (2004/5)

It is 14 years since the validation of the SS Athenia lifeboat, and the elements have taken their toll. Various proposals have been made regarding the future of the boat, but the wheels of progress move very slowly indeed. Nevertheless hope springs eternal that this unique 2<sup>nd</sup> World War artefact can be saved, both for the benefit of the Stronsay community, and as a real memorial for those who died at sea as a result of this tragedy.

The lifeboat has attracted considerable interest world-wide, particularly from the USA. I have received emails from relatives of survivors of the disaster, and many photographs of the SS Athenia and crew, prior to its fateful voyage. I understand that there is at least one active official 'SS Athenia' Club in the USA, possibly more. Nearer home, one of the Maritime Museums in Scotland, had and possibly still has, a special exhibition dealing with the sinking of the SS Athenia; she was after all, built in the Clyde.

Over recent years there have been many incomers to Stronsay to whom the history and circumstances of this lifeboat may be little known. Should you wish to learn more, The Stronsay Development Trust will have a copy of all of the full research found in this report and more available on their website [www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/sdt/](http://www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/sdt/)

further Heritage project updates will also be available on the website in the near future.