

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 23

THE RED ENSIGN OF THE *LOCH SEAFORTH*

This flag was flying on the *Loch Seaforth* that fateful day in 1973 that she hit rocks in the Gunna Sound. While no-one was hurt, it was the end for the once popular mail boat, and her later sinking at the Gott Bay pier blocked other ferries from berthing for six weeks.

The *Loch Seaforth* had been launched twenty-five years earlier and had worked the Stornoway-Mallaig run. Professor Meek described the vessel in her pomp. 'The new mail ship was a distinctive and imposing vessel for her size, and had an impressive service speed of sixteen knots ... Her hull had a touch of old-time elegance, with its long lines, graceful sheer and attractive cruiser stern. Only her funnel – somewhat squat in profile and fixed directly to the boat deck – detracted from her appearance, as it was rather too low ... Accommodation for five hundred passengers in two classes occupied the after two-thirds of the vessel. Cargo space included thirty-six cattle stalls.' It may seem strange to those used to today's classless canteens, but even forty years ago the vessel's 'third-class lounge was much superior to the first class saloon of some of the older steamers ... The first-class lounge, situated ... under the bridge, was a magnificent room with large plate-glass windows.'

In 1972 the *Loch Seaforth* was taken off the Stornoway run and given the circuit Oban-Coll-Tiree-Castlebay-Lochboisdale and back. On a wild evening on 22nd March the next year she left Lochboisdale. While negotiating the Gunna Sound at 5.15 am she hit rocks with jarring sound that woke almost everyone on board instantly. Captain Donald Gunn raced to the bridge. In the dark he made the decision to abandon ship and send out a Mayday call. Eleven passengers and some thirty crew climbed into three lifeboats.

The *Oban Times* reported that 'Eight passengers, including a family of four [the Strakers], were taken off by a crew headed by second officer John MacDonald, a Tiree man. It was decided, for safety's sake in the semi darkness, that the lifeboat should stand off the stranded ship until the light improved. Second Steward Donald Edwards from Oban told the *Oban Times*: "It was too dark to make for the shore and it was decided to keep the boat heading into the wind which had begun to freshen." After half an hour this lifeboat was taken in tow by another of the *Loch Seaforth's* lifeboats which had an engine. Captain Gunn and much of the crew set off in another boat and made land in Caolas. As daylight broke, realising that the boat was still very much afloat, he returned to the vessel with a skeleton crew.

Two fishing vessels out early that morning responded to the emergency call. One was experienced Tiree fisherman Hector MacPhail in the *Harbour Maid* with crewman Donald Iain Kennedy, whilst the other was Sandy MacPherson in the *Saffron*. The Tiree coastguard was mobilised with a shore search party who fired flares to guide the rescue. The two lifeboats containing passengers were then towed to Scarinish pier and were taken under the care of the Petries at the Scarinish Hotel. The *Loch Seaforth* was subsequently towed to the Gott Bay pier where a final passenger, Willie Miggin from Ireland, emerged, blinking, from his cabin to find the ship deserted.

However, the damage was greater than first thought and she sank at the pier, blocking access to the relief ferries for six weeks. She was eventually lifted by a giant barge and taken to lie on the sands of Gott Bay at *An Tràigh Mhòr*. She never carried another passenger.

An ensign is a flag showing the nationality of a vessel. It was first mentioned in relation to the ships of these isles in 1674, and until the Union of Parliaments in 1707 the Scottish ensign had a saltire in the 'canton', the upper quarter next to the flagpole. The White and Blue Ensigns belong to the Royal Navy, whilst the Australian national flag is a blue ensign with the five stars of the Southern Cross and the Commonwealth Star added. The Red Ensign is flown by British merchant ships.

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