

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 45

BRASS LANTERN FROM HMS *STURDY*

This beautiful brass light was salvaged from the Royal Navy destroyer HMS *Sturdy*, after it was wrecked on the rocks of Sandaig in October 1940. The vessel broke up over the next few months, but some salvage, both official and 'unofficial', took place.

HMS *Sturdy* was one of sixty-seven S-class destroyers, designed during the First World War. Built by Scotts of Greenock, she was, in fact, not launched until 1919. During the inter-war years, she spent much of her time at anchor as part of the Royal Naval Reserve. She did spend a period, however, in rough weather trials out of Portsmouth, only going to sea in the most atrocious conditions. At the start of the Second World War, only eleven of her class were still in action for the Royal Navy and she was starting to show her age. At first, she was tasked to defend the British flagship *Royal Oak*, before that was sunk in Scapa Flow. She then sailed to the Mediterranean, and went through another long refit in Malta. She was subsequently allocated to Western Approaches Command based in Londonderry. Albert Gallier, one of the ship's stokers, had never been to sea: "I was born in Shropshire. I left home quite young, seventeen and a half, and I went down the pits [following his father] ... I joined the Navy in 1939 (in June actually, before the war started), but I didn't get called in till the November. Did all the training on Hayling Island, and was drafted out to Malta to pick up the *Sturdy*. In 1940, I was twenty-one – I was coming round the Bay of Biscay on my twenty-first birthday. We went out on a cargo-passenger ... Things were pretty quiet then – we left before the attack on Malta started. She was an oldish boat – she was having a refit. What they were putting on it, I don't know."

It was a difficult time. On her first convoy, HX73, no fewer than twelve merchant ships were sunk by U-boats. On 26 October 1940, she left port to pick up another convoy, only to be pulled off that and sent to shadow another flotilla. Battered by dreadful weather, low on fuel, and unable to get an accurate bearing for two days, the captain, thirty-one-year-old Lt Cmdr George Cooper, failed to allow adequately for the vessel's drift. HMS *Sturdy* crashed into *Sgeir an Latharnaich* off the coast of Sandaig. Five sailors died in the initial attempt to reach land before the bridge received a message from Captain Donald Sinclair (*Dòmhnall an Dan*), who was home in Greenhill on leave from the Merchant Navy. Flashed in Morse code from the shore using the postman's torch, it advised the remaining crew to stay on board until the tide receded. This action saved many lives. Albert Gallier again: "We were in our hammocks, asleep [when the *Sturdy* hit the rocks]. [It was] 4.30 in the morning. You

wouldn't feel [the impact] being in the hammock. You don't feel the roll of the ship. In cases like that, you are warned to be clothed and have your lifebelt on, you sleep in your lifebelt. You never have your boots laced up when you're working. Saves you having to buy laces! As much as I remember, you don't feel [the cold and wet]. The first thing I remember getting on deck was seeing the stern go round. It had already broken in two, the ship had. I can't remember being frightened. Just concerned. We got organised. Someone got a rope off the bows onto the rocks. First one down would hold the rope for the next one come down. That's how we carried on. As soon as you got to the bottom, he was gone! You're up the shore! I remember running up the grassy bank, and I remember seeing the bloke before me going over the top. Then there were some houses. I don't actually remember going in, but I can remember sitting at a table and looking up the corner there, and there was a woman making bread on a flat [griddle]." (Albert Gallier, the last surviving member of that crew, sadly died earlier this year.)

The wreck jackknifed and was driven towards the shore. Most of the surviving crew were rapidly evacuated to Oban, leaving a detachment to guard the vessel while the shells and torpedoes were made safe and removed. The hulk could be reached at low tide. Hugh Maclean from Barrapol was one who passed by: "It wasn't very safe. It's a wonder to me no one was hurt or even drowned. I was there myself looking for souvenirs, and I've got one of the clasp knives out there in the workshop. And as for tobacco! My goodness, tobacco! Cigarettes by the million! Rum if you wanted it, plenty of rum too. And some of the boys [the Navy salvage party] would pinch a drop for a person, too!" Later, Iain Campbell (*Iain Bàn*) was employed as a night watchman at the site. Another islander remembered Tiree at that time: "There were a lot of white overalls and large frying pans all of a sudden!" Potatoes from the ship's galley were planted in Middleton the following year, and 'Sturdy potatoes' became a popular local variety. Walter Hume from Hynish was contracted by the Navy to transport stores, including large tins of corned beef, from the *Sturdy* to the pier. His route passed near his father's house in Heylipol, and sometimes a tin appeared to fly out of the window at the appropriate time.

This solidly made brass paraffin cabin bulkhead lamp was made by Bulpitt and Sons of Birmingham in 1918. It is therefore one of the original fittings for HMS *Sturdy*, lasting twenty-one years in service. Its brass construction, glass panes and wooden handle (in case the lamp got too hot) seem to speak to us from a different, imperial, age. It also reminds us of the five young men who sadly drowned that night in 1940. Just this week I met the daughter of another crewmember in An Iodhlann. She was making her first pilgrimage to the island to follow her father's wartime footsteps, and was surprised to find how vividly the accident is still remembered on Tiree.

Dr John Holliday

CORRECTION

It is always good to be reminded of the expertise of readers of *An Tirisdeach*. Alasdair 'Bunchy' Johnston from Scarinish, a merchant seaman, had read my article about Captain Donald MacKinnon and the *Taeping*. He pointed out that the passage "five million tons of tea flooded the London market" after the Great Tea Clipper race of 1866 was stretching the capacity of even these legendary boats. The figure should have been "five million pounds". Tea clippers were built for speed, and their hold capacity was limited: typical loads for the journey from China to London were between 500 and 900 tons of tea. Thank you, and well spotted!