

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 77

### COAL FROM THE WRECK OF THE *VIVO*

I can hold this small, black lump in the palm of my hand. It doesn't look much. You've heard of *taking* coals to Newcastle. Well, this story is about bringing coals *from* Newcastle. It was bad news for one seaman, but good news for some islanders.

At the east end of *An Tràigh Bhàn* 'the white (sandy) beach' at Balevullin, there is a small inlet between two lines of rocks. This is *Poll a' Mhanaich* 'the pool of the hooded skate'. At low tide here you can see the barnacle-covered outline of part of a steam engine and a huge crankshaft. That is all that remains of the *Vivo*, a 700-ton steamship that hit these rocks almost exactly 128 years ago. The seven-year-old boat had set out from her home port of Newcastle on 9th December 1890, heavily loaded with 1,500 tons of coal destined for the Dublin Gas Company. Her draught (the depth of water she needed) was fifteen feet. Rounding Cape Wrath, the forty-two-year-old captain, Fenn Waller, steered a course down the Minch, making for Ushenish Lighthouse on the northeastern corner of South Uist.

It was a miserable December night: a gale from the southwest with sleet. Visibility was worse than poor. Reckoning he was about five miles off the coast of Uist, Captain Waller adjusted his course to make for his next mark: Skerryvore light. He then went down to his cabin, leaving the first mate on the bridge. At 3.30 am, he came back up. Without sight of Skerryvore light, he realised he was in trouble. He ordered the engines to 'Slow', and asked the second officer to take a sounding lead from the bow; a reassuring twenty-seven fathoms was the answer. Still proceeding slowly, he ordered another lead at 5.15 am: seventeen fathoms, and a hard sea bed, came the reply, although it later became clear that the officer had not used the 'arming', a plug of tallow that picks up debris on the sea bed to double check, but had relied just on the 'feel' of the lead.

Minutes later, the look-out shouted 'Breakers Ahead!' It was too late. The vessel struck rocks, flooding the stoke hold and extinguishing the steam boilers in minutes. The captain decided not to deploy the lifeboats until dawn, when the eighteen crew landed safely on Balevullin beach. Of all the rocks along the west coast they could have hit, this was a relatively soft 'landing'.

News of the wreck spread around Tiree like wildfire. John Brown, a seaman himself from Kilmoluag and a well-known bard, wrote a sharp but witty song, *Òran na Vivo*, about the events that day. It became very popular: 'They woke *Gilleasbuig mac Chaluum* since he was fairly close to the beach; That man sprang to his feet; he had

had a premonition of the disaster. 'My second sight still has power, although they mock me about it: I saw the vision a year ago; now those foreigners have arrived'. The boat was soon declared a total wreck, and it attracted no little attention from those living nearby: 'The women with their tartan blankets were as undaunted as the captain of the boat, whether the tide was in or out, up to their breasts in the sea; collecting every cup and saucer and a selection of teapots.'

But the big mid-winter windfall was the huge load of coal washing out onto the beach. The Receiver of Wrecks sold the cargo to a MacKinnon from Balephuil, who organised for the coal to be retrieved from the beach and taken around the island in carts. It was said that it did not burn very well on domestic grates, destined as it was for the furnaces of a power station. Fragments of coal, like this one, still come ashore.

Captain Waller and his first mate were summoned to a tribunal a month later in South Shields. He was found guilty of poor navigation. The three compasses on board had been calibrated just two months before, but he had not taken account of the error the engineer had noted. He had also estimated his distance from South Uist incorrectly, and had not made adequate allowance for the wind and tide throwing him eastwards. He was demoted to the rank of First Officer for six months.

Fenn Waller went on to continue his career as Master Mariner, but died three years after the wreck at the age of just forty-five. And then I discovered something else about this event, something that brought this fragment of history up close and personal. Fenn Waller had been born a mile from my home village: at Blakeney, on the north Norfolk coast. Leaving home because the coastal ports there were silting up, he had settled in South Shields, my father's home town. And his boat had come to rest on Tiree, my home town. He's a man I would have liked to talk to.

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