

YESTERDAY'S NEWS.10

1896

CAPTAIN RICHARD KEARON OR ARKLOW

Last time, we learned of the sad fate that befell the young crew of the '*Nancy of Dublin*', drowned on the Hough skerries in 1885, and buried at the shore. The *Nancy's* captain, Richard Kearon, miraculously survived, clinging to a piece of wreckage. I wondered what became of this man whose life had been saved by three Tíree fishermen. I found the answer in a newspaper cutting eleven years later. As so often on the high seas, his was quite a story.

'The barquentine *Salus*, belonging to Mr Richard Kearon, King's Hill, Arklow, and commanded by the bravest of the Arklow masters, Richard Kearon of Ferrybank, was totally wrecked close to Fishguard, on the Welsh coast, at 3 p.m. on Friday last [October 1896]. The crew of seven hands were all drowned within the view of hundreds of persons on shore. The *Salus* was a splendid sailing vessel, well found, and had been almost rebuilt and re-fitted during the past three years at a cost of some £1,600. Two gentlemen in Drogheda had an interest in her, but the rebuilding referred to exceeded their proportion of interest, and now, unfortunately, the entire loss falls on Mr Richard Kearon, the managing partner. Apart from the valuable lives which have been sacrificed, a heavy financial blow has thus been received by one of the most enterprising and liberal shipowners in Arklow. But what is his loss—great as it is—to that of the widows and orphans who, by the same calamity, have been left desolate and impoverished. Letters and telegrams of sincere sympathy have come in from all parts of the kingdom, but, God help them, the future is a blank, except some of the many kind friends in Arklow take active steps to start a subscription list. We understand that the Rev R. C. Hallows contemplates such a move, and, if we know the Arklow people, he will not lack support.

'We give further down a graphic description of the wreck, furnished by the correspondent of the *Mail*. The *Salus* left Drogheda, in ballast, on Wednesday night for Swansea, where she was to load coals for Cherbourg. At 2 o'clock on Thursday afternoon she passed down Arklow Bay. A strong gale sprang up during the night. and nothing further was heard of her until telegrams on Saturday reported the wreck off Fishguard. Her crew consisted of Capt. Richard Kearon, aged 60, who leaves a widow, three daughters and one son; Murtagh Doyle, mate, aged 38. Kearon's son-in-law, who leaves a bed-ridden widow and two children; George Kearon, Kearon's son, aged 21; Andrew Hayden, aged 32, Arklow; P. McDonnell, aged 30, Drogheda; Augustine Akeoak, a German; and a Norwegian, name unknown. It is also not known if there was another sailor, and the finding of a woman's hat, as below stated, is unaccountable, as there was no woman on board. Three bodies have come ashore, being those of Hayden, Doyle and the Norwegian. Captain Kearon's reputation as a competent master and brave sailor is known in every one of our seaports. Four years ago, nautical men were reading of the heroic and successful efforts of Capt. Kearon to guide the

Belle Star from the Banks of Newfoundland to Dublin without assistance. On that eventful voyage, the cargo shifted on the outward journey, and the masts had to be cut away to allow the vessel to right herself. Then the captain raised a "jury" mast, and returned across the Atlantic with the vessel on her beam all the way, declining assistance from the Queenstown tugs. Seven years ago, Captain Kearon was shipwrecked in the *Nancy* off the Scottish coast. All the crew were drowned but himself, and he, clinging to the roof of the poop for 24 hours in a terrific storm, was picked up by a boat. On another occasion, in the Shannon, he was two hours in the water at night before being picked up. In lowering the anchor, he was dragged overboard. Again, when in a gale off Lundy Island, McDonnell was carried overboard from the bowsprit. Kearon threw him a lifebuoy which he caught, and after sailing the vessel under great difficulties for two miles, McDonnell was picked up. Such experiences are not those of a coward, but of a man whose life was entirely devoted to the interests of his employer and the welfare and safety of his crew.

'The following is taken from the *Western Mail*: Our Carmarthen correspondent visited Fishguard and Goodwick on Sunday, and the particulars he has gleaned of the shipwreck which occurred off that coast on Friday substantiate in the main the paragraph which appeared in the *Western Mail* on Saturday. Indeed, the latest news to hand makes up one of the saddest stories ever known of shipping disasters off the Pembrokeshire coast. The terrible gale of Friday last was felt in its intensest force off Fishguard Bay, the wind being N.N.E. and force from 8 to 9. The seas outside the harbour rose mountains high—a rougher sea has not been experienced there for many a long year. At 1.40 p.m. a three-masted barquentine was sighted off Fishguard Bay, standing to westward. She was labouring very heavily, and hundreds of people braved the elements in order to watch the fortunes of the ill-fated vessel. About 2.40 o'clock Carr, the coastguardsman on watch at the Goodwick look-out, says he observed that she showed signals of distress, namely, the English ensign half-mast high and the Union Jack upside down. Her lower foretopsail was split, and she had no head sails up. This was after she had passed Fishguard Bay. Coastguardsman Freathy, who kept a constant lookout on the vessel through a telescope, was able to distinguish seven men in the rigging, clinging like grim death to the ropes, and one man at the helm. Another person whom our correspondent interviewed maintained that when he sighted her through his glass there were two men at the wheel, putting forth all the power they could to steer the ship. Shortly afterwards, he says, a terrific sea completely engulfed her for a time, and when she righted herself a little he was under the impression that the two men left the helm and joined their comrades in the rigging, having, no doubt, lost all command and resigned themselves to Providence. Nautical men on shore were of opinion that the captain was trying to weather Strumble Head, a quarter most dangerous to vessels, lying close inland as she did, owing to the rugged rocks abounding there. Strumble Head is six miles west of Fishguard, and those on shore were led to think that the one in command must have been utterly unacquainted with the coast, else he would not have tried to weather it, but would have run the vessel on to the Goodwick Sands, where she would have ridden in safety.

'She kept sailing quickly to westward under heavy canvas, and about 3.10 p.m. she struck the cliffs about 200 yards west of Portsychan. Had it been the blackest of nights, instead of broad daylight, the unfortunate vessel could not have foundered on a worse spot. Everything points to the conclusion that, after passing the Cow and Calf Rocks, the vessel was to a great extent, if not absolutely, at the mercy of the waves, because between this point and the place where she struck there were two inlets where she could have run in in safety. Within four minutes of the time when she struck, so says Coastguardsman Tanalry, all was hopelessly lost. The poor fellows on board had not the vestige of a chance of life, seeing that a high precipice lowered above them and against which the waves dashed with immeasurable force. The vessel's timbers were also torn asunder, and before anyone was able to approach with assistance—if assistance was possible, which is very doubtful—the heartrending calamity was complete. There was nothing in sight, with the exception of small bits of wreckage, the largest piece recovered being a spar about 15ft long. It should be stated that when the signals of distress were hoisted, the coastguardsmen fired a rocket, and the rocket company, 21 in number, brought the apparatus into requisition. The Goodwick lifeboat rocket was not fired, although there were hundreds around the building and a crew easily obtainable. It is the general opinion that had the lifeboat been launched she could not possibly have reached the storm-tossed ship in time to be of any service; yet surprise is felt by many that some attempt at rescue was not made at an early stage. A good deal has been said locally about this point, and in order to know the true reason why the lifeboat was not manned, our correspondent obtained interviews with the first and second coxswains and the local secretary of the National Lifeboat Institution. Their opinions are referred to below.

'On Saturday morning Coastguardsmen Hynds, Freathey and Pitman noticed the body of a man from the precipice above on the rocks below, and later in the day it was brought up by means of a sack and ropes, and carried to an outhouse adjoining Tresenwen Farm, occupied by Mr Rowlands. The discovery was at once reported to Police Constable Lewis (Goodwick) and Police Sergeant Rosser (Fishguard). The body, which was picked up 100 yards from the spot where the unfortunate vessel foundered, was that of a medium-built man, 5ft. 10in in height. Every stitch of clothing had been washed off it. On the right arm are tattoo marks representing a heart, anchor and cross, and on the left the figure of a girl. Apart from a moustache of brownish colour he was clean-shaven. It was very much mutilated about the head and stomach. The second body was found, within an hour afterwards, about 200 yards away, by Freathey. It was that of a man about 38 years of age, standing 5ft. 8in., of very stout build. This also was divested of every particle of covering. Deceased had a light moustache. The right arm had been literally torn off by knocking against the jagged rocks. On the remaining arm is a tattooed representation of a crucifix. There is an old scar on the left leg below the knee and another on the right knee. The body was horribly mangled. The backbone was broken, head beaten in, and stomach torn as if by a spar, showing the terrible force of the waves. Up to the time of writing, no other body had been found, but Mr Ivor Evans, of Cardigan will probably hold an inquest today on the two found. In addition to the

green figurehead (a woman) and other things mentioned in Saturday's issue. The coastguardsmen have picked up a man's rough woollen drawers bearing the initials "J. K." This article of clothing, in addition to other circumstantial evidence, has placed it beyond a doubt that the wrecked vessel was the barquentine *Salus*, which sailed from Drogheda, Ireland, on the 23rd inst. for Swansea, with ballast. The identification of the vessel was the result of a letter received on Sunday by Chief Officer Monk of the Goodwick Coastguard Station, from Mr John Tyrrell, ship and commission agent, etc., Cardiff Docks. Mr Tyrrell, after referring to the *Western Mail* paragraph, wrote: "I am afraid she (the vessel) is the *Salus*, 293 registered, with 500 tons cargo. To the best of my belief, she had a woman figurehead, painted green. If she was round-sterned and hailed from either Dublin or Drogheda. The owner is Richard Kearon, King's Hill, Arklow, Co. Wicklow. The master's name is Richard Kearon; he is about 60 years of age, very stout, and grey-haired, inclined to baldness on the crown of the head. The owner is a friend of mine, and I would be very sorry to have my fears confirmed. He has a large family, and the vessel is uninsured, I believe." As before stated, the initials on the drawers are "R. K.", thus corresponding with those of Mr Tyrrell's friend. It is that of a stout person. another indication as to the correctness of the fears entertained.

'On looking at the shipping reference book, our correspondent finds the following entries : "*Salus*, of Shoreham, built 1868 at Southwick, Sussex. International code signal letters, HNKJ; 264 tons register; official number, 58,028." The owner in 1887 was Michael Cullen, of West Street, Drogheda. Amongst other things picked up, which might prove as clues to the identity of the other poor fellows, are a carpenter's plane, bearing the name "Henderson," and an old hand-brush, with the letters "W. T." and "W. Trevor" cut on it. A woman's white hat was found near the spot, and it is feared that a female has also perished.

Immediately the distress signal was observed, the coastguardsmen fired a rocket, and ran with the lifesaving apparatus along the cliffs, but in a few minutes afterwards it was seen that some of the sails had been torn, and the vessel struck almost against the face of the cliff. In four or five minutes there was nothing to be seen above the foam; the ship in an incredibly short span was practically in splinters. A general topic of conversation between the inhabitants of the district is the fact that the Goodwick lifeboat was not launched, and as it was hinted in some quarters that, in not manning the lifeboat, the coxswain and crew were to blame, our correspondent interviewed several persons affected by the imputation. He found that the men were not to be blamed for what, to the uninformed public, appeared to be a lack of duty and a want of a spirit of humanity. The sore point is that the vessel was said to have been seen flying signals of distress when passing the bay in sight of Fishguard. This was the statement made by our contemporary, but upon close enquiry, it seems that this was not so. The second coxswain, Lewis, Captain Rees, and several other seafaring men were out with their glasses, and they all positively assert that when on the Fishguard side of Penyglais Point she did not show signals of distress. On the contrary, she was under heavy press of sail, and going at the rate of about six knots an hour, apparently under control. The signal was hoisted a few minutes before she struck on the other side of the cliff, after her sails had split,

but this was five or six miles from, and out of sight of, Fishguard, and it would be an utter impossibility for the lifeboat to catch her up. The coxswain, James Thomas, is a man who has, in the past, proved himself a man of action and resource in similar circumstances, and this belies the very idea that he would have abstained from firing his rocket and launching the lifeboat if it was thought that there was work for her to do. All those who had glasses appear to have been under the impression that the person in command of the vessel must have had the intention of weathering Stumble Head. If he was in distress, they say, he would have hove to and run into Fishguard Bay, where his vessel would have been safe. However, no one is left to tell the tale, and the state of things on board can only be guessed at.

‘Mr Vaughan secretary of the local lifeboat committee, will attend the inquest on behalf of the institution. All in all, the circumstances are almost too terrible to be fully realized. A constant look-out is kept for the missing bodies. The schooner, J. L. Waters, of Arklow, belonging to Messrs Kearon & Storey, anchored in Arklow Bay on Thursday. The crew came on shore, leaving only a boy on board. The gale prevented them from reaching her until Friday evening. Although having only one anchor out, the vessel held her ground all through, but the peril of total destruction which threatened the vessel during the gale ought to teach her skipper a lesson for the future.’ (*Bray and South Dublin Herald*, 3 October 1896, p. 6)