



The Lifeboat 'MONA' Disaster

8th December 1959



STORIES FROM THE LOCAL NEWSPAPERS OF 1959



The tragedy of Broughty's empty shed.

Broughty Ferry mourned yesterday (8th Dec) under a bleak, scowling sky that was still full of menace of the South-easterly wind – the same wind which, only a few hours earlier, threshed the waves to a frenzy and brought death to eight of the bravest men, writes a “Courier” reporter.

Daybreak had brought the first chilling, stunning moment when the lonely little Mona was spotted rocking on the receding tide as the thin cries of the gulls mingled with the boom of the Buddon breakers.

With every hour that passed anxious calls for news jammed the telephone switchboards at “The Courier” office, indicating the nation-wide impact of the tragedy.

Nowhere was it felt more than in the small area of huddled houses in Broughty – Fisher Street, Ambrose Street, David Street, Fort Street and Bath Street – where for generations, the fisher folk have lived, and where, day in day out, the old men in their blue reefer jerseys stand in corner groups.

It has been by tradition, as well as juxtaposition to the lifeboat shed, that the lifeboat men have been drawn from that close knit quarter well within earshot of the warning maroons.

To the Lifeboat shed itself – whose shut side door hid the tragic emptiness – the early crowds, palefaced and tight-lipped gravitated.

The immensity of the shock was too great to comprehend at once. It sank into numbed minds slowly and unwillingly.



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This was the sort of thing one read as happening elsewhere, but not here in the Ferry.

The absence of visual evidence of the tragedy hindered comprehension. In the Arbroath disaster in 1953 the lifeboat lay on the rocks within sight and sound of home.

Here at Broughty there was no such grim evidence, just the familiar, comfortable bulk of the Castle, the pile light, the Tayport-Newport shoreline, and the small boats drawn up on the Fisher street shingle, boats with names like 'Margaret' and 'Little Auk'.

It was so easy in the comfort of daylight to visualise the 3 am scene when the rockets crashed their S.O.S. and eight brave men rubbed sleep from their eyes to answer the summons.

Easy, too, to see them racing out into the squall of wind and rain, climbing into the Mona, maybe cracking a grim joke, as men do in the worst of circumstances, then out into the river, and ever out into the awful, heaving waste of water.

Easy, moreover, to imagine the women left at home, wondering and waiting, glancing at its clock with its cosy tick, poking the dead embers of the fire, making tea.

Or maybe lying in bed, gazing up in the darkness at the ceiling, gripping the blankets as each fresh flurry of howling rain spatters the windows.

In the lower reaches of Fort Street, across from the lifeboat shed and past St. James's Church – The Beach Kirk – whose minister the Rev M.A. Ritchie, and his ministerial colleagues, were early on the scene, women stood together with coats thrown hastily over pinafores, shivering, yet oblivious of the cold.

The same sort of scene was enacted at close-ends in all the streets south of Brook Street.

In Gray Street cafes, the customary animated morning-coffee buzz of conversation was subdued.

Early editions of the "Evening Telegraph and Post," with the first lengthy accounts and pictures, were eagerly snapped up. Purchasers included girls on their way back to Grove Academy after lunch.

As the day wore on, and darkness came to envelope Broughty and cloak the tragedy, there seemed by comparison, a certain harshness about the brilliantly-lit shopping area, with windows gay for Christmas and bright with the manifestations of festivity.

Then one remembered the true and inner meaning of Christmas and knew that, despite the universal horror and grief, and particularly the anguish of the bereaved, the eternal verities prevail to bring comfort to the stricken homes.