

Excerpt From

Porthgwarra

By

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From around 1910 the coastguards, stationed at Tol Pedn (now Gwennap Head) half a mile along the cliff from Porthgwarra towards Land's End have maintained a watch over the sea. Lately this has become a part time voluntary service. However disasters have not been wholly averted, as there have been wrecks in the area.

The most notable one was that of the sailing boat Khyber which occurred whilst the coastguard houses were being built in 1905. The Khyber with a crew of twenty six men, had sailed from Australia in October 1904 with a cargo of grain. On 14th March 1905 the Khyber had been sighted passing the Wolf Rock Lighthouse, on a heading to cross Mounts Bay towards the Lizard, in heavy seas with a refreshing gale.

My grandmother (Ann Jackson) at the time was working in the house of her aunt at Roskestal but had been visiting in Porthgwarra that evening, along with her cousin Janie Williams. The evening was very rough and wet but Ann persuaded her fiancé Jack Harvey that, since she had company, he need not walk her back to Roskestal. Jack was always to regret this decision because he considered that he might have seen some distress signals from this stricken vessel as she was pounded, near the cliffs at Tol Pedn. In the event no one saw the Khyber until early next morning when she was spotted, almost ashore, by a workman who had arrived at the site near

Porth Loe (where the coastguard houses were under construction). A workman ran to Porthgwarra to summon help from the residents. By the time they arrived at the scene the sailing boat was on the rocks and within fifteen minutes had completely broken up. Only three members of the crew were saved and it is recorded that workmen, with ladders from the building site, rescued them. No photographic evidence exists of the boat going ashore but there are postcards showing an artist's impression of that disaster. There are photographs of the scene some hours later, which show nothing but broken up spars and wood.

Communications were very limited in 1905. I have been told that Mr. Williams of Roskestal farm rode his horse to Sennen to alert the lifeboat crew but they were unable to launch because the sea had thrown boulders onto the launch slipway. I understand that following this incident the Sennen breakwater was built to give some protection to the launching slip

The Penzance lifeboat Elizabeth and Blanche was also summoned. She was a pulling (rowing) & sailing lifeboat and was actually towed to Tol Pedn by the steamer the Lady of the Isles. The storm was just too great for the crew to make headway by rowing. However they still arrived too late to be of assistance. - after a very brave attempt.

The locals searched for any other survivors from the Khyber and picked up wreckage. After their marriage in 1906, Jack and Ann kept two mementos retrieved from the wreck. One was a white china plate with a picture of a young lady on it and the other was a telescope (Captain's). Some years later a woman visited their cottage in Porthgwarra and said that her husband to be was one of the victims of the Khyber disaster. That plate, with her image on it, was being brought back as a wedding present. Jack immediately gave the plate to the visitor. The telescope is now in the possession of Jack and Ann's grandson.

In 1923 the steamer, City of Westminster, hit the Runnel Stone in fog. She knocked off the top twenty foot and become lodged there. the crew and passengers were rescued by the Sennen and Penlee lifeboats. Although the Tol Pedn LSA (Life Saving Apparatus) company had been called out and were standing by, their services were no longer required. A tug stood by awaiting salvage. Jack Harvey, a member of the LSA, returned home to Respletha cliff -a mile away. In the garden with his son (Raymond), they heard continuous blasts of a ships siren. This is a recognised distress signal and they thought another ship was in trouble. The fog then began to lift and they could see the City of Westminster had been broken in half, as the tide dropped back. Soon the tugs crew signalled a message to the coastguard, by Aldis lamp, which said that a piece of rigging from the stricken vessel had become entangled around the siren's lanyard, causing it to sound!

In the 1920's Raymond Harvey, as a young man living with his parents at Rowe's Cottages, got up early one morning to prepare to go to work. As was usual, he opened the front door to check the weather

and sea conditions. About a quarter of a mile from Porthgwarra he saw a craft about the size of a fishing boat. Since it was not a crabbing season he doubted that it was a local boat. He looked through a telescope and thought that the boat was well laden. He called his father and gave him the telescope. Jack declared that the boat was full of men. They took a torch and signalled the boat. A flashing light responded. Jack and Raymond hurried to the slipway and launched their dinghy. They towed ashore that boat, which contained sixteen Greek seamen of whom only one spoke some broken English. The men said that their ship had been in collision with another vessel near the Wolf Rock Lighthouse (8 miles southwest of Land's End) had been sunk. The families in the cove gave the cold men hot drinks, sat them by the slab and provided them with warm clothing. The Tol Pedn coastguard was contacted & the men were sent to the Fishermen's Mission, Newlyn. Another of that ship's lifeboats, with fifteen men aboard, later came ashore at Cape Cornwall (due N. of Land's End). The Porthgwarra residents, none of whom were well off, heard nothing further from these rescued seamen although, at the time of the incident, there had been a promise of compensation.

