

The “MARY STODDART” TRAGEDY and the BLACKROCK LIFEBOAT

The “MARY STODDART”

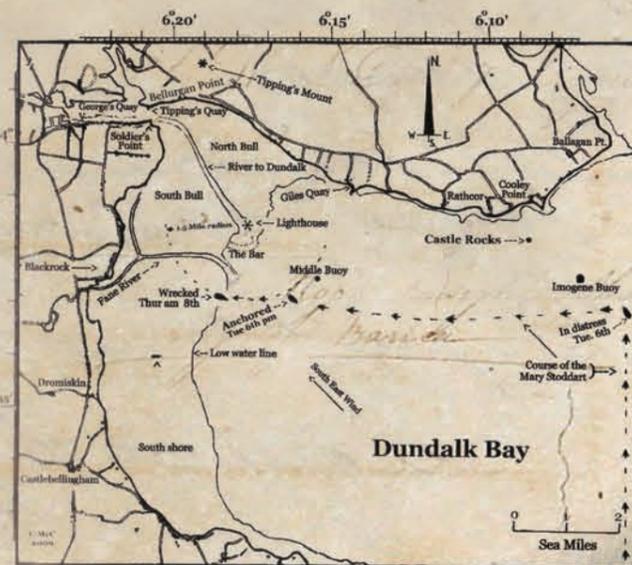


Drawing by Michael Harris Barke

On Tuesday 6th April 1858 a low-hulled barque, the “Mary Stoddart”, out of Scarborough in England, ran aground in Dundalk Bay during a violent storm with a crew of 18 on board. Her decks were two or three feet below high tide level and the hapless crew had to tie themselves up in the rigging, spending the next three days and nights drenched, frozen and helpless while the piercing gales and storm continued to rage. For three long days desperate rescue attempts by boats leaving Soldier’s Point in Dundalk were foiled by the turbulent tides and waves. Attempts were then made from Blackrock to reach the stricken crew, and two yawls with local men George Elphinstone and James Crosbey in charge of their six-man crews again failed because of the high winds and the turning of the tides at crucial times.

By Friday morning the 9th of April, the storm had still showed no signs of abating, and shortly after dawn another attempt was made from Soldier’s Point by Captain James Kelly and Captain John Hinds in two boats piloted by George Elphinstone and James Crosbey because of their knowledge of the Fane river channel. On nearing the “Mary Stoddart” Captain Kelly’s boat was overturned by a giant wave. Another wave righted her, and the crew, hanging on for dear life, clambered back in. Captain Kelly however, was carried away from his boat. The last words his crew heard him shout over the noise of the wind were “Lord, have mercy on me” before he sank under the waves. (A monument to the memory of Captain Kelly was subsequently erected at Roden Place in Dundalk.)

Captain Kelly's Monument, Roden Place, Dundalk.



Map courtesy of the County Louth Archaeological and Historic Society

Photo courtesy of Richard Whitmarsh

The BLACKROCK LIFEBOAT

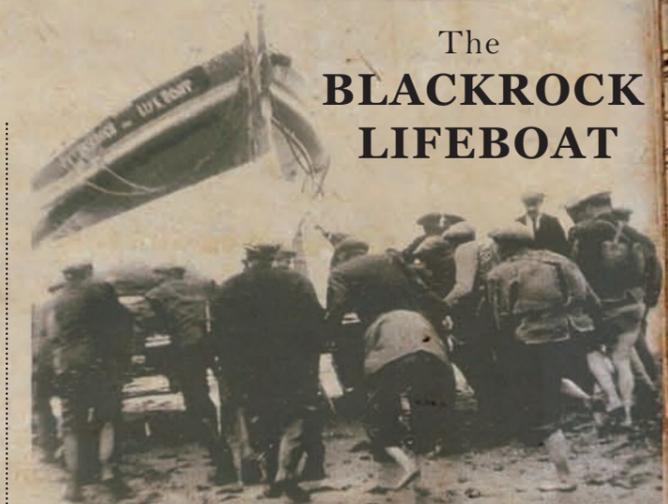


Photo courtesy of John Hamill

The remaining crew members of Captain Kelly’s boat, suffering from exposure and shock, were ferried back to Blackrock by Captain Hinds, but James Murphy and Gerald Hughes were both dead on reaching shore and James Crosbey died shortly afterwards (a plaque now identifies the site of his home on Main Street). The eleven surviving crew members of the “Mary Stoddart” were finally brought off the following day, Saturday the 10th of April, after the winds had eased somewhat.

The “Mary Stoddart” herself eventually broke up where she had run aground, 2 nautical miles (3.7km) straight ahead from where you are now standing, beyond the Fane river channel. Some artefacts, including her bell and barometer, were salvaged and were displayed at the Dundalk Show of 1908.

Eleven men died in the “Mary Stoddart” tragedy. Seven crew members of the ‘Mary Stoddart’ perished, and four local people lost their lives in the heroic rescue attempts over those five fateful days in April 1858.

In 1859, the year following the ‘Mary Stoddart’ tragedy, a lifeboat station was established at Blackrock and was located at the southern end of the promenade on a site donated by Thomas Fortescue, Lord Clermont (a heritage plaque now marks its location). Although a slipway was constructed to facilitate launches of the lifeboat, transporting the vessel over the sand and mudflats proved difficult. It became clear that a more efficient alternative was to build a new boathouse closer to the Fane river estuary. This was achieved when the boathouse at the promontory at Southend was brought into service in 1900. The building still stands today.

There were four Blackrock lifeboats in all. The first, which served from 1859 to 1867, was unnamed. In 1867 the “Stockport Sunday School” was allocated to Blackrock having been funded by the Stockport Children’s Sunday School in England. This remained in service until 1885 when it was replaced by the “General R Dudley Blake”. Finally in 1909 this in turn was replaced by a second “General R Dudley Blake” which served as the Blackrock lifeboat until the service eventually ended in 1935.

During its 76 years of service under coxswains Bernard Hamilton, Michael Hamilton and Daniel Smith, the Blackrock lifeboat was called out 40 times and saved some 84 lives. The “General R Dudley Blake” continued to operate for pleasure trips out of Howth for many years afterwards, but it made a nostalgic and festive return to Blackrock in the summer of 1994, an event which prompted Blackrock Tidy Towns to establish the annual Raft Race which has taken place every summer since 1996 in the same waters where the Blackrock Lifeboat once operated.

The Old Boathouse



Photo courtesy of Paul Boyle



For more information on the “Mary Stoddart”, the Blackrock Lifeboat, and the Heritage of Blackrock, scan the code.

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