The tragedy of the *Stella.*

The last year of the nineteenth century saw the worst maritime tragedy that the islands had ever seen. On the Thursday before Easter, 30th March , the *London and South-Western Railway Company* had arranged an excursion to the islands of Guernsey and Jersey. It was the first daylight service for the 1899 season. There was a night-time service all year round, but during the summer it had introduced another daily service. There was a special excursion every Easter before the start of the service at the beginning of May. The price of the tickets was special too – twenty-five shillings for the first class and seventeen shilllings and sixpence for the second class from Southampton return.

That day it was the *Stella,* under the command of Captain William Reeks, that would take one hundred and forty-seven passengers on their voyage to the islands. The boat-train left Waterloo in London at five minutes to nine in the morning with one hundred and ten passengers on board and arrived just after eleven o'clock. Thirty-seven other passengers went on board and the boat left ten minutes late at twenty-five past eleven.

The weather was fine but rather cold – ten degrees (Fahrenheit)- and because Easter was so early that year, there were not as many passengers as usual. So there was plenty of room inside the saloon as well as on deck. Soon after they had passed the Needles lighthouse on the Isle of Wight, the *Stella* began her voyage of sixty-four miles towards the Casquets and the islands. She never arrived.

By 1899 there were two compognies which provided boat services to the islands, the *London and South-Western* from Waterloo and Southampton and the *Great Western* from Paddington and Weymouth. There was great competition between the compognies to encourage the people to use their service. In 1890 the service from Weymouth was carrying more passengers than that of Southampton, so the LSWR company ordered three new steamers to be built –the *Frederica,* the *Lydia* and the *Stella.* The *Frederica* made the fastest passage at the beginning, but in the *Guernsey Star* of 13th November 1890 there was a report that the *Stella* had made the voyage from Jersey to Guernsey in about one hour twenty minutes. Five days later, another report said that the same ship had passed the Needles lighthouse on the Isle of Wight four hours and ten minutes after it had left the harbour in Guernsey. The GWR company replied to this news with a report that its ship the *Ibex* had made the same voyage in an extraordinary time in 1891 – three hours thirty minutes!

In the *Guernsey Star* of September 1891, another report told of a race between the *Frederica* and the *Ibex* from the White Rock in Guernsey to Jersey which was won by the *Frederica* by one and a half minutes. This competition carried on for some years and there were some accidents during that time. On Good Friday 1897, during another race, two hundred passengers and sailors of the crew were put ashore at Noirmont in Jersey when the *Ibex* hit a rock and was damaged. Even though there was an official enquiry these races continued and the wreck of the *Stella* became one of the results.

The Captain of the *Stella* at that time was William Reeks, a man of forty-nine years who had begun his service with the LSWR company in 1874 as a crew member and he became captain in 1891. He had his pilot's certificate for Guernsey, Jersey and Southampton, and he had made the voyage between the islands and England hundreds of times.

On 30th March 1899 the weather was fine when the *Stella* left the quay at Southampton at twenty-five minutes past nine in the morning, and when she had passed the Needles, her speed was eighteen and a half knots. The captain had his lunch with the passengers and during that time, the Chief Officer Richard Wade was on the bridge to navigate. The horizon was no longer as clear and soon fog began to roll towards the ship. By half past three it was very thick, and those on the bridge could not see more than two or three hundred yards in front of the ship. Even though the visibility was so bad, the ship continued its journey at more than eighteen knots – something which was confirmed at the enquiry after the disaster by two passengers who had spoken with the Chief Engineer at that time and who had seen the revolution counter of the engines. The fog whistle sounded from time to time, but the passengers began to worry because the ship was still going so fast.

A member of the crew was sent to the bow of the ship to listen for the foghorn on the Casquets. The captain knew that he was about forty minutes from the tower and he had to be careful around this reef of rocks – one mistake, and he would find himself amongst the dangerous reefs to the north of Guernsey. Another thing, he would lose some time. Just before four o'clock, everyone on board should have heard the fog-horn at the Casquets but they didn't hear anything. At four o'clock they heard the fog-horn which sounded in their ears right above the ship, and at the same time, the member of the crew who had been at the bow of the *Stella* came running towards the bridge shouting, "Stop! Stop!" The men on the bridge saw an immense rock which had appeared at the moment the fog had cleared, about forty-five yards in front of the ship. At once, the captain ordered the engineer to put the engines in reverse, but it was too late. The *Stella* scraped along the rock and then drove to the right when another rock appeared and the keel hit three times with a noise, described at the enquiry by a passenger, as if a train travelling very fast was trying to stop. The ship was pushed further on to a reef of rocks with so much force that its engines were torn from their place. It passed over these rocks and found itself in deeper water, but the water was already coming through a gash cut through its length halfway up the hull.

The Second Officer George Reynolds, the only officer on the bridge who survived, said later that there had been a feeling of a "strange calm." The captain ordered the small life-boats to be put into the water and said calmly, "Women and children first and then the men." There was some panic amongst the passengers. There were some who had been asleep in their cabins or who had been lying in the benches in the saloon and they had been thrown on to the floor. They didn't have time to get dressed but some women didn't forget their jewellery boxes. There were plenty of life-belts made of cork in the old-fashioned way. (700 for the passengers and 43 for the crew.) The men watched as the little boats with their wives and children left the *Stella* but there were some women who didn't know what to do, and they cried out and wept on the deck. They didn't know that the *Stella* had only another seven minutes above water. The sea was filling up the ship rapidly and it was already sinking by the stern in 160 to 170 feet of water. The Chief Engineer managed to shut down the engines and to allow the steam to escape and to close two water-tight doors. He realised that it wouldn't make any difference and he went to the bridge to report to the captain.

Things would have been worse if the little boats had not been put into the water so quickly. Four boats were carrying almost all the women and children – but not all. There were two stewardesses in the crew – for one, Ada Preston, it was her first

voyage on the *Stella* and she did not survive. The other, Mary Rogers, managed to put all the women in her charge into the boats, but she gave up her life-belt to a woman who didn't have one, and when she saw so many people in the boat, she refused to get into it saying that one more would sink it. She stayed on the deck until the ship sank and was drowned. By this time, the *Stella* was almost under water. The bow was up in the air and those still on board had to jump into the water which was like ice. It was very cold in the boats as well – the temperature was in the forties. As one of the boats was leaving the *Stella*, the captain threw his binoculars into the boat; he knew that he had used them for the last time.

The fifth boat capsized and the people on board were drowned. Another two minutes and perhaps twenty passengers could have been saved. The officers tried to put other boats into the water when the bow of the *Stella* went straight up in the air, hesitated a moment and then disappeared under the water. The Captain and Chief Engineer were still on the bridge and they were drowned with the others who were on board.

Even though he had made the voyage hundreds of times before, that day Captain Reeks had not calculated his position near the Casquets correctly.When the *Stella* was a few miles from the rocks, he thought that the tide would have taken him a mile and a half to the west of the Casquets reef. But the neap-tide that day didn't take him as far to the west as he thought, and because the fog was so thick, he couldn't see the tower of the Casquets to take his marks and change course. At the enquiry it was suggested that the strong currents around the rocks had affected the navigation when the ship found itself so close to the reef. All kinds of suggestions were made, but it was very difficult to decide exactly what had happened. The men in the lighthouse heard a ship which was giving off steam, but quite often there was so much fog, that the ships which found themselves near the Casquets anchored and let off steam. These men didn't think anything of it and didn't know that it had arrived so close to their lighthouse.

It was at eight o'clock in the morning on Good Friday when the *Vera* and the *Ibex* arrived in Guernsey with survivors whom they had found that the first news of the tragedy was known. There had been fog everywhere on the island on the Thursday, and when the *Stella* didn't arrive at half past five as usual, it was supposed that it was going slowly because of the weather. On Friday morning, there was a great crowd of people at the White Rock and on the other jetties around the harbour. These people saw the *Vera* arrive with some survivors and soon the story of the tragedy was all round the town. The news was sent to Jersey, but the authorities did not believe it at first. Later, when the *Lynx* arrived there, the jetties were full of very worried people. Even though the relatives of people on board the *Stella* tried to find out what had happened at the offices of the LSWR in the islands, at Southampton and at Waterloo, no-one could help them. The only list of passengers was aboard the ship and when the survivors landed, their names were not recorded as they should have been. Therefore there were many mistakes made in the reports of the names of the drowned and those who had survived. Even some months later, the exact number of drowned was not known.

Some drowned people were found all over the Channel, near Alderney, Cherbourg and even at the mouth of the Seine. The English papers published the news and very soon everyone knew about the disaster. By Saturday morning, all Guernsey was in mourning and flags were flying at half-mast. In Jersey and in England it was the same. Reports of the disaster continued for a long time in the press and the enquiries took months because there had been so many people drowned.