

The Casquets.

At any time, the reef of the Casquets is dangerous. No matter if boat is large or small, if the sea is rough or smooth elsewhere, there are always swells, bad tides or currents around these rocks and it is soon in trouble. The reef is seven miles to the west of Alderney and extends nearly a mile from east to west with larger reefs to the north and south. Apart from these large rocks which always show above the water – there are some which are fifty to eighty feet high – there are other reefs which are covered by only three or four feet of water at high tide. The large rocks are called Lighthouse Rock, La Callotte, Little Casquet, L'Auquière and Noire Roque. At first, when it was reported that the *Stella* had struck the Casquets on monday, March 30th 1899, the authorities could not say for sure which rock it was. Later it became clear that the first rock it scraped past was L'Auquière which is forty-four feet above high tide and is just to the west of the rock with the lighthouse. At high spring tide, the sea rises and falls as much as thirty feet at the Casquets. When the Captain tried to avoid hitting L'Auquière, he steered to the right but straight in front of him he saw the Noire Roque. When he changed course again, the ship was taken over the reef that was under the water between the two rocks. He was going so fast that he did not have the chance to stop and the ship was wrecked.

Besides the dangers of the sea, the tides and the currents around the Casquets, there was always the danger of fog. The lighthouse had a foghorn, but it was not always possible to hear it from all directions. That day, in 1899, the fog was so thick that a man was sent to the bow of the ship to watch and listen for the foghorn. If the ship had passed only a hundred yards to the west of the Noire Roque, it would have arrived as usual in Guernsey.

For centuries, shipwrecks have been reported on the Casquets reef. In 1120, it is said, the only son of Henry I of England was drowned there during a storm, with one of his sisters and all the crew of the ship *La Blanche Nef* or the *White Ship* in English. If you talk about it to people from Barfleur in the Cotentin near Cherbourg, they will tell you that Prince William was drowned just outside the little harbour there. This name is well known in the history of England because Henry did not have another son to succeed him as heir to the crown. The result was nineteen years of civil war between Mathilda, (a daughter of William the Conqueror and sister of Henry 1st) and one of her cousins, Stephen of Boulogne. The death of the young prince changed the history of England.

In 1701 the ship *Michael* was en route to Lisbon in Portugal when it struck one of the rocks at the Casquets, but a few days later all the crew was saved by another ship. The men had found limpets, some fish and enough fresh water to survive.

Eight years later, the Governor of Alderney asked Queen Anne of England if he could build a tower on the Casquets and put a light there to warn mariners of the danger around there. The rocks were rented to a man called Le Patourel who had to look after a coal fire to warn mariners of the danger. The coal was brought to the Casquets, probably from Alderney, when the weather was fine. After sixty years, in 1785, the Governor at that time, Peter Le Mesurier, became the tenant. In 1785, three towers were built – Donjon, St. Pierre and St. Thomas. At first the light was a coal fire, and then it was an oil lamp. In 1790 it was a lamp able to revolve.

In 1774 also, the frigate *Victory* sank at the Casquets with eleven hundred men on board. The next warship of that name was Admiral Nelson's ship which was at the battle of Trafalgar on October 21st 1805.

In the eighteenth century, Trinity House, the society which maintains the lighthouses around the coast of England, took responsibility for the Casquets and three men were put in charge as keepers; two at a time whilst the third went to Alderney for a month. In 1855 the towers were made higher, but in 1877 there was only one light, in the St. Pierre tower, and the two others were shortened again.

For eighteen years, during the nineteenth century, a family named Hougue lived there without ever leaving the rock. Each member of the family took his, or her, turn to look after the light; father, mother and the six children. A boat came from Alderney each month and there was a little garden made with soil brought from the island where they could grow some vegetables and a few flowers. That little garden is still there, sheltered by the three towers.

During the Second World War the Germans used the Casquets as a signal station for their ships. In 1942 some English commandos attacked the lighthouse and took prisoner the seven Germans who were there. They left a message; "If you put more men on this rock, they will also be taken prisoner." Apparently they attacked the Casquets a number of times, and one of the men who was important at this time was Captain "Bonnie" Newton as he was known in Guernsey after the war. He knew the seas around the islands very well and also the Casquets reef, its tides and dangers. After the war he used to take visitors to Herm in his boat the *Martha Gunn*.

Since that time, there have been other wrecks on, or near, the Casquets, too many to mention here. It continues to be a very dangerous place regardless of the weather or tidal conditions, even with the navigation aids that we have now.