

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 shillings 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.