



SINKING OF THE PRINCESS VICTORIA

Passengers aboard one of the first roll-on, roll-off ferries were doomed when rough seas forced open the gates to the car deck during a routine 20-mile crossing between Scotland and Ireland over 50 years ago. Bob O'Hara investigates the tragic sinking.

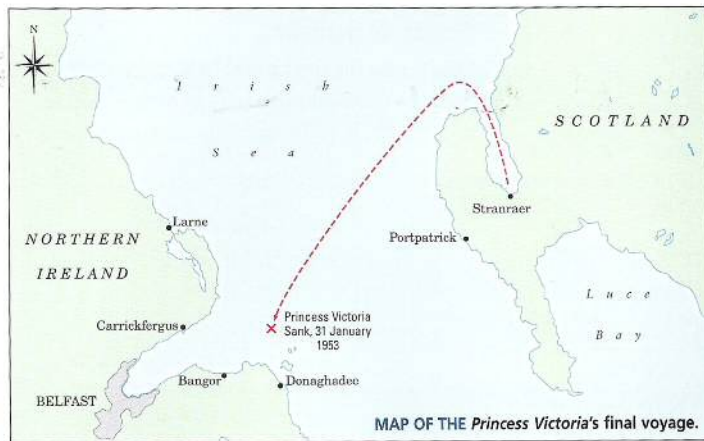
'A 19th-century disaster in the middle of the 20th century.'

Those were the headlines nearly 50 years ago on 31 January 1953 when the Stranraer to Larne railway ferry sank with the tragic loss of 133

lives. The story is told in several files at The National Archives (TNA) in Kew.

An inquiry opened in Belfast on 23 March 1953 and the report was issued on 11 June 1953 under the Merchant Shipping Act of 1894. Judge JH Campbell presided. He heard that the *Princess Victoria* was built by William Denny & Brothers of Dumbarton in 1947 and was owned and operated by the British Transport Commission. He also heard from many witnesses about what happened on the fateful day.

At 0745 on 31 January 1953, Captain James Millar Ferguson took the decision, despite bad weather, to make the routine journey from Stranraer in Scotland to Larne in Northern Ireland, with around 177 persons on board. Two hours after departing from Stranraer



MAP OF THE *Princess Victoria's* final voyage.

The severe gale-force winds increased, and shortly after were considered to be amongst the worst experienced in Scotland in the 20th century

EFFORTS TO CLOSE DOORS

Able Seaman ALEXANDER CRAIG, of Stranraer, who helped in the efforts to close the car doors, said the port-side door was intact when he first saw it. When they had got the starboard door closed another heavy sea came and burst both doors inward. The starboard door was badly twisted the second time. Witness said he was once flung back by the waves and was told to keep back or he would be washed over the stern. Craig said he was later told to stand by one of the lifeboats and also to keep a sharp look-out for the help which was expected. He saw nothing.

He said it was impossible to get his lifeboat on the port side released because of the list. As the "abandon ship" signal went he stood still for a moment since he stood still for a

LLOYD'S LIST REPORTED the evidence given at the official enquiry. Able Seaman Alexander Craig survived the ordeal and told the court that after a huge wave burst the doors inwards, 'it was impossible to get the stern doors closed after 15 or 20 minutes' strenuous effort'. *Lloyd's List*, 27 March 1953.

the *Princess Victoria* reported that she was not 'under command' and requested assistance from a tug. No tug was available in Stranraer and 45 minutes later the ferry sent a distress message asking for immediate assistance. At this point the Captain of the 3rd

Submarine Flotilla had been informed and ordered HMS *Contest*, the duty destroyer located at Rothesay, to proceed with all haste to provide assistance to the endangered ferry.

The logbook

According to her log in TNA file ADM 53/134847, *Contest* was ordered to proceed to assist MV *Princess Victoria* at 1026. She prepared for sea and slipped her buoy at 1109, set a southerly course and was underway with a speed of 21 knots at 1117. An entry in the *Contest* log shows the reported 1200 noon position of the stricken ferry as bearing west by south from Corsewall Point, at a distance of five miles. Corsewall Point is just outside the mouth of Loch Ryan. *Contest* reached that position shortly after 1300 but found no signs of the *Princess Victoria* and continued southwards. She recorded her own position as 54 degrees 40 minutes north, 5 degrees 21 minutes west (almost

The victims

Only around 44 people survived the disaster out of the 177 people on board the *Princess Victoria* (though these numbers vary slightly from source to source). Among the victims were Major Maynard Sinclair, Northern Ireland Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister at Stormont, and Sir Walter Smiles, MP for North Down. The body of Dudley Farnsworth Kipling was recovered from the sea. He was related to the poet Rudyard Kipling, and was traveling home from a business trip aboard the *Princess Victoria*. None of the senior officers were rescued, nor were any of the women and children on board.



the mid-point between the narrowest part of the Scottish and Irish coasts), at 1450. By this time Lieutenant Commander HP Fleming, captain of HMS *Contest*, realized that he had passed the area and returned northwards. At 1523, wreckage was sighted, and *Contest* began searching for and embarking survivors in the mouth of Belfast Lough. Eventually, the Belfast pilot was embarked and survivors were landed at 2345.

Severe gales

Should the *Princess Victoria* have put to sea? According to the Meteorological Office, there was a moderating gale, but no more than Captain Ferguson and the ferry had encountered on other occasions. However, the severe gale-force winds did not moderate; indeed they increased, and shortly after

LOGBOOK FOR HMS Contest, 31 January 1953.
TNA, ADM 53/134847

H.M.S. CONTEST										31									
SATURDAY day 31 st of JANUARY										19 53 From Rothesay to Belfast, or at Rothesay 31									
										REMARKS									
Log	Direction	Force	Mean	True	Over	Standard	Direction	Wind	Weather	Waves	Current	Direction	Force	Bar	Therm	Humid	Wind	Force	Direction
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The judge closely questioned some witnesses as to why no women and children had been saved...

were considered to be amongst the worst experienced in Scotland in the 20th century. The forecast of worsening weather was not available when Ferguson took his decision, according to Met Office enquiries in file BJ 5/274.

From about 0945, the *Princess Victoria* had been drifting slowly south west away from Corsewall Point and Loch Ryan and towards Mew Island and Belfast Lough. The Coastguard had launched the Royal National Lifeboat Institution lifeboats from Portpatrick and Donaghadee and they were en route to the stricken ferry. But they headed for the position broadcast from the *Princess Victoria* and, like HMS *Contest*, did not find her.

Inaccurate positions

Why was the wrong position transmitted? Neither the inquiry nor the subsequent appeal court received satisfactory answers to this question. A witness at the lower court was asked, 'Were steps taken to check the positions given by the ship?' The witness explained how 'snap' bearings were taken by Portpatrick and Malin Head radio stations (and later by Seaforth Radio), but these were unreliable for technical reasons, although the bearing taken at 1101 by Portpatrick was relayed to the *Contest*.

Radioed reports continued to show the *Princess Victoria* in the vicinity of Corsewall Point. As late as 1200, *Princess Victoria* was still indicating her position relative to Corsewall Point, and at 1232 she radioed that she was seven miles west of Killantringan Lighthouse (near Portpatrick) and still on the Scottish coast. It was not until

AT THE SCENE OF SINKING
Describing the arrival of the *East Coast* on the scene of the sinking, witness said he saw boats and wreckage and tried to pick up survivors. This could only be done with great difficulty owing to the state of the sea. He did not think many of those floating were alive. When he saw a group of people close together in the water he tried to get his vessel near them. But just as he began to approach a big sea wave came and washed them away. His crew had boathooks and they tried to catch everything that passed. Halfway through the trawlers' own rescue efforts, Mr. Brewster said, he saw a destroyer. Two aircraft circled around and dropped a flare quite close to the trawler. The 'planes were trying to give us assistance but we did not need any because we could not do any more than we were doing,' said the witness. The trawler remained in the vicinity until darkness fell and the other ships indicated that they were leaving. Fear of the six

THE INQUIRY HEARD descriptions of the scene of the sinking when rescue ships arrived. *Lloyd's List*, March 1953.

1335 that Captain Ferguson said the Irish coast was visible and a few minutes later, at 1347, a message was broadcast saying that they were now off the entrance to Belfast Lough. The final message sent at 1358 was addressed to HMS *Contest* and repeated the information about the location outside Belfast Lough. A little after 1400, *Princess Victoria* sank in the vicinity of Mew Island.

Lieutenant Commander Fleming of *Contest* appeared before Judge Campbell and stated that his ship could not have reached the *Princess Victoria* in time even if the correct position had been given. He said that during her journey from Rothesay, *Contest* had achieved 31 knots at times, but occasionally had to slow to 16 knots. Fleming agreed with the court that it would have been difficult for Captain Ferguson to give an accurate position with the ship on her beam ends. He also stated that radio direction finding was impossible from *Contest* (and perhaps other vessels) because of severe yawling.

Commander PJH Hoare, Staff Officer at the Royal Naval Air Station at Pitreavie, Scotland, told the court that on 31 January six other vessels in UK waters were sending distress signals. He stated that the sea area to the west of Portpatrick was under the command of the Commander in Chief, Plymouth, and that the distress messages from the Admiralty would have been relayed there first and then to HMS *Sea Eagle*, the shore base at Londonderry, and HMS *Gannet*, the Royal Navy Air Station at Eglinton in Northern Ireland.

The judge closely questioned some witnesses as to why no women and children had been saved. He was told that most women and children had been put into one lifeboat but the boat hit the side of the ship and was smashed to pieces. It was suggested that this went a long way to explaining why no women or children survived.

Negligence

In all tragedies with such extensive loss of life, there are heroes and those who could have done better. Mr Campbell, who sat with three technical assessors, asked probing questions about the construction of the *Princess Victoria* and her suitability for deployment on the Stranraer to Larne journey in winter. The Court noted that the British Transport Commission had rejected this vessel for the regular Fishguard to Rosslare crossings, as it was not considered to be robust enough.

The judge identified two deficiencies, which were attributed to the owners:

- Weak and badly designed stern doors.
- Scuppers that were inadequate for the run-off of large quantities of water on the car deck.

The owners were held to be principally at fault in causing the disaster.

An appeal under Lord MacDermott, the Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland,



TIMELINE: 31 JANUARY 1953

0745
Princess Victoria leaves Stranraer with around 177 persons on board

0946
Princess Victoria 'not under command' after wave burst through stern doors. Another distress message sent 4 minutes later

1026
HMS *Contest* ordered to provide assistance

1109
Contest prepares for sea

1300
Contest reaches the given position but finds no sign of *Princess Victoria* and continues southwards

1315
Princess Victoria crew prepare passengers to abandon ship

1335
Princess Victoria says Irish coast is visible and 12 minutes later they are off the entrance to Belfast Lough

1358
Final message sent to *Contest* repeats information about the location outside Belfast Lough

1400
Princess Victoria sinks in the vicinity of Mew Island

1450
Captain of *Contest* realizes he has passed the area and returns northwards

1523
Wreckage sighted and *Contest* begins searching for and embarking survivors in the mouth of Belfast Lough

II.

THE PRINCIPAL CAUSES OF THE DISASTER

In the opinion of this court there were three main causes for the loss of the "Princess Victoria":—

1.—"The inadequacy" to quote the words of the court below "of the stern doors, which yielded to the stress of the seas, thus permitting the influx of water into the car space". There can be no question about this finding. The doors had been properly rigged and fastened and they broke because they were not strong enough to hold against the sea. In the particulars furnished by the Commission this is expressly admitted in a passage which reads—"The stern doors were inadequate to withstand the sea encountered on 31st January, 1953". Had they held there is no reason to suppose that sufficient water to imperil the vessel would have got over them on this occasion. Wherever it may lead on the questions of seaworthiness and default, the fact that the doors were inadequate to keep out the sea in this instance must, therefore, rank as a direct cause of the disaster.

2.—"The inadequacy"—the quotation is again from

against the main findings by the lower court confirmed the original decision that the owners could not avoid their responsibilities. Lord MacDermott concluded:

The loss of the MV Princess Victoria was caused or contributed to by the default of the owners and the manager, Captain Perry, in that they were negligent before the disaster:

- in failing to appreciate that the vessel was unfit to encounter the full range of foreseeable weather conditions on the Larne and Stranraer route by reason of the inability of the stern doors to withstand heavy seas and the inadequacy of the freeing arrangements on the car deck
- in not taking appropriate steps to provide adequate freeing arrangements on the said car deck or else to make the stern doors sufficiently strong and adequate to prevent heavy seas from flooding that deck.

No whitewash here! Both courts were clear in their condemnation of those principally responsible. However, there were other faults not attributable to the owners amongst those who could have done better, but first let us look at some of the heroes.

Heroic bravery

George Medals were awarded to Lieutenant Stanley McArdle and Chief Petty Officer Wilfred Warren Owen of the *Contest*. Both entered the water in mountainous seas to rescue a survivor who had reached the limit of his endurance and could no longer cling to a life raft. The personal bravery of McArdle and Owen was in the best traditions of the Royal Navy.

OBEs were awarded to the masters of four small vessels, which put to sea despite being in ballast and managed to locate some survivors. The coxswains of the Donaghadee and Portpatrick lifeboats received BEMs and several RNLI awards.

Judge Campbell's inquiry was unanimous in placing on record the outstanding and selfless conduct of David Broadfoot, the wireless operator of the ferry, who remained at his post to the last, transmitting accurate messages in circumstances of the utmost difficulty and danger. The highest award for bravery that can be made to a civilian is the George Cross. The following announcement appeared in the *London Gazette* on 6 October 1953:

David Broadfoot was born in 1900 and started work as a GPO messenger before going to a

THE FOLLOWING TNA FILES were used to research this History Mystery:

ADM 1/24998 – Formal investigation into the total loss of MV *Princess Victoria* on 31 Jan 1953

ADM 53/134847 – Ship's log for *Contest*, Jan 1953

ADM 53/136818-136819 – Ship's log for *Tenacious*, Jan-Feb 1953

BJ 5/274 – Ministry of Transport (Shipping) Met Office enquiries re: *Princess Victoria*, 1953

THE INQUIRY identified three principal causes for the disaster – the inadequacy of the stern doors and of clearing arrangements for water aboard the ferry, and the shifting of cargo.

TNA, ADM 1/24998

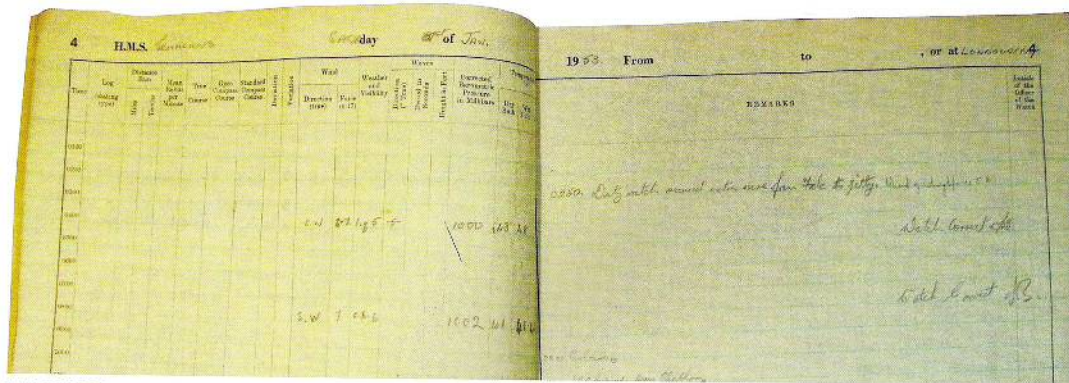
Marconi College where he trained to be a wireless operator. He had served on several other ships before joining the 'Princess Victoria' on 2nd October, 1950. On 20th Oct 1953, Mrs Muriel Broadfoot, of Royal Avenue, Stranraer, accompanied by her 13 year old son William, attended an investiture at Buckingham Palace to receive the George Cross from HM the Queen, which had been awarded posthumously to her husband.

Unanswered questions

Judge Campbell's report concluded by saying that if the *Princess Victoria* had been as staunch as the men who manned her then disaster would have been averted. But what of those who could have done better but were not identified at the inquiry?

Apart from the *Contest* based at Rothesay, the Royal Navy had a number of ships that might have helped in the disaster. The 3rd Training Squadron at Londonderry consisting of half a dozen operational anti-submarine frigates and destroyers were all on station that Saturday morning. Should the duty destroyer at Londonderry not have been involved in the rescue?

Why did a warship from Londonderry not proceed down the River Foyle to the sea at the time that *Contest* was setting course from Rothesay? Was the alert late in getting to the Londonderry vessels where the duty destroyer was HMS *Tenacious*? What was *Tenacious* doing at 1026? Was she preparing for sea like *Contest*? According to her log in TNA file ADM 53/136819, at 1030



THE LOGBOOK of HMS *Tenacious* for 31 January 1953 shows that she was sitting idle at Londonderry while the *Princess Victoria* was sinking.

TNA, ADM 53/132187

Despite a diligent and wide-ranging search all *Crispin* found was a single lifebuoy with the name *Princess Victoria*

Tenacious was preparing for captain's rounds by Commander CKS Aylwin, a routine weekly inspection of mess deck accommodation.

And at 1450, when *Contest* was reporting her position in the Irish Sea, *Tenacious* still had not left her berth in Londonderry and had let so many seamen and specialist ratings go ashore that she did not have enough hands to take the ship to sea. During the afternoon, naval and civil police were employed throughout the city of Londonderry to recover essential ratings. Volunteers were sought from those on other ships who had not gone on weekend leave to help man the emergency destroyer. Eventually, *Tenacious* was able to head down river at 1710 and reached the sea at Magilligan Point at 1900. By this time, it had long since been dark, and no traces of the *Princess Victoria* or her passengers or crew were sighted.

Next day, it was the turn of HMS *Crispin* and Lieutenant Commander FG Lachlan, MBE, to be the Londonderry duty destroyer and she searched the area off Mew Island. By this time it was over 24 hours since the ferry had first declared an emergency and despite a

diligent and wide-ranging search all *Crispin* found was a single lifebuoy with the name *Princess Victoria*.

Why did the Admiralty not dispatch the Londonderry duty destroyer to assist *Contest*? Why did neither Campbell nor MacDermott hear about these available ships? Both the enquiry and the appeal were held in Belfast and it seems strange that this question did not arise. Had Campbell and the Lord Chief Justice produced complaisant reports, which exonerated all and sundry, an answer would have been to hand. But we have seen that this was not so. Both courts probed events conscientiously and both identified establishment figures to be the principal culprits in the disaster.

The Admiralty knew that the 3rd Training Squadron at Londonderry had a part to play as *Tenacious* was ordered to join the search for survivors late in the day on 31 January and *Crispin* searched for bodies and wreckage on 1 February. Within a few days of the disaster, the Londonderry duty destroyer was permanently stationed at the mouth of the River Foyle at Magilligan Point at one hour's notice for steam.

It is all 50 years too late, but

surely someone must have lost at least one night's sleep when he thought of 133 lives going to a watery grave in a very rough Irish Sea, which might have been saved by a more timely deployment of *Tenacious*. Could someone at Admiralty in London or in the office of Commander in Chief, Plymouth have done better? What about the Senior Naval Officer Northern Ireland? Could he have done better? One wonders what a carefully worded application under the Freedom of Information Act would reveal.

Then there was the desperate irony of the movements of *Tenacious*. According to her log she was anchored in Belfast Lough at one hour's notice for steam from 27 January through to 29 January when she slipped her tug in Belfast Lough and headed for her base at Londonderry. Had her departure from Belfast occurred two days later, *Tenacious* would almost have bumped into the *Princess Victoria* as she drifted in the Irish Sea. Not only should someone in the Royal Navy have done better, but a little more luck was desperately needed.

A 19th-century tragedy indeed, on 31 January 1953.



BOB O'HARA was a telegraphist on HMS *Crispin* and recalls sending the signal from that ship to the Senior Naval Officer Northern Ireland, which reported the finding of the *Princess Victoria* lifebuoy. He now runs a research business (www.searcher-na.co.uk).

HAVE YOU BEEN affected by the issues raised here? Or have you solved a History Mystery that you'd like to share with us? Get in touch using the form at www.your-familyhistory.com/yourstories