

Carmarthen Bay Ship's Graveyard

Carmarthen Bay is a wide expanse of shallow water making a hazardous approach for the captains of sailing vessels wishing to transport cargoes to and from Llanelli. Sailing ships constantly came to grief on the shoaling sandbanks outside Pembrey, and looking through the records a surprising number of them were not intending to visit Llanelli, or any South Wales port at all.

Often ships would be battling with weather on a long sea voyage from foreign parts and arrive off South Wales mistaking it for the Cornish coast. While sailing eastwards they would be entrapped by the coastline of Carmarthen Bay, and if they did not realise their mistake early enough would invariably become wrecked somewhere between Cefn Sidan and Pembrey Burrows.

The channel of the Burry Estuary was marked by buoys around the Year 1800 but this idea was not greeted with enthusiasm by the local inhabitants who knew the channel anyway and thought that it would interfere with their smuggling and wrecking practices. Hence the buoys mysteriously vanished. One ship in 1815 that strayed severely off her intended course was LA CONCORDE, a French brig bound for Antwerp with a cargo of wine. The villagers of Burry Port were very industrious and quickly seized the opportunity to trundle home the casks of liquor. The Vessel Was finally set on fire by the wreckers after most of the cargo of excellent port had been removed. It is sometimes rumoured that Burry Port derives its name from the cargo of this wreck.

An exception to the rule that sailing ship wrecks are synonymous with storms is borne out in an odd situation that arose in the year 1868. It was a quiet winter's day on January 22nd, the afternoon was peaceful and a fleet of vessels ranging from 80 to 400 tons took advantage of the favourable weather and set off from Llanelli on their voyages. For a few days before a gale had been raging, but it had now ceased and now there was hardly a breath of wind. In order to help the large sailing vessels on their way, two tug boats towed them out to the estuary mouth, also known as Burry Bar. Fourteen vessels eventually arrived at the sand bar where the effect of an Atlantic storm was producing a terrific ground swell. One of the tug boats on returning up river to Llanelli, hailed the masters of the remaining vessels, and told them not to venture out of the harbour because of the huge swell. But this sound advice was treated as a joke by the skippers, as a favourable sailing wind was starting to blow. By early evening there were 20 vessels

All huddled together on the sand bar off Whitford sands, with the huge swell and very little wind, the vessels knocked against each other, breaking spars and masts as they collided. The whole fleet, huddled like sheep was being torn apart, each vessel unable to sail through lack of wind, and not enough sea room to sail away. The swell became worse and drove them towards the shore. Four of the ships involved belonged to Llanelli and on board one of these was a local pilot.

This ship, the "Onward" became separated from the rest and was tossed like a feather in a raging sea. It hit the shore with an awful grinding noise and the ships hull started to break up. As each wave hit the decks so it took pieces of wreckage with it. The nine men on board climbed the mast hoping for safety from the cruel sea, but during the night this collapsed causing four of them to be drowned. The other ships were in a similar plight, and during the night a north easterly gale sprang up causing further havoc to the hulks already grounding in Broughton Bay.

So complete was the calamity, known to this day as the Broughton Bay disaster that no fewer than 16 ships were wrecked and many of them were lost with their entire crew. One vessel luckily managed to return to Llanelli and another, the "ELIZA" of JERSEY was the only ship reported to have got safely out to sea.

The owner of the cargo of the "Mary Fanny, found her two days later after riding along the Gower coast in search of her. He found the vessel high up on the sands beyond Llanrhidian.

The wreck was salvaged and rebuilt, only to be later sunk by a German submarine in World War One. Her Master Captain Williams and crew perished.

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