

# **THE ORKNEY VIEW**

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*Photo: Alastair Cormack*

## ***This issue includes:-***

**Letters from an Emigrant Passage**

**A Winter's Tale from Valasay**

**Granny in Service**

**Rousay Boat Nousts**

**Wreck of the Eyfirdingur**

**'Salute to the Memory' by Johnny Pottinger**

**Competition Pages**

**Readers' pages, poems and many other features**



# The Tragic Loss of the MV EYFIRDINGUR

JOHN TOWRIE

As local readers will know, John Towrie, the author of this article died six months ago. John had researched this feature over last winter, finishing it only days before his death. We had earlier hoped that this would be the first of many contributions from John, but sadly it was not to be. He did, however, express to us a wish that this story be printed and we are pleased to do so in his memory.

All Orkney mourned the loss on 11 February 1952 of the Icelandic ship **Eyfirðingur**, which foundered on Lashy Skerry (locally called the Scroggs) off the Calf of Eday, with her seven man crew all being drowned. Apart from the Longhope Lifeboat disaster, it was one of the most tragic shipping accidents in Orkney waters in the last fifty years.

The **Eyfirðingur**, an oak ship, was built in France by E Capon in Fécamp, a port near Le Havre. Originally the **Jean Charcot**, she was described in Lloyd's Register of Shipping as an auxiliary lugger. Since some reports suggest that the ship was originally a fishing boat, she possibly could have been used for marine research.

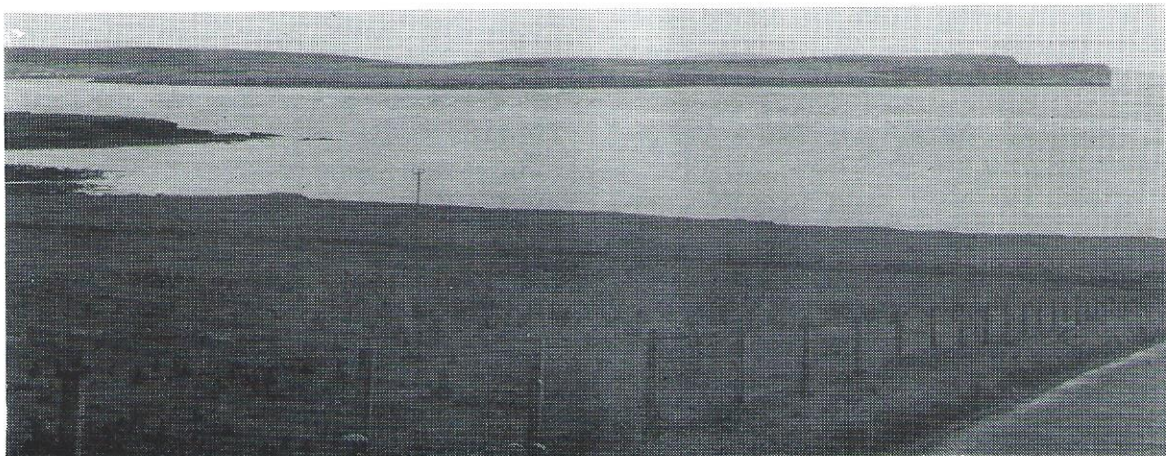
Later a 120hp Skandia diesel engine was installed. According to Lloyd's records the ship was 174 tons gross weight, with a net weight of 110 tons and a length of 117 feet.

In 1946 the **Eyfirðingur** was bought by Hjortur Larusson of Iceland and registered in the port of Akureyri, a town on the north coast of Iceland. The ship was sold on to Njall Gundlaugsson in

1950, but according to the reports in The Orcadian and The Orkney Herald the owner was still H Larusson in 1952 when the ship was stranded. Her crew on her last fateful voyage were as follows:-

Benedikt Kristjensson, Captain - age 46  
Marvin Aguctsson, First Officer - age 30  
Erlander Palsson, Engineer - age 47  
Gudmundur Gestsson, Seaman - age 25  
Sigurdur Gunnlaugsson, Seaman - age 21  
Vernhardur Sigurdsson, Seaman - age 48  
Vernhardur Errtsson, Cook - age 47

The **Eyfirðingur** had left Reykjavik on 5 February 1952 on passage to Antwerp in Belgium with a cargo of scrap metal. Captain Kristjensson next contacted Hornafjardar radio on the south east coast of Iceland reporting that everything was all right and that they were abeam of the Faroe Islands. That was the last that was heard from them. The distance from Reykjavik to Orkney is 700 miles and it took them six days to arrive, which meant an average speed of just under five knots. It may



*The scene of the tragedy, looking across from Sanday to the Calf of Eday. Lashy Skerry, where the **Eyfirðingur** came to grief, lies above the 'hydro' pole in the picture*  
Photo: Alastair Cormack



be that the vessel encountered heavy weather to slow her progress or that the engine broke down, also slowing her progress south. Kristjen Bendiktsson, the son of the captain, did tell me that his father described the ship as 'a pile of junk with an unreliable engine'.

It is a puzzle why the captain took his ship through the North Sound between Sanday and Eday, since the best route would have been through the Fair Isle Channel between North Ronaldsay and Fair Isle. I have a few theories as to his possible reasoning.

1. The ship may have had a mechanical failure in its 'unreliable engine' and was heading for Kirkwall for repairs.
  2. The captain was seeking shelter due to the bad weather and sea conditions.
  3. The ship was heading for Kirkwall to land an injured crewman.
  4. The captain had lost his way due to heavy snow showers causing poor visibility.
- They are, however, just my own theories and I have absolutely no evidence for any of them.

The **Eyfirthingur** was seen proceeding down the North Sound by the late Thomas Rendall, Meadow, Sanday before she went ashore on Lashy Skerry. The ship grounded around 6.30 to 7.00 p.m. on Monday 11 February 1952. There were heavy snow showers at the time, driven by a fresh northerly breeze. Heavy seas were running and it was a bright moonlight night. Robbie Clouston and James Baikie reported the stranding of the vessel. Mrs Elsie Work said that the ship was swamped by three huge waves and broke up around 8.00 p.m. When the ship ran aground it was quickly realised that she and her crew were in grave danger. Although it was reported that a flashing light was seen, which may have been a Mayday in Morse, there is no record that the captain sent out a Mayday distress call. There was a radio on board which possibly was out of order, as the last signal sent was when the ship was abeam of the Faroe Islands. Oliver Drever, Boloquoy, Sanday, remembers seeing clothes or blankets being burnt on deck, presumably to attract attention to the ship's distress.

The Eday Coastguards heard the crew shouting to attract attention. A motor boat from Calfsound tried to get close to the ship, but was unsuccessful due to the heavy seas. The crew of this motor boat were Willie Groat, owner, Everett Groat, David Reid, Thomas Wallace and Peter Hill. Eday Coastguards also tried to

get a breeches buoy across to the ship from the Calf of Eday but were unsuccessful.

The Stromness Lifeboat, the **J.J.K.S.W.**, a Barnett class lifeboat with a speed of 9-10 knots, under the command of Coxswain Willie Sinclair was launched at 7.18 p.m. After picking up a pilot at Eday Pier to guide them to the scene of the tragedy, the lifeboat arrived there at 11.45 p.m. She searched for fifteen hours for survivors but found none. The Sanday and Eday Auxiliary Coastguard companies also made a coastal search but found no survivors or boats.

During the search the Stromness lifeboat collided with a half-submerged mast which caused minor damage but otherwise her crew saw only the wreckage from the **Eyfirthingur**. The lifeboatmen managed to recover only two lifebelts but with no identification on them. After the unsuccessful search the Stromness lifeboat had to call at Kirkwall to refuel before returning to base. The crew of the lifeboat on this occasion were:-

Coxswain W Sinclair

Second Coxswain M Laughton

Engineer J Macrae

Seamen A Wilson and J Adam

Coxswain Willie Sinclair quoted to The Orcadian "It was a terrible night. The vessel must have taken a battering. Wreckage was floating like matchwood on the sea." Mr Tom Harvey told The Orcadian at the time "The lifeboat had a tough time and her Coxswain and crew must be congratulated for the speed with which they arrived at the scene. It was a magnificent feat of seamanship."

The Dennison family of Shapinsay owned three ships in 1952 and could have been at the scene of the tragedy in two hours. It is Captain William Dennison's opinion that one of their ships may have been able to save some lives, but they were not called out and all were lost.

One victim washed ashore on Eday, at Sandquoy, was thought to have been the captain from his clothing. Three other bodies, one of them possibly the engineer as he had grease on his hands, came ashore in Sanday on 12, 13 and 16 of February. One body was found below Pool by Billy Walls now of Schoolhouse, a second was found near Ayre and the third by Jock Muir, Backaskaill, at Braas Geo. As the access to Braas Geo is very steep, a number of men were needed to recover the drowned sailor. They were Jock and Robbie Muir, Peter Marcus, Tommy



Moodie and James Moodie. Peter Marcus, who was the Harbour Master in Sanday at the time, provided the necessary ropes. One of the men found on Sanday had a ring with the names Erna and Inga engraved on it. Two bodies were kept in a temporary mortuary in a building near Leyland, Sanday and the third at Midmyre. Near the body found at Ayre was a barrel of diesel and it may be that the crewman had used the barrel as a float. The bodies were transported from Sanday to Kirkwall in coffins made by the late John M Slater. All four victims were then sealed in lead-lined coffins for transportation to Leith and eventually Iceland for burial.

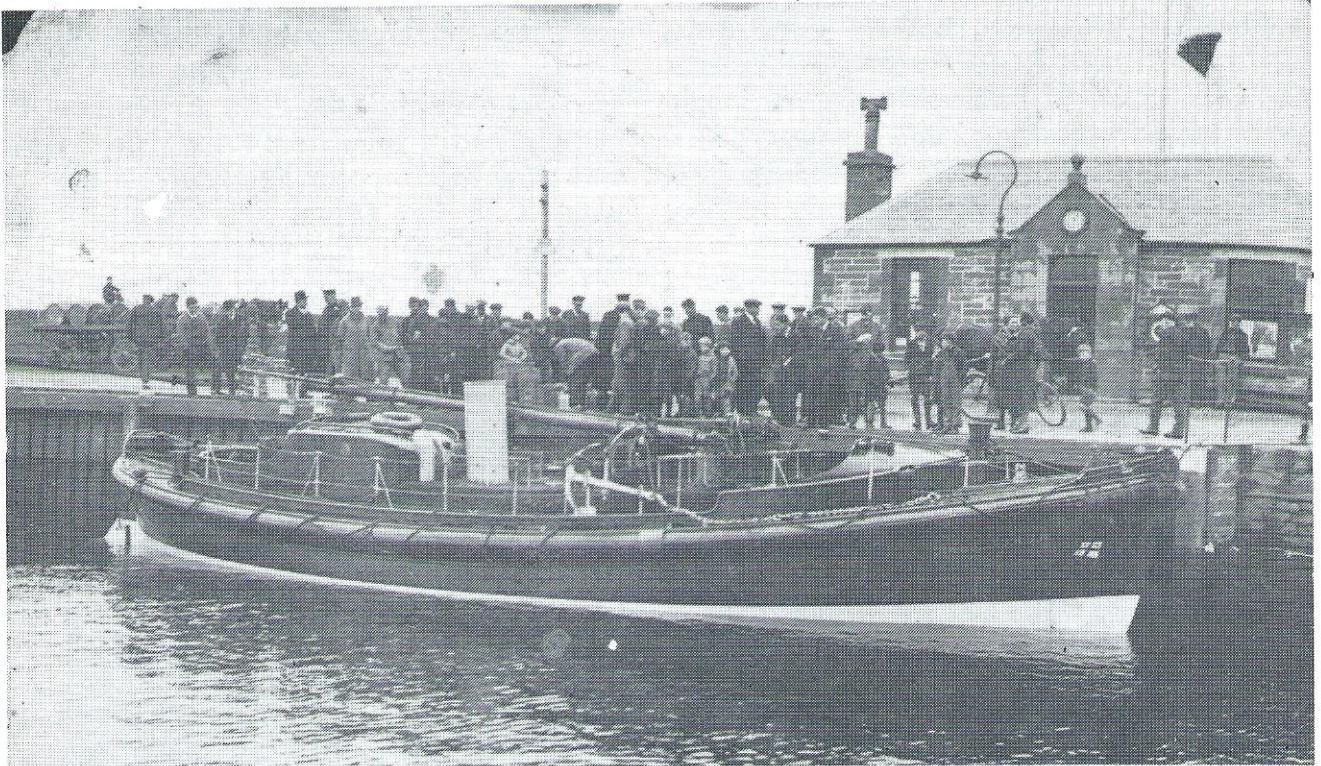
A fifth man was washed ashore on Stronsay about one month later and was laid to rest in Bay Cemetery. The funeral service was conducted by the Rev Edward Fox, one of the pallbearers was John Dennison and a wreath of flowers was laid over the grave by the South End Men's Club.

In his church magazine Rev Fox stated, "Severe storms at sea brought a tragic loss of ships and crews. The tidings filled our hearts with sorrow and, although unknown to us, we share in the sadness of those who mourn for the loss of brave fishermen. Many of us paid our respects

to one of the crew when the funeral took place at the Bay Cemetery. The crewman was identified as Gudmundur Gestsson." Two men were never found.

Following the disaster the ship's lifeboat was spotted off Rerwick Head, Tankerness and was towed to Shapinsay by Willie Nicolson with his motor boat **Sheena**. The lifeboat contained documents, oars, a mast, and an axe which is still in Shapinsay. Her stem was broken and she was presumably unseaworthy. It lay at the small pier in Balfour for a time and thereafter broke up. The lifeboat was painted grey with a red bottom. According to Lloyds weekly casualty report painted on the stem was 5/02+/80+083453/15MAN.

Some time after the loss of the **Eyfirthingur** Mr T Bain, Twiness, Westray dived on what remained of the wreck. He reported that the cargo was scrap brass and copper stored in barrels, also iron flywheels. A brass block of the head of a man was also found. Alastair Scott, Eday also confirmed that the cargo was scrap brass and copper packed into barrels and that an old oil lamp was recovered which is still in Eday. Jimmy Thomson, Heathercow, Eday says that the scrap metal came from US bases which were being dismantled after



*The Stromness Life-boat J.J.K.S.W., which was called to the scene of the tragedy, at Kirkwall pier. This boat was on station at Stromness for twenty-seven years, saving no less than 139 lives in ninety-two launches. Her name derives from the combined legacies of several people from which comes her full title, "The John and Ann Moody, J.P. Traill, Kate MacFarlane Aitken, Sam Wood and William Notting."*

*Photo courtesy Orkney County Library Archives*



World War II.

Two separate parts of the wheelhouse were washed ashore in Eday. There were names pencilled on one of them, L Arusson, A Arusson, H Artfur. These men may have been former crewmen as they were not on the ship when she was lost. It may be that L Arusson was misinterpreted as the former owner Larusson. One part of the wheelhouse bore the name Brodie & Son, Hull, according to a report in *The Fishing News* of February 15 1952. There was also a directional aerial which was marked 'injeniorfimner MP/Pedersson Kopenhagen (Copenhagen) type B135NR531. The author's father found a plank with the name **Eyfirðingur** painted on it and also a chest full of cutlery and other pieces of wreckage which had been washed ashore. Another piece of wood with the letters EA - the registration

letters of Akureyri, the ship's port of registration, was found on the shore at Sanday.

As a result of the tragedy demands were made to the RNLI to station a lifeboat in either Sanday or Stronsay. Several letters of appeal appeared in *The Orcadian* and *The Orkney Herald* for a lifeboat to cover the North Isles. In a comment column of *The Orcadian* the then editor Gerry Meyer wrote, "The loss of the **Eyfirðingur** stresses the urgent need for a lifeboat to be stationed within easier reach of the North Isles." The editor goes on to say, "all Orkney is unanimous in its praise for the work done by the Stromness and Longhope lifeboats and their Coxswains and crews." As a result of these heartfelt pleas a lifeboat was afterwards stationed in Stronsay by the RNLI but it was withdrawn in 1971.

*The author would like to thank those in Iceland who provided information, including the Icelandic State Radio (Channel 2), Icelandic Marine Organisations and the Icelandic National Life-Saving Association. My thanks are also extended to those in Orkney who helped give information, especially folk in Sanday and Eday. I am grateful for the help given by Lloyd's Register and other national organisations further south, including the National Icelandic Embassy. Without all this information, gathered from many sources, the story would never have been written.*