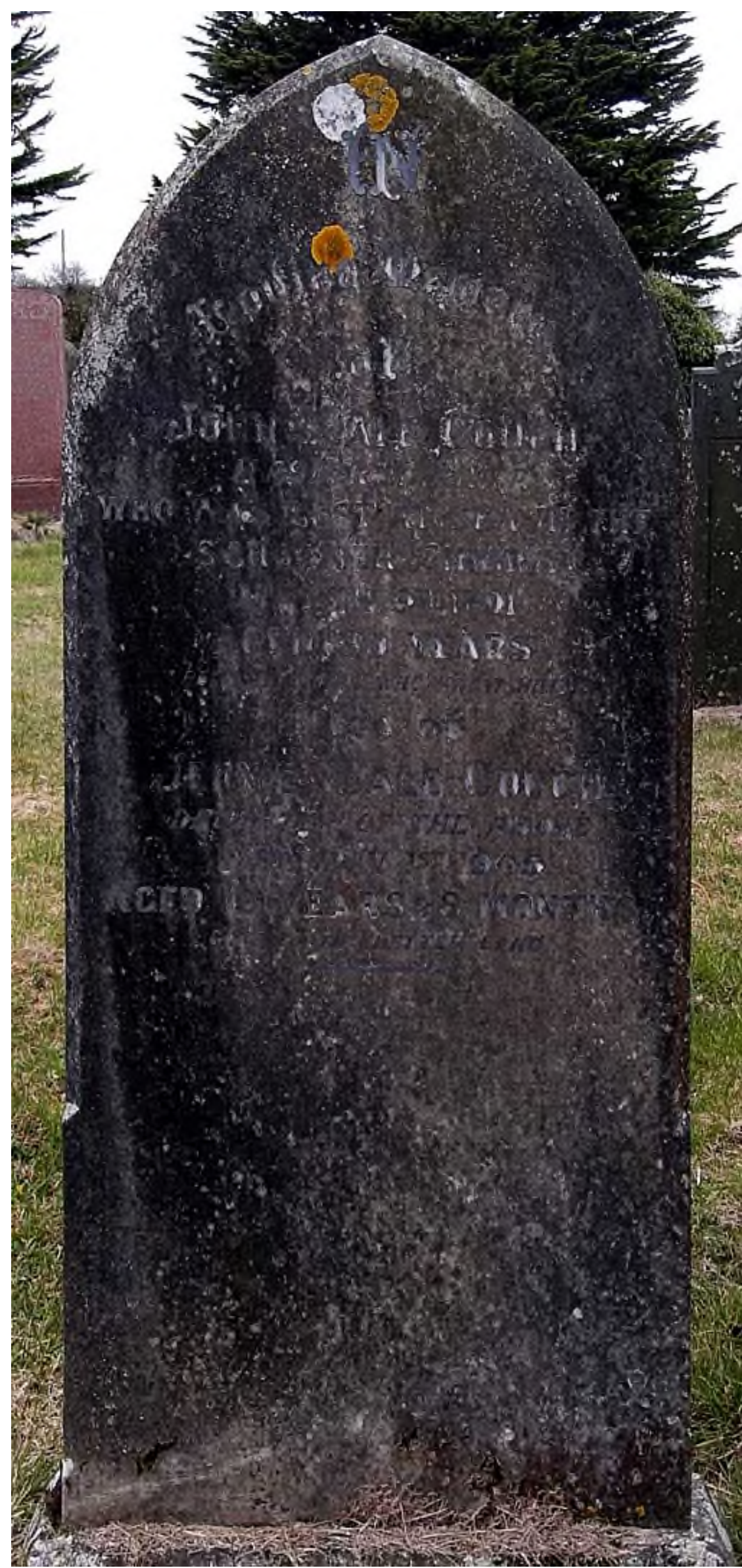


The Great Blizzard of March 1891

In the headmaster's report dated Thursday 12th March 1891 are references to very severe weather with roads very slippery. The severe weather continued the following day and there was no school. In his report for the following week he reports much better weather but that many of the children had lost relatives in the storm and were being kept home. The storm raged between Monday 9th and Friday 13th March 1891 and was one of the most severe to hit the UK in the 19th Century, particularly affecting the West Country. Devon and Cornwall were completely cut off, with even the trains snowed in. Over 200 people lost their lives, including nine Port Isaac mariners who were lost at sea on the 9th and 10th March. In the Royal Cornwall Gazette of 19th March 1891 are various reports of the awful conditions in the county. Nearby Camelford had the streets literally filled with snow, in many cases to the roofs of the houses. Tunnels had to be dug to access the doors. It was not until Friday that Camelford was relieved, when George Martyn and a relief party from Wadebridge arrived. They reported having to get through 15 to 20 foot snowdrifts to reach the town. It is surprising that we read nothing of the tragedy at Port Isaac, but presumably the village was cut off so the story could not reach the outside world. It was not until the 16th April edition that there was any mention, when Dr Richard Julyan George (*after whom Doctor George's Field is named*) put in a letter of appeal on behalf of the widows and fatherless children. There are four of the mariners named on gravestones at St Endellion Church; John Hale Couch (30 years old) and George Honey (36) were lost on the 9th March, with Thomas Strout (45) and his son James (16) lost on the 10th March. Olive Strout has an 'In Loving Remembrance' card for John Oten (20) lost on 10th March.



Gravestones of four Port Isaac mariners lost in the Great Blizzard of March 1891

In
Loving Memory
Of
JOHN HALE COUCH
Master Mariner
Who was lost at sea
In the schooner Zingra
March 9th 1891
Aged 30 years
Beloved by those who knew him
Also of
JENNIE HALE COUCH
Daughter of the above
Who died May 1st 1905
Aged 13 years and 8 Months
Gone to a better land

In
Affectionate Memory of
ELLEN GRACE STROUT
Who died May 5th 1917 Aged 78 years
She left this world of sorrow
Ending trouble, grief and pain
But to those who truly loved her
In memory shall remain
Also of
THOMAS STROUT
Mariner
Husband of the above
Who was drowned at sea
March 10th 1891 Aged 45 Years
Also of
JAMES STROUT
Son of the above
Who was drowned at sea
March 10th 1891 Aged 16 Years
Thy will be done

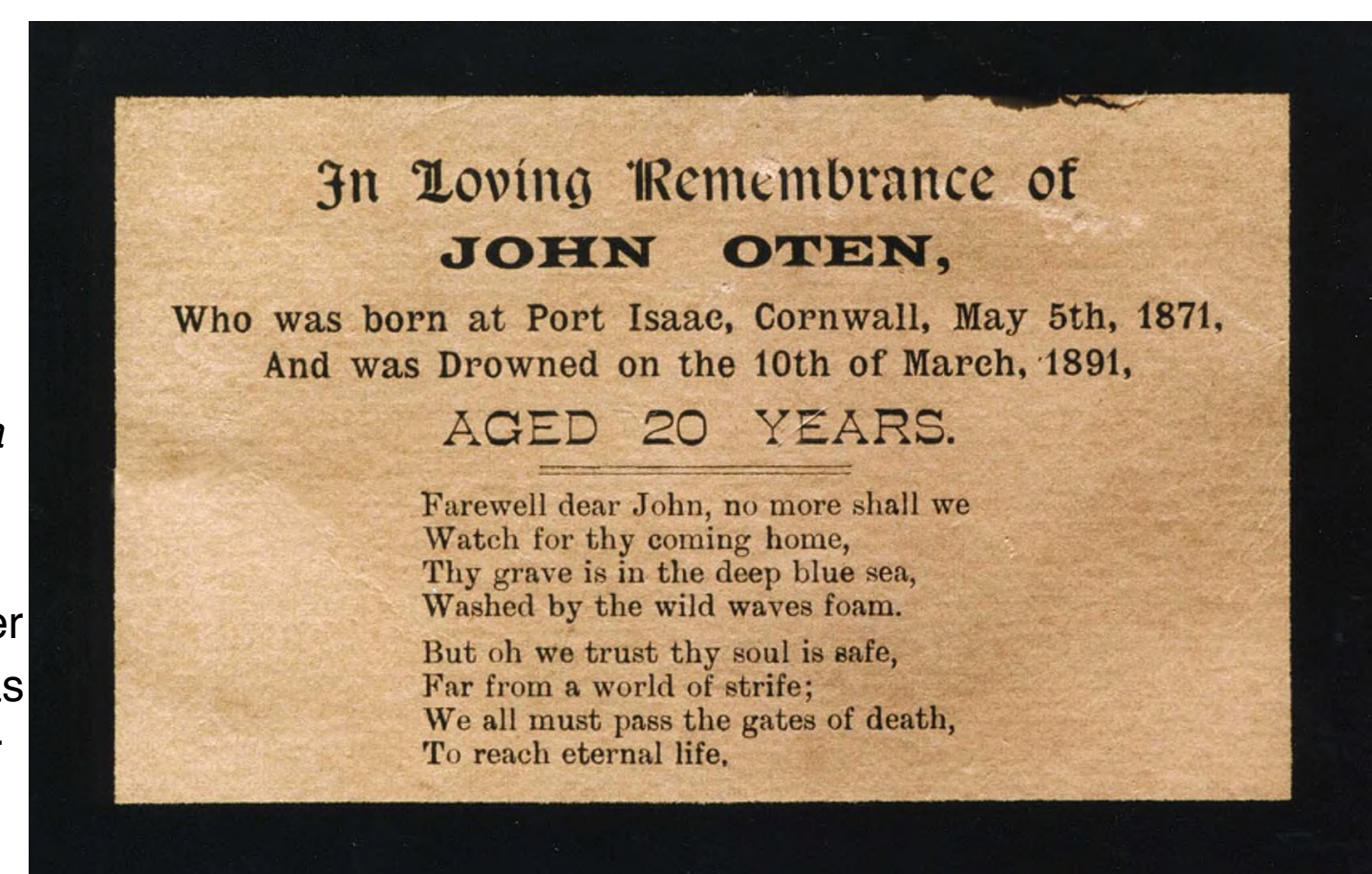
In
Loving memory of
Our dear father
GEORGE HONEY
Who was lost at sea in a snowstorm
On the 9th March 1891
Aged 36 years
Also our darling mother
POLLIE
Wife of the above
Who died July 8th 1916
Aged 60 years
Oh not lost but gone before us
Sweet their memory to the lonely
In our hearts they perish not.

John Hale Couch was a seaman on the 127 tons Fowey registered schooner *Zingra*, which the Ipswich Journal of 14th March 1891 reports was wrecked off Deal on the night on Monday 9th March. The 1891 census (*taken on 5th April, just a few weeks after the tragedy*) records his widow Hannah was left with a 6 year old daughter, also Hannah. The memorial at St Endellion Church records another daughter, Jennie Hale Couch, who was 13 years and 8 months old when she died on 1st May 1905. This means she was born around September 1891, six months after her father died, so John never saw his second daughter. If he had been at sea for some time, the possibility exists that he never even knew his wife was pregnant. In the 1901 census Hannah had married again (*to another mariner, Francis Billing, in 1895*) and living with her were Jennie Hale Couch, together with her two sons from Francis - Joseph (4) and Francis (3). In 1911 she was living in Delabole with Joseph and Francis and her grown up daughter Hannah Couch, a teacher at Delabole school. She recorded her marital status as a widow again, since Francis was also killed at sea, in January 1906. The perils of the sea, indeed.

George Honey's widow Mary was left to look after four children; Elsie (12), Willie H (10), Lizzie D (7) and George (4). Looking forward 10 years to the 1901 census, Mary had married a naval seaman, John Bishop, at Devonport in 1900 and was now Mary A. Bishop. Elsie had married a mariner, now Elsie Sweet. Mary and Elsie were living in the same house next door to Cliff Cottage in Port Isaac. William Haynes (*Willie H*) Honey was a cook and ordinary seaman on the sailing vessel 'Samson' which was in Fowey harbour on census night. Elizabeth (*Lizzie D*) was working as a housemaid for a tea broker in Croydon. The youngest, 14 year old George, was a scholar at the Merchant Seamen's Orphan Asylum in Snaresbrook, Essex, a charity set up to give training in seamanship to the orphan children of merchant seaman (*now The Royal Merchant Navy School Foundation*). This family was related to George Steer, and I remember helping him with online research about 10 years ago. George told me that Mary had had a very tough life raising four children on her own. She was pleased to be able to get young George a new start in life with training she could not possibly afford. Another 10 years to 1911 and we see that George and his brother William Haynes Honey are both merchant seamen in the coasting trade on sailing vessels, and on census night they were living with their mother in Port Isaac (*the census form notes she was deaf*).

Thomas Strout's widow, and James' mother, was 51 year old Ellen Grace Strout, and the 1891 census records she was living with her brother Charles Hoskin and his family in Molesworth Street Wadebridge a few weeks after the tragedy. In the 1881 census her son James was living with his 20 year old married sister Ellen Provis, as well as his 11 year old brother Thomas and 8 year old sister Agnes, whilst Ellen Grace and Thomas senior both were on the vessel 'Planet' in St Blazey as mate and mate's wife. She died in 1917.

John Oten's mother was Jane Oaten, who became Jane Hosking after marrying John Henry Hosking in 1881 and would have been 44 when he died. At that time he had three brother and two sisters, all scholars between the ages of 5 and 14.



John Oten 'In Loving Remembrance' Card