

# Before the RNLI and Lifeboats

Prior to the establishment of the first Port Isaac lifeboat in 1869, rescue on this dangerous stretch of the coast was the province of local initiative. Then, as now, the mariners of Port Isaac were ready to face the dangers of a sea in rage to rescue those in distress. Records of these ad hoc acts of bravery and sacrifice probably never reached the outside world, as Port Isaac was a remote place when the horse was the principal means of transport. We are fortunate in having a written document from the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when John Watts Trevan wrote his *Summary Memoirs of the Parish of Endellion Prior to the year 1834*, setting down a pen portrait of the parish and its people as he knew it in the years immediately prior to Queen Victoria's reign. He included an account of wrecks, covering the period 1806 to 1834, no doubt gleaned from the records his father maintained as the local Principal Officer of Customs, with further detail added by local people who witnessed or knew about those wrecks. He lists 26 commercial vessels wrecked over this 29 year period, with no less than four in 1807, two of those in the same storm. There were no doubt many more smaller local vessels which literally 'sank without trace'. All too frequently, Trevan records that all on board perished, and one local mariner, Thomas Strout, was drowned in a rescue attempt during that 1807 storm.

There are many stories, especially here in the south west, of deliberate wrecking with false lights to lure unsuspecting ships to their doom, but all the evidence suggests this was nothing but fiction. Whilst there was unlikely any truth in deliberate wrecking, once the ship was in pieces there could be a mad scramble for the cargo with scant consideration for the shocked survivors. Trevan confirms this happened at least once with the 1822 wreck of the Dutch vessel Elizabeth Joanna "An Officer coming on shore with his few trifling articles, which he could save out of the ship on this distressing occasion, in a boat in which only were John Arnold [the local school teacher], Richd C. Cook, and Pascoe Carter, all of Port Isaac, and as soon as the boat came to the shore they snatched at a portable desk which the officer had intrusted to him, belonging to an officer who had died in India, for his widow in Holland, and made off with it. The desk, the officer said after, contained from 200 to 300 doubloons, gold watch, and other valuables. The desk was afterwards recovered but the contents were gone. But the most surprising is, that none of those delinquents were ever brought to punishment for their baseness." Regarding his last comment, it was always said that a Cornish jury would rarely convict on a charge of carrying off cargo from a wreck, so perhaps the authorities would have been reluctant to press the issue except in extreme cases. These were tough times, and the prevailing view would probably have been that this was merely another bounty from the sea.

Trevan's complete manuscript was published last year, together with his delightful watercolour illustrations in full colour, and the hardback book can be obtained in local shops for £10. Below is the section he wrote on wrecks.

## Wrecks

- an account of vessels wrecked and stranded on the coast of the Parish of St. Endellion from the year 1806 to 1834 inclusive

1806 Sloop 'Economy' of Southampton from Plymouth bound to Swansea in ballast driven into Port Karn Hun in a severe gale at N.W. but again got off after being greatly damaged.

1807 Schooner 'Betsy' of Plymouth from Plymouth bound to Wales in ballast. The villain of a Master run the vessel ashore at Crowser, Roscarrock estate, under the excuse of that he supposed he was running into Padstow Harbour, although it being then about 10 o'clock in the forenoon the weather being moderate and clear wind at N. The master's son, a lad about 14 years of age, was unfortunately drowned.

1807 Sloop 'Teresa' Captain Johns of Fowey from that port, for Neath, in ballast, being caught in a most tremendous gale, and when entering Port Isaac cove in the grey of the morning struck on a rock called Warrant Rock, within the entrance, and immediately smashed to pieces, and all on board perished – Captain Johns being the only one of the bodies ever fished up of the unfortunate 'Teresa'.

1807 The same afternoon of the above, the 'Polperro' of Looe, in ballast for Wales, made for Port Isaac and got in at low water. A boat immediately was launched to go to their assistance, which capsized before reaching the vessel, when Thos. Strout of Port Isaac was drowned. The vessel was afterwards boarded and brought up, until high water, when she was brought in and laid on the beach, being greatly damaged but afterwards repaired.

1807 Brig 'Newry' of London. Captain Charles Robinson from Cork bound to London laden with butter, etc. Foundered about 14 miles off Port Isaac in a hurricane when all on board perished. Upwards of two thousand barrels of butter were taken up (the boats went off over the wreck to receive them as they came up) by people of this Parish. Many individuals shared from £60 to £70 each as salvage, and with which several large herring boats were afterwards purchased for the fishing at Port Isaac.

1808 Brig 'Myrtle' of Lancaster. Captain Harper from Liverpool bound to London laden with palm oil, etc. Run onshore by night in a tempestuous gale of wind at N.W. into Gilson Cavern, a short distance to the W. of Port Quin. Different people as they lay in bed on the different farms near on this melancholy night heard the shrieks of the unfortunate crew, but not knowing at the time from whence the shrieks came, until the morning when the wreck of the vessel was seen scattered along the coast and all on board had perished. Neither of their bodies was ever taken up, and the most part of the cargo washed into Port Quin.

1808 Brig 'Integrity' of Swansea in ballast from Falmouth bound to Wales. Run into Porth Karn Hun in a gale but was again got off after sustaining great damage.

1810 Sloop 'Cardigan' of Cornwall. There from Bristol bound to Falmouth, laden with Sundry merchandise – run into Port Isaac in a gale on a fine moonlight night. At low water time, sustained considerable damage by beating in over the rocks but afterwards repaired and forwarded on her destination.

1811 Sloop 'Two Brothers' of Dartmouth, from Neath, for Dartmouth, laden with coals founded off this coast, all on board perished.

1811 Sloop 'Brothers' of Youghall from that port, bound to London laden with butter and oats. Run into Port Isaac in tempestuous weather in a greatly distressed state, the cargo of which was landed, and afterwards sold for the benefit of underwriters. The vessel after laying for a considerable time was also sold and repaired.

1812 Sloop 'Daniel' of Saint Ives, in ballast, wrecked in Port Isaac Bay, crew saved.

1814 Schooner 'Dolphin of –'. Put into Port Isaac in bad weather. Sustained trifling damage as the loss of rudder etc.

1814 Brig 'Betsy' of Liverpool from that Port bound to Portsmouth with salt. Foundered. All on board, five in number, perished.

1815 Sloop 'Concord' of Swansea from that Port, laden with coals for Saint Ives, founded. All on board, four in number perished.

1816 Sloop 'Fortune' of Truro from the Truro river – laden with copper ore, bound to Swansea. Foundered. All the crew, four in number, perished.

1816 The Dutch galiot 'Dr. Jacob' of Amsterdam from some part of Spain, laden with wool. Run on shore in a gale into Port Quin bay when all the crew, eight in number, perished. Great part of the cargo washed onshore at Port Quin. This vessel is said to have had several boxes of dollars on board quantities of these being afterwards taken up.

1816 Schooner 'Adventure' of Padstow from Wales, laden with coals, bound to Padstow. Foundered, crew saved.

1819 Brig 'Aurora' of Teignmouth from Labrador, bound to Teignmouth, laden with cod oil, seal skins, etc. Driven into Port Isaac in a furious storm, the vessel being large – about 300 tons. Run in, as it happened, at high water, the cargo was discharged and afterwards reshipped on board four small vessels and sent to its destination. The vessel sustained but trifling damage and was put round to Padstow shortly after.

1821 The French Schooner 'Adolpe' of Nants from Swansea for France, laden with tin plate, iron, etc. Put into Port Isaac waterlogged. The cargo was discharged. The vessel, a few days after, had her stern fasts cut adrift by some evil disposed person or persons in consequence of which she beat to pieces against the beach. The tin plate was afterwards reshipped for Swansea to be new dipped after being damaged by the salt water. The crew greatly enlivened Port Isaac while there by their cheerful good humour and dancing through the streets with the girls.

1821 Sloop 'Theodore' of Youghall Captain Timothy Daisy, from Youghall for Plymouth, laden with potatoes. This vessel was seen off Port Isaac in the morning, dismasted, and with great difficulty was boarded by a boat, but when they got on board were greatly surprised to find no one on deck but heard a violin playing below. The Pats they soon learned were enjoying themselves, it being Saint Patherick's Day, and to whose guidance of course they intrusted the vessel, being quite careless of themselves. They had, it appeared, intrusted the helm to a boy, the day before and the wind blowing fresh had jibed her and carried away the mast. The boat people with the greatest difficulty succeeded in getting her into Port Isaac the next day after being at it all night. Captain Daisey sold all his Murphys at Port Isaac and Padstow, got in a new mast and again set sail for dear Ireland. The crew was exceedingly dirty having great quantities of lice about them. The captain would put his hand into his bosom and take one out, and address it, saying 'Och! dear Honey I wish you and I were in Dublin,' and then replace it again in his bosom.

The French vessel before mentioned was cut adrift at the time Pat was at Port Isaac, and who laughed and exalted over the Frenchmen when that accident occurred, exclaiming, 'Och! Monsieur Parlez vous, see how the 'Theodore' rides it out'.

1821 The Portuguese schooner 'Courier' of the Azores from Trecaira bound to Harvre de Grace, laden with oranges etc. Driven into Port Isaac in bad weather, wind at N.W., being a very small vessel not more than about 25 tons burden, and after a survey, not thinking her again seaworthy, was broken up and sold. The cargo was likewise sold. This vessel was quite a picture being a beautiful model in part as perfect a model as was ever seen and with a figurehead.

1822 The Dutch ship 'Elizabeth Joanna' of Rotterdam from Batavia Island of Java for Holland, laden with coffee, camphor, etc. Foundered about a quarter of a mile off the points Port Isaac. This beautiful ship got waterlogged on her passage home, as is supposed, by carrying too great a press of canvas on her, she having several young Dutch Naval Officers as passengers on board and whose time of servitude was up on the East India Station, and they cracked on upon her as they would a man of war, taking their watches on the passage with the crew to make a quick passage home. Signal guns were heard along the coast the night before she appeared off Port Isaac which, as soon as seen on the morning, was immediately went off to by a gig. The ship at that time looking beautiful and to all appearances all well but as soon as the boat's crew got on board they soon saw the state of the ship and was going to leave when the Officers immediately drew their swords saying the first man who attempted to leave the ship they would cut him down. They were fresh men, and the crew being worn out with several weeks hard labour at the pumps. On this they made signals for further assistance, when other boats went off and one likewise came up from Padstow. This ship was then put about for Padstow but stood into Port Quin Bay and brought up waiting for the tide, it then being low water. But while there the ship made so much water that they could not wait for the tide for Padstow but must run her onshore somewhere, when the anchor with the cable was cut adrift and again stood up for Port Isaac to endeavour to get her in there but, it blowing a gale at S. with a tremendous ground sea, it could not be accomplished. The people that went off having as much spirits as they pleased got uncommonly drunk. The ship at the time going down, when the Officers that remained on board and the agent for Lloyds, Mr Rowlings of Padstow, ordered all hands to quit. The which they had not done five minutes before the ship went down with two of the poor fatigued dutchmen in her which could not be removed in time. Several of the Officers and crew left her at Port Quin bay and put up at Pentireglaze and on their first coming up off Port Isaac, with their luggage, one poor fellow a Dutchman was sent on shore to take care of the luggage in a Port Quin boat about a quarter of an hour before she sunk, being in there in the dusk of the evening. The Boat and the crew got safe on shore, but the luggage and Dutchman was condiddled by them as neither was ever heard of.

These villains where other most audacious and diabolical acts were perpetrated by the Port Isaac people as an instance: An Officer coming on shore with his few trifling articles, which he could save out of the ship on this distressing occasion, in a boat in which only were John Arnold, Richd C. Cook, and Pascoe Carter, all of Port Isaac, and as soon as the boat came to the shore they snatched at a portable desk which the officer had intrusted to him, belonging to an officer who had died in India, for his widow in Holland, and made off with it. The desk, the officer said after, contained from 200 to 300 doubloons, gold watch, and other valuables. The desk was afterwards recovered but the contents were gone. But the most surprising is, that none of those delinquents were ever brought to punishment for their baseness. The crew left the ship once in the midst of the Atlantic Ocean in their boats but afterwards returned resolved, if possible, to keep her up until they could meet with a ship or make land which, as soon as they made land, which is supposed to have been Trevose Head, a part of the crew left in the long boat and were seen to pass up this coast. They attempted to land at Saint Ginnes Cliffs but, owing to the groundsea at the time, the boat was upset in the surf and when all on board perished. A very trifling part of the cargo on the ship was saved. This ship was built at Sunderland being about 500 tons burden and sold to the Dutch East India Company.

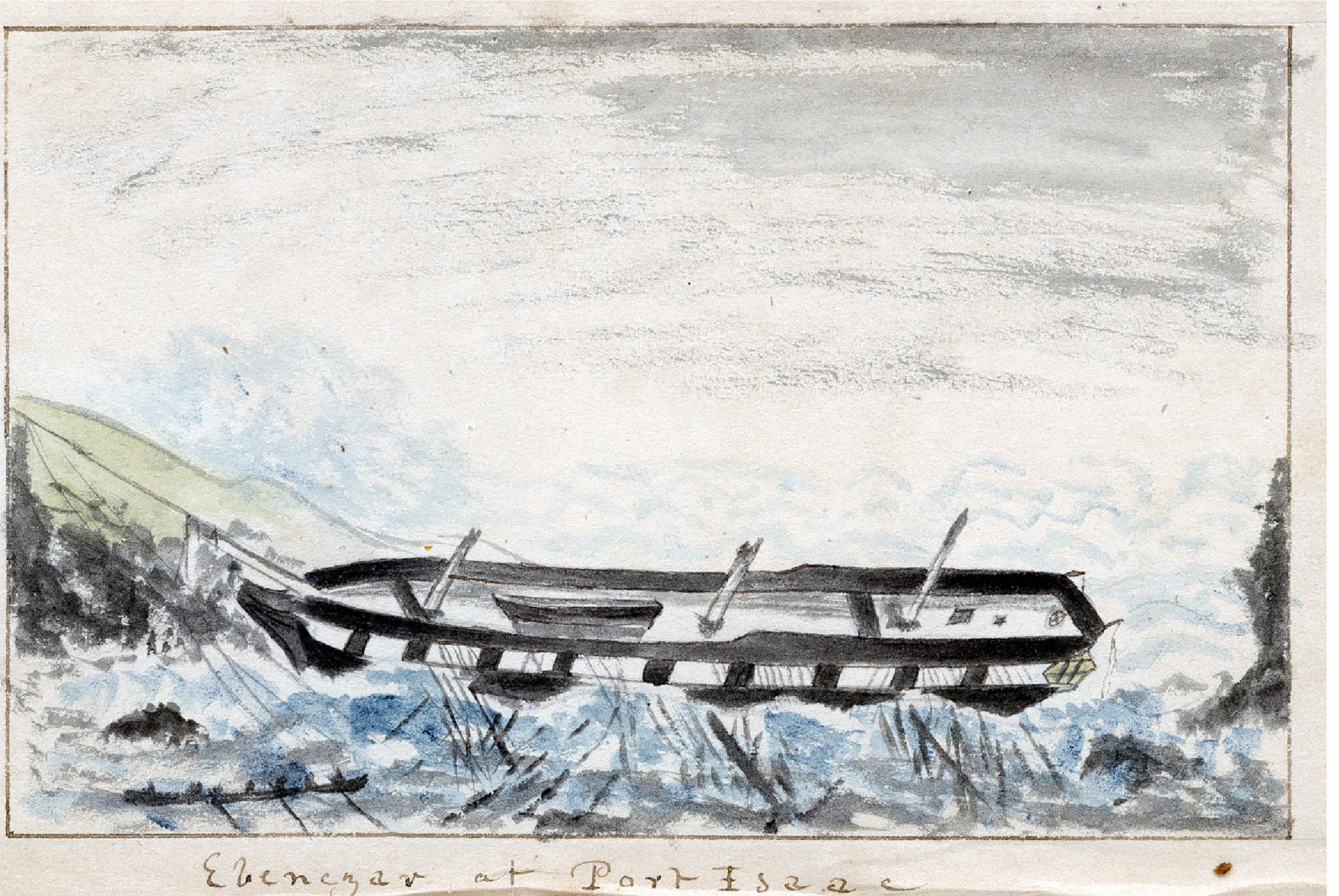
'Harmony' 1824. In a dismal November evening about eight o'clock the crew of the sloop 'Harmony' of Whalchet came into Port Isaac about half tide, during a gale, in their boat, being attracted by the lights from the houses, as they were drifting up before the cove, having quitted their vessel, which foundered about ten or twelve leagues to the westward. They were from Portreath bound to Swansea with copper ore.

'Courier de Naple' 1826. The Neapolitan Brig 'Courier de Naples', Tomo Cacase, Master, of about 250 tons burden, from Pelarma bound to Antwerp. Stranded at Port Isaac, laden with [sumac?], brimstone, olive oil, licorice, fruit, etc, etc. The ship being bilged, the cargo was discharged and warehoused in the 'Industry' Cellar then reshipped in small craft and sent to its destination, the 'Courier' was broken up and sold. She was of a beautiful model and a splendid sailor.

'Heneritta' 1834. The 'Heneritta' of Sunderland, Anderson Master, foundered off Tintagel Head on a Sunday Morning and in a dead calm. Crew quitted, came into Port Isaac. They were from Cardiff bound to Portsmouth, with culm. She was about 250 tons.

'Ebenezer' 1833 On the morning of 31st. August, it blowing a gale of wind at N.W., a ship appeared off Port Isaac endeavouring to work off the land but, in her attempts, continually falling to leeward every tack, and having a Jack flying in her rigging for a pilot on this, the colours on the flag staff on the Eastern hill and a large fire was instantly made, the tide at the time being about half ebb. The people on board the ship was then perceived throwing lumber, water casks, etc., etc., overboard to clear ship. And then being but a short distance from the W. point of the cove, wore ship, and run for the place and took ground on the sands opposite the old W. quay, and went athwart, her stern swinging round to the eastward as will appear by the annexed draft. She was immediately boarded by the Preventive Service boat and likewise by the crews of other boats. She proved to be the ship 'Ebenezer' 550 tons, Captain Radford of Bristol from Saint Vincent for Bristol, laden with sugar, and rum. The masts were as soon as possible cut away to ease the ship but on the flowing of the next tide she parted and her upperworks went into the cavern inside the above named West quay and the cove completely strewn with the wreck. And out of the whole cargoes, which consisted of between 600 to 700 hogsheads of sugar and fifteen puns rum, only six puncheons of rum was saved. What of the wreck and materials were saved, was sold shortly after by the underwriters. Not a single cable was bent, nor the anchors over the bows, or the plugs out of the Hawser holes. There was great neglect somewhere, and likewise in the ship being so embayed instead of keeping midchannel as they made the high land of St Ives the day before and before the gale commenced.

Courtesy Malcolm Lee



Tr

evan's illustration of the wrecked 'Ebenezer'

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