

# The Bencoolen Bell

The ship Bencoolen was first spotted by locals about midday, a long black hull deep in the water. She sent no signals, no sails were set, her masts were gone. There had been several days of stormy weather and the sea was high with the incoming tide.

A tar barrel was lit on Summerleaze Cliff to guide the vessel onto the sands – her only chance. Presently a small sail was seen on the stump of her foremast and she appeared to be heading straight for the harbour entrance.

By this time the cliffs were crowded with people and they watched the doomed vessel as she came drifting in, borne by the wind and tide. The old sailors said, "It will be a bad business." Just before 3pm the ship came broadside on, exactly at the entrance to the Haven, where she stuck on the sand and was instantly swept by seas.

Bude Coastguards set up their rocket apparatus to get a line to the ship. The first rocket fell short. The second line fell on board but was instantly swept back into the sea. The ship's second mate managed to get hold of the third line but was swept overboard and drowned. A huge wave hit and the ship started to break up. The onlookers could only watch the scene in horror and utter helplessness.

The great seas continued to roll in, covering the wreck and within an hour the ship split apart in the middle. "There was no possible means left by which aid could be given, and we could only stand and watch" recalled an onlooker afterwards.

Survivors tell that when the ship got into difficulty, Captain Chambers retired to his cabin to get drunk; two of the crew, at different times, went to him, asking him to come up and get on the raft, but he ignored them and drowned as the ship broke up.

An enormous wave lifted the raft, with men clinging to it, into the raging sea. Wave after wave rushed over the raft, each one claiming a life, until miraculously the raft eventually came in under the steep Summerleaze Cliff. A rope was lowered to lift the survivors to the cliff top. Just six men survived; they were boatswain Thomas Aspinwall, seamen Andrew Hallman, John Whiteside, George Walsh and two others. The bodies of the Chief Mate and thirteen seamen were eventually recovered and laid to rest in a mass grave in Bude Churchyard. The boat's figurehead was salvaged from the wreckage to mark the grave.

**At the same time, Thomas Hills, a member of the Roscarrock Hill Methodist Society, was in Bude on his coasting smack Telegraph. He paid thirty shillings for the Bencoolen bell and brought it down the coast to Port Isaac and to its new home in the Chapel. Apart from during the war years, the bell was rung every Sunday up until the Chapel closed, calling the congregation to worship.**

