

The Bencoolen

wrecked at Budehaven, October 21st 1862

The merchant ship, *Bencoolen*, was bound for India with machinery for the cotton mills there. With a crew of 31 under Captain Chambers, she set sail from Liverpool on October 13th 1862 and was wrecked off Bude Haven on October 21st. Shortly after rounding Anglesey and entering the Irish Sea she ran into a SW gale. The captain refused to turn back and three days later her mainsail was blown away followed by the collapse of her foretop mast. Two seamen who were on the rigging fell into the sea and were drowned. By now the ship was in big trouble and, driven by the wind into the Bristol Channel, the crew began to make a raft from spare spars and booms in case they sank. When land was sighted ahead to starboard they steered for shore at Bude Haven.

The harbour at Bude is protected by a breakwater which runs due north from under the high southern cliff called Compass Point. Around the north end of this breakwater runs the little river flowing out to the sea and the narrow channel by which the harbour is entered at certain states of the tide, wind and weather permitting. A wide stretch of sand lies between this channel at the end of the breakwater and the cliff that runs out to the north of Bude called Summerleaze.

The *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.

