

BOATING DISASTER AT PENZANCE.

A DOUBLE FATALITY.

THE COXSWAIN OF THE PENZANCE LIFEBOAT DROWNED.

A boating disaster has occurred at Penzance which is probably one of the saddest in the annals of Penzance.

On Friday evening Mr. George Chirgwin, one of the most trustworthy and respected boatmen of Penzance, of wide experience, and the coxswain of the Penzance lifeboat, went off in his gig in company with a man named Morris Davies, for the purpose of taking the captain of the Cornubia on board his vessel, which was lying in the Bay.

As the boat did not return some uneasiness was felt, especially as the weather was very bad during the evening. There were blinding showers of snow accompanied by squalls.

At daybreak boats went out to search for the missing men, and at low water a boat's mast was seen about a foot above water, also the yard and peak of a sail. The boat had evidently sunk between the Gear Pole and the Chimney Rock, in a line with a rock known as the Frenchman, and about 400 yards from the shore.

No traces of the men were to be seen, and it is supposed they were caught in a squall on returning from the Cornubia.

Mr. Chirgwin was one of the best known boatmen on the coast, and has had an adventurous sea career. Some twenty-five years ago he was one of the crew of a large steamer, carrying thirty-five hands, which was lost on a desolate part of the coast of Spain. With the exception of Mr. Chirgwin all hands were drowned. Half-dead and almost naked he was thrown ashore, and remained in a Spanish village for some weeks. When sufficiently recovered he came back to Penzance, where he was warmly received by his townsmen.

Another account says : An appalling disaster occurred in Mount's Bay on Friday evening, resulting in the loss of two lives, one being Mr. George Chirgwin, coxswain of the Penzance lifeboat, and the other Mr. Morris Davies, who lives opposite the Barbican House at the Quay.

On Friday evening Mr. Chirgwin and Mr. Davies left about six o'clock to take the captain of the s.s. Cornubia, of Hayle, off to his ship, which was lying about a mile out, just east of the Gear Pole. They left the harbour in Mr. Chirgwin's own gig, and that was the last heard of them.

Time passed and the pilots became anxious on their behalf, the weather being squally, accompanied by blinding showers of hail and snow. Unable to bear the suspense longer, the pilots put off to the Cornubia, and learnt that the captain had arrived in safety and that Mr. Chirgwin and Mr. Davies had left with the intention of going ashore. Sufficient time had elapsed before the pilots arrived to have enabled the men to get to ashore, and with this in their minds the hearts of the pilots were filled with forebodings. They recognised that in Mr. Chirgwin there was a man whose knowledge of handling sailing craft was unsurpassed, and they entertained the faint hope that they might have come ashore rather out of their course. Inquiries instituted shewed no trace of the missing men, and it became generally believed that both had perished.

The news created profound sensation, not only at the Quay, where they could be seen daily, but throughout the town, where they were well known and respected. Early on Saturday morning three boats were out dragging for the bodies, and eventually discovered Mr. Davies lying near the sunken craft, just off the Battery Rocks. The body was raised and taken ashore, being subsequently removed to the mortuary. Grappling operations were continued by Joseph Hill, of Coinage Hall Street, Philip Nicholls, of Regent Terrace, and the body of Mr. Chirgwin was found about 20 yards distant from that of Mr. Davies. It was reverently taken ashore and placed in the lifeboat house.

Mr. Chirgwin was forty-three years of age and leaves a widow and several children. Mr. Davies was about forty-eight years old, and leaves a widow and four children.

Many theories have been advanced as to the probable cause of the disaster, and it is believed that as the men were coming ashore a squall struck their boat, she filled with water, and sank immediately. Mr. Davies, it is understood, could not swim, and that in all probability accounts for his body being found close by. Mr. Chirgwin, on the contrary, was a most powerful swimmer, and before his clothes and the cold water impeded his progress and numbed his limbs, he must have made a hard struggle for life.

On every hand expressions of the deepest sympathy arise for the bereaved relatives.

THE INQUEST.

The inquest was held at the Guildhall, Penzance, on Monday morning, by the Borough Coroner (Mr. W. Dennis Lawry). Mr. John Richards was foreman of the jury, which comprised Messrs. Justinian Carter, sen., Henry Row, W. J. Foss, T. T. Hicks, J. Herbert Rowe, William Beckerleg, Marshall Beadsworth, George H. Trehwella, E. Ball, S. Passmore, S. Carter, and Edward Trythall.

Edwin Chirgwin, living at 7, Dock Lane, identified the bodies lying dead as his brother and Morris Davies. Witness was the eldest brother of George Chirgwin who was 45 years of age. Both of the deceased were sailors, Chirgwin living at South Terrace, and Davies at the top of Barbican Lane, the Quay.

Philip Nicholls, Trinity pilot, living at Regent Terrace, said he knew the deceased well, and last saw them alive on Friday morning. On Saturday morning he saw a gig coming in from the Cornubia and he went down to see what was

the matter. The gig came into the Battery Rocks and contained G. Trehwella, Joe Hill, and R. Lashbrooke. They asked witness if they had heard the news, stating that Chirgwin and Davies had put off the captain of the Cornubia on Friday night, and leaving the ship's side at 6.30 had not been heard of since. Mr. Nicholls thought the circumstances very suspicious and communicated his fears to the others. He came to the conclusion that they could not have reached Mousehole for then they would have walked home during the night. Neither did they make fast to any of the vessels lying in the Bay for they could have come into the harbour before that. They then went to breakfast, Hill asking what they could do. Witness said they had better go out and look for some clue, and on leaving his house he saw the masts of a boat standing out of the water. The water was ebbing and the others said that was the boat in which the deceased had put off the captain. Witness took the glasses and had a look. They then took some gear and went in search of the bodies. It was very calm and witness said the bodies could not be very far from the boat. Morris Davies' body was found about 15 or 20 yards from the boat, and almost 500 yards off the Battery Rocks. Before they found him Hill said "Look here Philip, I should like you to have a look at the boat and the sheets before they are shifted." Witness looked and exclaimed "Why, the sheets are fast, and Hill remarked "Yes." Witness confirmed this by running his boat over the sunken one and looking down, the water being very clear. One sheet was belayed over the other, the outside one being new. Witness said "Two of you pull upon the cleats of the sail." They pulled and it gave the boat they were in a list, and the sheet tightened from the "lea" to the cleat. In witness's opinion the accident occurred in this way. When they got into smooth water Chirgwin probably took a turn with the sheet rather than trust it to the other man, and then went to bail out, the boat having evidently shipped some water. During that time a squall must have struck the boat causing her to founder immediately. Witness came to this conclusion through finding the bailer some distance from the craft, and, had it not been in use it would not have been found separate from the boat. The craft was lying west nor' west when they found her in such a position as they would find a boat if going by the wind. The boat was upright and as she struck the bottom the top of the centre board box was knocked off.

A Juror : What tack was she on? – She would have been on a starboard tack. He let her go with her head to the westward and was on the same tack when they left the steamer.

The Coroner : You have seen the thimble and it is heart shape. Is it usual to have heart shaped or round shape? – It all depends.

The Coroner : Would a man in a position to buy a thimble have a round one? – Probably buy a "heart" for the sake of convenience as one could make a better turn round it.

Mr. Carter : Had the men tried to swim ashore do you think they might have reached the Battery Rocks? – They naturally tried to get ashore or they could not have been that distance from the boat.

Capt. Beckerleg : I noticed that the thimble was bent. – It was bent to get it over the pin of the shackle.

Continuing, witness said Davies was fully dressed, having on sou' wester, cardigan jacket etc., just as he went about when it was dirty weather.

The Coroner : How far from Morris Davies did you find Chirgwin? – About 20 yards. He had on a guernsey frock, waistcoat, trousers, pants and half boots. He had no coat on. We have not found the coat but there was a coat folded up lying the weather side of the mizzen mast. It may have been his oil skin which he threw down but it has disappeared, probably being washed out when the boat was brought in.

A Juror : Were there any rocks for the boat to pass over? – There were no rocks in line with the Cornubia. The wind was north and they came up between the Gear and the Frenchman.

Capt. Row : We know that Chirgwin was an expert swimmer and that Davies could not swim. Do you think that "George" was trying to save "Morris"? – I do not think so. The strange thing is that both men were found with their heads towards the boat and their feet towards the Point rocks.

The Foreman thought it was possible that Chirgwin could have swam to the rocks. Witness said it was not very pleasant on Friday evening about 6.30 and a man would not know where he was swimming. He thought he could have got ashore under ordinary circumstances but he must have been thrown into the water in an instant.

William Charles Buckney, captain of the Cornubia said he did not know either of the men. He remembered hiring two men at 5.30 on Friday night to take him off to his ship. They left the slipway in the harbour about six o'clock, the wind then being just east from the north. There was a light breeze but it had been blowing hard just before. It was very thick weather at the time of leaving and he asked if they had a compass in the boat. One said he had a small compass in his pocket and the man in charge of the boat asked witness if he could distinguish the ship from the others. He replied that he could, stating it was the nearest to the harbour, and just before leaving the pier-head light he pointed it out. Witness had not been on board for a week, having come down from Liverpool. He noticed that one of the ship's boats had evidently been used and told the men that they would probably find the gangway down and could run up alongside the same. One of the two men said the boat was hard and they would take the sail down before running alongside. They did so and drew up with the aid of a paddle. They immediately left the steamer to go back as soon as the captain was on board, only staying sufficient time to put the centre board down. One of the men wished him a Happy New Year, and said they would stand in to the Battery. Witness thought they would have made a couple of tacks to fetch the harbour, but they said they would put down the centre-board and stand in to the Battery. Just before eight o'clock the weather came on bad again. There was hardly sufficient wind to sail out of the harbour, so they rowed out and then set sail.

The Foreman : At the time the boat left you to go ashore was there any snow? – No. The wind was very puffy.

Joseph Hill, of Coinage Hall Street, said he was a boatman and knew both of the deceased. He then corroborated the evidence given by Philip Nicholls as to the finding of the bodies and said the boat was pointing in the direction of New Road.

The Foreman said he had heard rumours that the men were not sober. He should like that disclaimed.

The Captain was then re-called and said the men were sober.

The Foreman said he should like that made known as there had been a lot of talk in the town on that point. As far as he knew Chirgwin was a teetotaler.

The Coroner said that was all the evidence he proposed calling and they would all join with him in expressing their sorrow and deep sympathy with the relatives in their great sorrow and distress. He regretted to say that that was one of the saddest fatalities which had occurred in the neighbourhood for many years past. What made the case sadder was the fact that both men lost their lives in view of their homes. George Chirgwin, as he was familiarly called, and known by his comrades, was a man held in the highest respect, not only on account of his knowledge of the sea but for his geniality and kindly disposition. He also held the proud, distinguished, and honourable position as coxswain of the Penzance lifeboat. Morris Davies was equally popular and was acknowledged to be a good seaman. He held the distinguished position of signalman to the Penzance lifeboat. The evidence given shewed plainly that the boat capsized some 500 yards off the Battery and they had to decide what was the cause of the calamity.

Before the jury returned their verdict, Mr. T. H. Cornish said he wished to speak on behalf of himself and the Lifeboat Institution of which he was the district representative. They thoroughly endorsed every word which had fallen from the Coroner's lips and his expression of feeling, which they all must have, towards the late George Chirgwin. He assured them that the Institution shared their sympathy with the widows of both men who found themselves in such sad positions. Words on such occasions would do little to assuage the heaviness of the blow, but he ventured to think that expressions from people with whom they had been acquainted all their lives would help to lighten their grief. He wished to assure the gentlemen of the jury and Mrs. Chirgwin and Mrs. Davies that they had sustained a great loss, but the Institution itself was not without loss on that occasion. They had lost George Chirgwin, a man who during the time he had been connected with the boat, had proved himself reliable, able, and thoroughly trustworthy. Although Morris Davies' connection had not extended over so long a period he shewed himself to be a man to be entrusted with the confidence and responsibility reposed in him. In the death of Mr. Chirgwin they had sustained a loss which would take sometime to fill. The occasion was made all the more sad because at that season one's feelings and thoughts ran in opposite directions than in those which they were called upon to express that day, and on behalf of the Lifeboat Institution he extended his deepest sympathy to the widows and children.

The jury without retiring returned a verdict of "Accidental drowning."

Mr. J. Carter asked the Coroner to explain why the inquest was not held on Saturday, there having been complaints in the town in that respect.

The Coroner was sorry that a member of the jury should have mentioned that, for under the circumstances it was impossible for the inquest to be held earlier. The captain of the Cornubia was at Hayle and he sent Supt. Nicholas to Hayle to get the captain back by the five o'clock train and if possible, before that time. He also gave instructions to one of the sergeants that if the chief constable wired he was to empanel a jury at once. Therefore it was impossible to have held the inquest before, the captain not arriving.

The Cornishman, Thursday January 5 1907

Transcribed by D & I Flaxman