

The burgeoning years of the Industrial Revolution attracted ships from all over the world to South Wales and inevitably there were casualties. The year 1873 proved a particularly eventful one on the coasts around Bridgend County.

1873

THE YEAR OF THE FOUR SHIPWRECKS

The coasts of Bridgend County are, historically, some of the most dangerous in the Bristol Channel, particularly in the days of sail when vessels were largely at the mercy of wind and weather. These stories from the particularly eventful year of 1873 are based upon research done by my friend Dennis Jones of North Cornelly who discovered them in the pages of the Central Glamorgan Gazette newspaper.



Sker Point

On Monday 7th January wreckage, including large quantities of deal timber, started coming ashore at Porthcawl between Hutchwns Point and Newton whilst further out in the channel more debris could be seen being carried by the tide up towards Nash Point. It was obviously flotsam from a ship that had foundered on one of the sandbars at the entrance to Swansea Bay, and over the next few days it began coming ashore on beaches around the town. A section of the stern gave her name as the *Mary Pollock of Glasgow*, which was a vessel of some 829 tons that had originally been built at Quebec in Canada. Other than this there was little clue as to the nature of her fate, and none whatsoever regarding that of her crew who were therefore assumed to have perished.

This, however, proved not to be the case, and during the week that followed news gradually filtered through regarding the *Mary's* ordeal which had started as far back as 29th November the previous year when she was spotted by a vessel named the *Pomona* far out in the Atlantic. On passage from Bathurst to Liverpool with a cargo of timber, she had become completely waterlogged, and indeed it was only her cargo of timber that was keeping her afloat. The *Pomona* took off 18 crew members but the master, mate and one seaman elected to remain aboard in the hope that she could be brought safely to land.

When next sighted, by the barque *Seafield*, on 10th December the *Mary Pollock's* situation was even more desperate. Her sails had gone, the bulwarks and all the deck fittings had been carried away, and waves were breaking over her "as if she was a half-tide rock". The men remaining aboard were huddled on the poop but the heavy seas made it too dangerous for the captain of the *Seafield* to attempt a rescue. For two nights he stood by the stricken vessel in the hope that the sea would moderate sufficiently for a rescue to be attempted.. Eventually on the third day the mate and four seamen from the *Seafield*, at no small risk to themselves, managed to get across to *The Mary Pollock* in their ship's boat and bring off the exhausted survivors.

Now completely derelict the *Mary Pollock* was swept up the Bristol Channel where she was next spotted off Lundy Island by the crew of the steam ship *Cromwell*. They actually got some men aboard and considered the possibility of taking her in tow, but with night falling and the sea rising, this was considered to be too much of a risk. The *Mary Pollock* was therefore left to her fate and presumably continued up channel until she struck one of the sandbanks at the entrance to Swansea Bay causing her to break up, where-after the flotsam drifted onto the beaches at Porthcawl.



The Coastguard Tower & Harbour Breakwater, Porthcawl

Early in March the stern of another vessel, *Industry of Youghal*, was washed ashore at Porthcawl. Thick fog blanketed the area at this time, and from its location it was assumed the ship had also struck the Scarweather Sands off Sker and then broken up. By a strange coincidence the same vessel had hit the nearby Hugo Bank six years earlier and capsized. On that occasion her crew had managed to reach safety in the ship's boat, and the vessel itself had been towed into harbour by the Porthcawl lifeboat. On this occasion she had not been so lucky, and there were no survivors.

The next wreck happened on the coast at 'Sealawn near Southerndown', presumably near the hotel of that name at Ogmores-by-sea. This was on Sunday 12th May, and the unfortunate vessel was an American barque called *Whampoa* which ran aground at about six o'clock in the evening. She is described as a fine vessel of 1197 tons, built in 1861 and "*recently fitted with every convenience*". Loaded with a cargo of coal for Japan she had left Penarth roads at six o'clock in the morning when the weather had been fair and the sea calm. By two o'clock a fog had set in, and the captain's problems were not made any easier due to the fact that he had put his pilot ashore, because (allegedly) the man was too drunk to perform his duties.

Sounding its foghorn, and with a man in the bows with a lead to check the depth, the ship crept down channel, but despite these precautions somehow ended up running aground at the Sealawns. Captain W.G. Jeffrey and his twenty-one crewmen were able to get ashore safely, and even salvaged their personal belongings and some of the ship's stores. Efforts were then made to refloat the vessel by discharging some of the cargo and cutting away her masts, but the stranding had taken place at full tide and she remained fast aground, her keel imbedded in the shingle. The Gazette reporter placed much of the blame for this failure on the fact that, it being Sunday, it proved

difficult to obtain assistance from any of the local ports immediately following the stranding, all being virtually closed down on this 'Day of Rest'.

There, fast on the rocks and shingle, the *Whampoa* remained throughout the week, an object of curiosity for hundreds of local spectators who journeyed down to Ogmore to witness her plight. The same edition of the paper carries an advertisement for the sale of the wreck and cargo by auction "as she now lies", and the report concluded gloomily that it appeared she was likely to become a total wreck.



Porthcawl and Newton from Ogmore by Sea

The final wreck that year also occurred on a Sunday (18th December) and involved the schooner *Charleton* of Salcombe which was heading up the channel in ballast. It happened about eight o'clock on an evening described as being very dark, there being no moon, with a great deal of haze about. In the blackness the vessel ran onto the notorious Tusker Rock and grounded with the sea fairly calm, and the wind moderate. Captain and crew therefore had no difficulty in abandoning ship by boat taking most of their personal belongings with them.

Following their arrival at Porthcawl the harbour pilots went out to see what could be done for the stranded vessel. The *Charleston* in the meanwhile had lifted off the reef, and when eventually they located her was drifting towards shore and in danger of stranding once again. Fortunately they were able to get some men aboard who set the vessel's sails and brought her safely into the harbour under her own power during the early hours of the morning.