

In all, 13 men perished that fatal morning, leaving eight widows and 30 fatherless children

The current Dornoch Firth inshore lifeboat service, launched 20 years ago mainly to go to the rescue of pleasure boat crews or swimmers in difficulty, was preceded by a Royal National Lifeboat Institution craft more than a century ago, when in distress calls at sea were common.

Two fishing boats foundered in the firth in October 1865, in which all eight crew from Inver and five from Golspie lost their lives.

This one appalling disaster, along with more loss of life in earlier years, possibly prompted the RNLI to station a rescue boat at Embo, though it took another 20 years for it to arrive.

by James Henderson

The 34-ft long, self-righting *Daisie*, with 10 oars and costing £297, was gifted by an anonymous donor. According to contemporary accounts, the boat came north by rail and was unloaded at The Mound station, long before there was a rail link to Embo and Dornoch. It was then towed on a carriage pulled by eight "powerful" horses, by way of Dornoch, to its launch position about a half-mile from Embo.

The animals were loaned by Provost Fraser of Dornoch, Mr Barclay of Skelbo, Mr Mackintosh of Proney and Mr Gordon of Embo. Some difficulty was experienced in unloading the heavy boat from the railway wagon, but many willing hands volunteered help, including a number of Embo fishermen, and they succeeded in placing it safely on its carriage.

Among those who assisted were Mr J B Kydd, the Duke of Sutherland's forester, Highland Railways' station agent Mr Symon, and Capt Mackintosh of the Dornoch Rifle Volunteers.

According to a local report, "In Dornoch the arrival of the lifeboat evoked much interest, and several of the buildings were decorated with flags in honour of the occasion. At the west end of the burgh, a triumphal arch

was erected which bore the suitable and appropriate inscription 'Welcome Daisie'. Flags floated on the Castle, the Cathedral, Bailie Neill's residence and from the building occupied by Mr W S Fraser, merchant, while a flag was also unfurled at the 'Poles' and at the launching point. The effect was pleasing and attractive."

Headed by two pipers, the procession wended its way to the launching station on the beach, followed by a large band of the public. Among those present at the ceremony were Mr Sutherland of Skibo (chairman), Bailie Neill, Dornoch (hon. secretary), Rev Mr Taylor (Dornoch Free Church), Mr Lewis Hoyes SSC, Mr John Mackintosh (Proney), Mr John Leslie (solicitor), Mr David Peters, Mr A Morrison (hotel keeper), Mr W S Fraser (merchant), Mr Alex Mackenzie (Skelbo), Mr J B Kydd (the Poles), Mr William Sutherland (merchant), Mr Roderick Maclean (Chief Constable), Bailie Ross (Dornoch), Rev Donald Grant (Dornoch Parish Church), Miss Sutherland (Skibo), Mr Barrow and party (Dornoch), Mr Donald Maclean, Sutherland Estates Factor (Rhives), Mr Box (factor, Tongue), Mr Barclay (Skelbo), Mr Fraser (from India), Mr and Mrs Donald Taylor, Dornoch, Mrs Taylor, FC Manse, Dornoch, Dr Gordon (Embo), the Misses Mackintosh (Clashmore), Mr and Mrs Mackenzie (Jain), Mrs Pryde (Edinburgh), Mr Mackenzie (Bonar), and the Rev Mr Taylor (from England).

Before the launch, Mr Sutherland of Embo called on the Rev Mr Neil to offer prayer, after which Captain Beddoes RN, as representative of the RNLI, handed over the lifeboat to the local committee.

In front of a large gathering from the surrounding district, Miss Sutherland of Skibo Castle was invited formally to name the *Daisie* on 29th September 1886. The following year a boathouse and a 140-ft wooden slipway were constructed at a cost of £638 6s 1d.

Bailie Neill proposed a hearty vote of thanks to the RNLI "for this noble gift". They did not know the name of the donor, but the excellent gift showed that the donor was a humane and generous person and to that person they returned their heartiest thanks.

Thirty-eight men from Dornoch and Embo volunteered to crew the boat, and 10 were selected to man the launch. "Strong, hardy-looking fellows they were," it was reported, "and as they appeared in the boat, attired in their lifeboat clothing, with cork jackets and preservers, their appearance indicated that when called upon to perform active service on the open sea, they could not fail to render a satisfactory account of themselves."

They were Donald "Eban" Mackay, launch coxswain; Alexander Main, look-out; Kenneth "Main" Mackay; John Ross; John Ross elder; Thomas Fraser; William Fraser; Alex "Roy" Mackay; John "Roy" Mackay; and Kenneth Ross.

After the naming ceremony, the crowd pushed and pulled the *Daisie* into the water, while the crew stood by their oars. "The boat glided splendidly into the water and, in a choppy sea, the crew rowed her round to her new station at Embo. Here a number of the fishermen, along with their wives and children, awaited to receive the boat, which glided through the waves in excellent style. The boat was dragged on to the beach, where it will remain until the completion of the new building to be erected for its accommodation."

Though launched on three occasions to vessels in distress, during 18 years on station, the *Daisie*'s only effective service was on 20th January 1890, when called to aid the Gardenstown fishing boat *Come On*. The open-decked vessel, with six of a crew, had become stranded on a sandbank at the entrance to Loch Fleet. Two members of the lifeboat crew were transferred to assist in refloating the vessel and getting her to safety. The rescue was carried out in darkness, with snow showers, a heavy swell and a south-west gale.

In October 1904, the lifeboat was withdrawn from service and the station was closed. The *Daisie* was sold by the RNLI in 1905.

The East Sutherland Rescue Association resumed an inshore lifeboat service from its base at Dornoch in 1982, following the successful recovery of a little girl floating out to sea on an inflatable mat.

NB: The recorder of this piece of local lifeboat history is indebted to Mr George Sutherland from Lybster, who uncovered the original manuscript, though its source is unknown.

From the Northern Ensign, Wick, November 2nd, 1865:

MELANCHOLY CASUALTIES — GREAT LOSS OF LIFE

The storm of Wednesday last, preceded by a night of extreme beauty, tempting the fisherman of Dornoch and Moray Firths to sea, has proved lamentably disastrous in its results on human life, as the following details will painfully show.

LOSS OF A GOLSPIE BOAT AND CREW Golspie, Oct. 28, 1865 — A sad calamity has this week befallen the fishing population here, a boat's crew of five hands having been lost. On Wednesday, when the boats went to sea, between two and three o'clock, AM, the morning was quite calm and the sea without a ripple on its surface, the only premonitions of a coming change in the weather being frequent and brilliant fishes of lightning.

By the time they reached the fishing ground, a dark cloud was seen gathering to the northward, which in a short time appeared rapidly approaching, and it soon broke over them in wind and rain with terrible fury, at the same time enveloping them in such darkness that the men in the same boat could not see one another.

The storm came on so sudden that they had to cut their lines and try to make for land with all possible speed. That, however, was a work of extreme difficulty, the wind ahead, pelting rain, every other sea nearly swamping the boat, and thick darkness all around. One aged seaman said of this storm that, although he had in his time been three times riding on the keel of his boat at sea, yet he never despaired of his life till this morning. Often they had to use their boots in bailing the boats to keep them afloat, the sea washing over them with such violence.

While yet dark they nearly all struck land here and there along the shore between the Littleferry and Dornoch point and, as the sea was breaking furiously in the shallow water, many of the men had narrow escapes. In one case the crew was lifted bodily out of the boat by running surf, but by the help of the oars, which the men seized, they kept themselves afloat till wave after wave pitched them on the sandy beach. Some of the boats made complete revolutions on



Mr Donald Ross, Rosshdu House, Gate Street, Embo, is the grandson of John Ross, the Dornoch lifeboat coxswain. Here he is pictured (right) with the framed RNLI certificate awarded to his grandfather in 1904 on his retirement, along with his cousin, Mr Donald Macdonald, 5 Church Street, Golspie. Mr Ross also has the training record of lifeboat volunteers, and remembers the family once had the inscribed bell belonging to the *Daisie*.

their keels — whirled round by the rolling breakers.

As the men picked themselves up and made a muster of boats when daylight came on, they found one and its crew missing. Various rumours were afloat regarding them all that day, but there was no certain tidings of their fate, till on Thursday word came from the Ross-shire side that a boat had come ashore near Inver, keel upmost, with a dead body under it. This report turned out to be true, and another of the bodies was got near Tain.

This melancholy disaster has awakened much sympathy in the place, for apart from the sad loss of human life, it leaves two widows, and eleven orphan children very destitute. The crew consisted of two married men, and one unmarried, and two boys, sons of one of the men — their names are as follows:

1. Hector Sutherland (Nhoe), leaves a widow and six children under 15 years of age.
 2. John Sutherland (Nhoe), unmarried. Son of the above Hector Sutherland (Nhoe), aged 21 years.
 3. Donald Sutherland (Nhoe), unmarried. Son of do.; aged 19 years.
 4. James Sutherland (Grasich), aged 40 years, leaves a widow and five of a family under 15.
 5. John Sutherland (Grasich), unmarried, but the sole support of a widowed mother.
- The two last named were stepbrothers and John Sutherland, a nephew of Hector Sutherland, so that it may be said the five men have been taken out of one family. John Sutherland (Grasich) leaves a wid-

owed mother and sister unprovided for. The widowed mother has thus lost a brother, two nephews, and two sons, while another has lost a husband and two sons. Two of the widows are sisters, and one is in a state of pregnancy.

No more bodies have been found. The two bodies were taken here on Friday, and interred next day.

LOSS OF AN INVER BOAT AND CREW

A still more disastrous calamity, as regards loss of life, occurred the same morning to a fishing boat belonging to Inver, near Tain, an entire crew of eight men having perished when running for Portmahomack.

The boat was washed ashore at Balnabruach, a small village 400 or 500 yards to the west of Portmahomack. One man (supposed to be John Campbell, a sailor, who went out that he might get some fish for his own family), was seen clinging to one of the masts of the boat, a little distance out, and though his cries were distinctly heard by the crowd that had assembled on the shore, they could render him no assistance, owing to the force of the waves, and he went down to rise no more. None of the others were seen.

The names of the poor fellows who have thus suddenly been bereft of life are:

1. John Mackay, left a widow and two daughters.
2. Donald Mackay — son of above — left a widow and three children.
3. Alex Mackay; also son of John, unmarried.
4. Kenneth Mackay, brother of John, left

a widow and six children.

5. Hugh Mackay, left a widow and three children.

6. Donald Mackay, left a widow and two children.

7. Alex Mackay, brother of Donald, unmarried, but the sole support of father and three sisters.

8. John Campbell, left a widow, always in a frail state of health.

It will be seen by the above detail that six wives have been bereft of their husbands, and are left with nineteen helpless and totally destitute children. We are assured that their condition is that of extreme destitution, and calls loudly for public sympathy and aid.

In all 13 men perished that fatal morning, leaving eight widows and thirty fatherless children. Need we say to our readers that this is a case in which we are justified in warmly appealing to them on behalf of the widows and the fatherless. Local efforts in the respective localities will be made on their behalf, and we shall have great satisfaction in being entrusted with any sums, however small, for this benevolent object.

On former calamities occurring, we used a like freedom on behalf of Shetland, Lewis, and local sufferers, and we do feel confident that on this occasion we shall not appeal in vain. The case is one of peculiar interest, and those sorrowing sufferers have a claim on the practical sympathy of the northern public. We trust our columns of next week will give evidence that this claim is conceded by many kind-hearted readers. The shilling and the pound will be alike acceptable, and will be duly acknowledged.



This is John Ross from Embo, the first coxswain and superintendent of the Dornoch lifeboat, who served in the post for all 18 years of its existence here.