

# GREAT FERRY DISASTER OF 1809

## Nearly 100 Drowned When Boat Capsized

THE impression made on the minds of the citizens of Dornoch and the surrounding parish can well be imagined when it became known that almost 100 of their number were drowned on their way to attend a market at Tain.

This dreadful tragedy took place at the Meikle Ferry, five miles from Dornoch, on August 16, 1809. Out of a boatload of 100 persons only 12 lives were saved. The overcrowded ferry-boat turned turtle.

The following depositions provide worthwhile reading — only one out of the three deponents was illiterate, a very small proportion in those days of expensive schooling.

First, Andrew Ross, a young Dornoch carpenter, deponed at Skibo before William Soper Dempster, a justice of the peace for the county of Sutherland, that he was bound with the crowd for the popular fair at Tain.

He had boarded the large ferryboat which had just arrived from the Ross-shire side. No elbow room for rowers was possible, nor could the passengers sit or stand normally.

### PANIC

Some, panic-stricken, leaped ashore, a lucky proceeding as it happened. "Further, our ferryman now gave warning that the vessel had sunk deeply in the mud or sand. However, the tide having come in, the crew managed to pull her up and, with the timely aid of a slight breeze, sails were then hoisted, only, alas, to be lowered in an ensuing calm."

Then Andrew Ross said that "a great swell set in, with huge waves breaking over the gunwales of the boat so that the luckless humans were now more than a foot deep in water. Rowing was impossible.

"The shore of their home was all that these poor people now cried for — in vain.

"The last scene of all was when the boat turned right over, a climax hastened by the weight of passengers who rushed to one side."

A short statement corroborating the first witness was given by a William Gordon, tenant in Clashmore. By good luck he was rescued from the back of the upturned boat by the crew of the smaller ferryboat and, with six other fortunate survivors, brought ashore.

### SPECTATOR

A spectator of this ghastly affair was Andrew Thomson, farmer, Ferryton. He relates that a survivor had told him that the well-known Sheriff MacCulloch, one of the victims, had protested very strongly against the extreme congestion and that a Ross-shire ferryman curtly contradicted him, declaring that the boat could well hold "a score more people."

For a highly coloured version of the calamity we must hark back to the '45 and the Culloden disaster of 1746. Then the lairds of Ross were Jacobite

had many times boasted that if he got a boatload of Catachs and Sheriff MacCulloch with them he would drown the lot. So Tain fair day was a gift to such a villain.

I have no doubt he had no intention of losing his own life; he was a powerful swimmer, which was well known to many of his passengers who quickly took hold of him, hoping thereby to save their own lives. He was dragged into the watery depths by the frantic victims of his "devilish cantrip."

This tale needs more than the customary grain of salt. But many a peat fire ceilidh has applauded it on the north side of the Dornoch Firth ere the old story-teller was ousted from his comfortable neuk by the ready-made entertainment of modern radio.

William Gordon, the younger, tenant in Clashmore, in the parish of Dornoch, deponed to the same effect as Ross. He was saved "by laying hold of the boat's mast from which he was fortunately thrown by a wave upon the back of the boat, from where he was brought ashore with six others—two men and three women and a young girl—by the small ferryboat." He thought there were about 100 people in the boat, not more than nine of whom were saved.

### ALARM

Andrew Thomson, tacksman, Ferryton, deponed that he was returning from the barn to his house when he saw the sail hoisted on board the boat when it was about 20 yards from the shore.

He remarked to his wife that he should not wonder if some accident happened to the boat by being so overloaded.

He then went into the house and in a few minutes his wife, who was watching, called out that the boat had sunk. He ran out to the front door and at first saw nothing but one man swimming. But in a few seconds he saw a number of unfortunate people floating near the upturned boat and calling for help. No assistance was at hand or could be sent to them "until the small boat, which was filling with passengers as full as the other, was emptied and sent off, which took a considerable time."

He was told by one of the survivors that there were no fewer than 120 persons on board the boat and he himself thought there were rather more than that number.

### RELIEF FUND

"The same person had told him that Mr MacCulloch of Dornoch, who was one of the unfortunate sufferers, had called out frequently not to admit more people into the boat or else to allow him to go out of it. He was answered by one of the ferrymen by the name of Sutherland, belonging to the Ross-shire side of the ferry, that there was no danger and that the boat could carry 20 more."