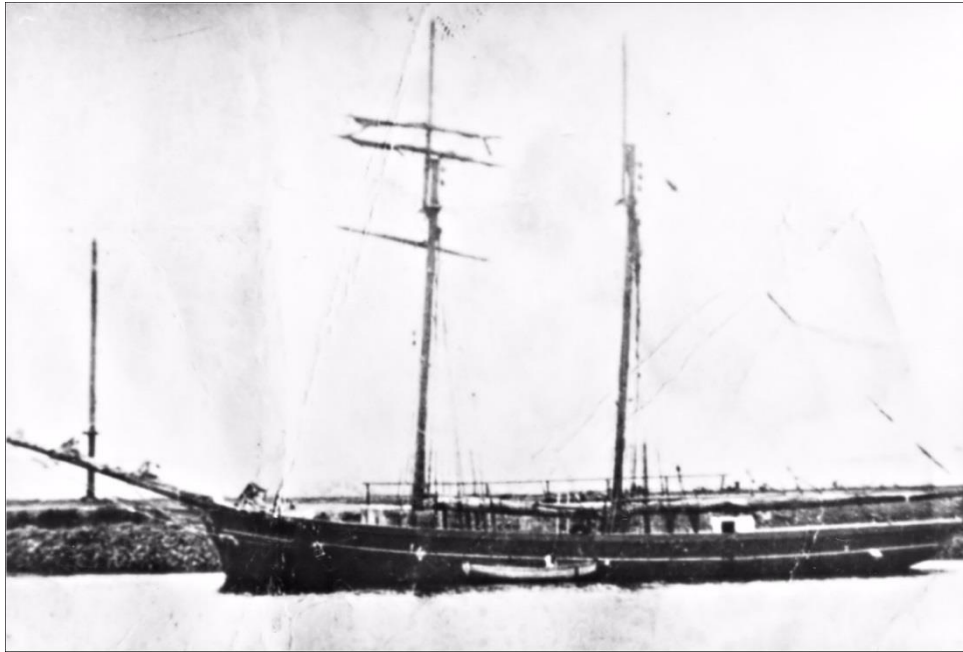


The Burry Inlet Shipwrecks 1868

By Ian Hugh



The Mary Fanny

January 1868 saw many ships and lives lost not to storm force winds but to exceptional swells, pounding many vessels to destruction.

The events are recounted here by Ian Hugh who's Great, Great Grandfather David Morris and his son George of Llanelli salvaged one of those wrecks, the Mary Fanny. She continued trading in 1872 remaining in the family until 1881.

Re-rigged in 1916 and mounted with a gun, she was sunk by a German submarine in 1918.



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The Burry Inlet Shipwrecks 1868

In the minds of many people sailing shipwrecks are synonymous with storms; but that this is far from the truth was never better illustrated than on a quiet January day in 1868. The setting for this, one of the worst incidents of multiple shipwrecks on the coast of Great Britain, was the North West coast of the Gower Peninsular at the mouth of the Burry estuary in Carmarthen Bay.

Carmarthen Bay is a wide expanse of shallow water making a hazardous approach for captains of sailing vessels that used the once busy ports of Llanelli and Burry Port. Sailing ships constantly came to grief on the shoaling sandbanks outside Pembrey and from the records it appears that a surprisingly large number of them were not intending to visit any South Wales port at all. Often ships would be battling with heavy weather on a long sea voyage from foreign parts and arrive off South Wales mistaking it for the Cornish coast. While sailing eastwards they would be entrapped by the coastline of Carmarthen bay and if they did not realise their mistake early enough, would invariably become wrecked somewhere between Cefn Sidan and Pembrey Burrows. However the disaster that overtook the twenty ships leaving Llanelli on the evening ebb tide of Wednesday 22nd January occurred as a consequence of too little and not too much wind.

In 1868 Llanelli was a busy little port exporting large quantities of coal and tin plate to all parts of Britain, Ireland and the continent, but the sand bar, which the ships needed to cross and which was eventually to be one of the main reasons for the closure of the port, provided an extremely dangerous obstacle. Unlike the sandbars at the entrances to many harbours the one across the Burry Inlet is extremely wide and it took a sailing vessel a considerable time to pass over this hazardous strip of water.

Throughout that January the characters that would play their parts in the drama soon to unfold arrived unsuspectingly at the port. They came from near and far and represented most of the seafaring communities of Britain. From Llanelli itself there were the ONWARD, 193 ton brigantine built in Prince Edward Isle in 1864; the ROSCIUS also built in Prince Edward Isle on the Hillsborough River in 1857, a 174 ton brigantine; the BROTHERS, another Prince Edward Isle brigantine of 132 tons; the WATERLILY, 119 tons built at Newport in 1845.

From other parts of the principality came the ELIZABETH DAVIES of Aberystwyth, a small 64 ton iron bolted schooner, and the RHOS of Caernarfon, 51 tons and schooner rigged.

The west country was well represented by the JULIA of Truro, a 61 ton schooner; the ST CATHERINE a 97 ton schooner of Fowey; the ANN of Bideford 58 tons, a polacca; the CONCORDE, a 75 ton schooner of Plymouth; the ANN AND ELIZABETH of Barnstaple a 36 ton smack; the TAMAR QUEEN 103 tons, a schooner of Plymouth; the CHARLES of Bridgewater a 77 ton schooner.

From further afield came the HUNTRESS of Workington an 89 ton schooner; the JEUNE CELINE, a 115 ton schooner of Jersey; the ELIZA, a 211 ton brig also from Jersey; the 89 ton schooner AMETHYST of Dublin; the schooner CHARLES WALKER of Belfast and the SOPHIE of Regneville.

Finally completing the cast was the MARY FANNY, a two masted topsail schooner built at Amlwch in 1862 and registered at Beaumaris. The turn of the year saw her unloading in Swansea Docks. She had arrived during the last week of December carrying a cargo of pit props from Ireland. She had left her home port of Amlwch on the 10th December but had not made a particularly fast passage either to Ireland or back across the Irish Sea. Her crew must have been hoping to have been home in time for Christmas or at worst the New Year, but fate had turned against them and Captain Williams now found himself without a return cargo to ensure a quick turn round. She lay idle at the quayside until the 6th January when her agent brought news of a cargo of tinplate available at nearby Llanelli and destined for Liverpool. The freight was accepted immediately and the MARY FANNY caught the next tide for the short passage around the Gower Peninsular picking up a pilot off the Burry Holmes to see her safely through the difficult approaches in the Burry Estuary. She tied up in the Copperworks Dock to await her cargo. It appears that there was some delay as when interviewed many years later Mr J.S. Tregonning recalled that the cargo did not leave his Morfa Tin Works until the 14th January. Given two days to load the heavy boxes of tin this meant that the MARY FANNY would have been ready to leave port on the 16th or 17th at the earliest.

Here again fate played its hand to keep her and the others laid up along the wharves in Llanelli. Some days earlier the wind had shifted round to the south-west and gradually increased in strength making it impossible for any sailing vessel to leave the port even with the help of a tow as far as the bar by one of the steam tugs operating at the port. On the 12th news arrived in the town of a casualty of the westerly winds that had now risen to storm force. The brig ALBION of Cardiff was reported as going aground on the north coast of the Gower. She had been heading for Cardiff with a cargo of Spanish grass and ore from Almeida in Spain. Driven too far to the north she had been forced into the Burry Inlet and was left stranded on the shore near Llanrhidian. She was visited by a Llanelli customs official, Mr. Charles Ridell who found five feet of water in the hold and the sails blown to pieces. The only living thing aboard was the ship's cat. Over the next two days seven bodies were washed ashore, only the body of the master of the ill-fated vessel remained missing.

By Saturday 19th the wind had risen to a severe westerly gale which battered the whole coastline of South Western Britain. Then gradually conditions began to improve and fine weather with a light but favourable northeast breeze brought new heart to the besieged port. The masters and crews were happy to be freed from their enforced idleness and looked forward to reaching open water beyond the Burry Holmes. They hoped that with the help of Wednesday's ebb tide they would clear the estuary before the flood set in. The congested port became a hive of activity as the no longer wind bound vessels prepared to leave. Pilots were engaged and tows from the steam tugs were arranged.

The ELIZA was the first to go out some time before the rest of the fleet. With a cargo of coal bound for Brest, Captain Luin was anxious to make up for lost time. He took with him a Llanelli pilot Daniel Rees, and once outside the bar found a ground swell running so heavy that the pilot could not be put off and had to remain with the ship. Nothing was seen of her after she had crossed the bar and she was to be numbered with the lost causing much grief in Llanelli where pilot Rees was a man of great popularity.

It was well into the afternoon before the majority of the fleet had left the harbour. In groups of between two and five in number they were towed by paddle tugs through the intricate channels of the upper reaches of the Burry Estuary as far as Whitford Sker. Here the tows would be cast off and the tugs would return to the port to pick up the next group. The

JEUNE CELINE, the CHARLES WALKER, the AMETHYST and the ANN were among the early leavers at about four o'clock in the afternoon and were soon fighting against the effects of the terrific ground swell. Their plight was seen by the returning tugs who warned the masters of the vessels awaiting them in dock not to venture over the bar because of the swell. Whether or not they were believed the advice went unheeded and the remaining vessels were in turn towed out into the bay.

The MARY FANNY was one of the last vessels to leave. In a flotilla of five ships, one of which was the BROTHERS she was towed out by the tug ROYAL PRINCESS. When she had just passed the No. 3 buoy before reaching Whitford Lighthouse her towrope parted and she was on her own. By this time, about six-thirty pm, it was too late on the tide to return to Llanelli even with the help of the steamer, and she like the rest of the fleet, was committed to try her strength against the elements.

Her pilot, John Parrot of Llanelli immediately put on more canvas to make the most of the north westerly breeze and by the time she had reached No.2 buoy around Whitford Point she had overtaken the other four vessels of the same tow. The pilot could now take his leave and when the pilot cutter CERES was sighted the MARY FANNY bore down on her. On rounding No.2 buoy she shipped a very heavy sea that although terrifying the ship's boy, sixteen year old Robert Williams, did little damage to the ship herself. With some difficulty the pilot clambered into his pilot boat to row across to the cutter and as he was about to pull away the boy, by now completely petrified took his chance to get away from the schooner wallowing badly in the heavy seas. With hardly a hesitation he cleared the bulwarks and jumped into the boat. Captain Williams shouted to him to return. He knew the serious effect this desertion would have on the boy's future career but he also realised that he would have need of every hand, however inexperienced, to help him over the next few hours. But there was no way the boy was going to return to the schooner.

As darkness hardened over the vessels huddled together on the sand bar, their hopes of getting clear into the bay before the tide turned were dashed when suddenly the wind dropped, leaving the collection of sloops, schooners and brigs becalmed, rising and falling on the continually developing ground swell.

The swell had by now increased to a quite extraordinary level and the crews of the vessels found themselves in an almost paradoxical situation of being surrounded by such perilous and tempestuous seas with mountainous unbroken waves as though they were on the edge of a hurricane and yet it was dead calm. The cause of this swell can never be ascertained; it could have been some storm of extreme violence somewhere far out in the Atlantic or even a marine earthquake. In either case an immense and destructive volume of water was driven in on the shore with an unquenchable momentum. About half a dozen vessels had cleared the bar, the rest were trapped and helpless, tossed like corks with their infilled sails hanging limply in the gloom of that January evening. But the forces of nature had yet to do their worst as the tide began to turn and the ground swell increased to an even more unprecedented level.

With the flood tide beginning to set strongly the vessels started to drift dangerously back onto the bar or onto the northwest shore of the Gower. Anchors were put down but many cables broke under the stress and strain caused by the violent rising, falling and rolling of the ships. There was little that the crews could do to prevent the approaching catastrophe. The seas were running far too high for them to attempt to put out their boats to tow

themselves farther out to sea. All their desperate efforts were in vain as their vessels had their bottoms knocked out by the continual thumping on the sandbanks of the Hooper shoals, for the swell was so great that at one moment a ship would be floating high on the crest of a wave and the next crashing down into the trough would be aground with a jarring crunch on the bar. Some sank in the middle of the estuary, but even those that were swept back right over the bar, found that the inrush of water through their stoved-in hulls and crushed planking was too much for the pumps to handle and were driven ashore in a sinking condition.

One such vessel was the Llanelli brigantine BROTHERS. Her master and owner Captain Thomas Roberts of Marine Street Llanelli reckoned at the inquest that the tug ought to have taken them clear of the bar but either the tow had been cast off early or that they had dragged the two posts out of the tug. Nevertheless he found himself with several others of the same tow in a position where he thought himself clear of the bar. His pilot had not left for as he said later “there was too much sea”. Before the north –easterly breeze died they had reached about two miles outside the Holmes but soon realised he was drifting back into the estuary. At about eleven pm they struck the bank outside the Homes, and half an hour later saw another vessel bearing down on them unmanageable and out of control. In the prevailing conditions control of the vessels was impossible and there were several collisions. In this instance the approaching ship was the ROSCIUS, also of Llanelli and she was badly holed. As she fell across the bows of the BROTHERS her seven man crew and her pilot jumped safely onto the deck of the brigantine. Whilst the vessels were interlocked a third vessel the Jersey schooner JEUNE CELINE also out of control came up, her crew desperately shouting for help. Those on board the BROTHERS shouted back for them to abandon ship and make out for the pilot hulk, whilst they themselves fought to clear the sinking ROSCIUS now holding them on the bank. They cut away the obstruction and with the help of a breeze that had sprung up floated off the bank. Finding deep water again Captain Roberts decided to drop anchor but quickly realised that too much water was entering through the broken planking. The pilot boat CERES came up to aid the men straining at the pumps in an attempt to keep her afloat until the tug could come to her rescue. Their efforts were of no avail and in the end the anchor cable was cut and the vessel allowed to beach herself. Her crew and that of the ROSCIUS boarded the pilot cutter and struck out for the pilot hulk. This was a hulk moored in the estuary where the pilots of Llanelli awaited incoming ships often spending a fortnight on station when the weather was favourable.

Here they found the crews of several of the vessels clinging on for dear life, thankful for their own salvation but haunted by the screams and agonised cries that carried above the roaring of the waves from the sailors whom no help could reach. This was a sad night indeed for Captain Roberts for although he and his crew were safe, his other vessel, the 119 ton schooner WATERLILY bound for Rouen with coal was also a casualty of those fearful seas. She broke up in the heavy swell but again fortunately without loss of life.

For some reason, probably because sand blown up by the southwest gales had accumulated between the lifeboat station and the sea, the Pembrey lifeboat could not be launched. With no lifeboat the only gleam of hope was the light burning on the pilot hulk and crews took to their boats and rowed desperately towards the friendly glimmer. Some were successful in boarding the hulk but others perished miserably. The pilots on the hulk did valiant work rescuing in all at least thirty five of the sailors. The two men on the pilot cutter CERES came in for particular praise and gratitude at the inquest. They had taken off the crews of four vessels and landed them safely.

It was strongly felt that had there been a lifeboat on the hulk then many more lives would have been saved. The Llanelli lifeboat station had been closed in 1863 but one of the outcomes of the disaster was a request for a boat to be again stationed at the port. Every witness at the inquest was emphatic about the need for both another lifeboat and some means of communicating the state of the seas over the bar to the port itself. The request for the lifeboat was granted and she arrived on station in April 1869. She was kept on the hulk and in view of the exposed position was made of iron.

A few of the sailors struck out for the shore, some for the Gower, others to Pembrey, while according to local legend one is said to have swum all the way back to Llanelli with the help of the flood tide. Others took to the rigging but with the ships breaking up and masts being torn out, theirs was not to be a safe refuge.

One such case was that of the brigantine ONWARD. She had become separated from the majority of the fleet, missed the bar but had been swept onto the rocks on the Holmes neckway with a terrible grinding noise and the ship's hull started to break up. As each wave hit the decks so it took pieces of wreckage with it. The men on board including the pilot Christopher (Kit) Lewis climbed the mast hoping for safety from the raging sea, but during the night the mast collapsed throwing them into the water and causing four of them; the master, his son, the pilot, and an apprentice to perish. The others were rescued by six of the pilots off the hulk who dashed into the surf with ropes.

Also dismasted near the Holmes was the ANN of Bideford. She had probably been the first casualty of the evening having had her mainmast knocked out when the sea struck her abreast No.3 buoy. She eventually drifted ashore just outside the hulk at about eight o'clock having been carried out by the ebb tide. Her crew took to the boat before she grounded and made it safely to the hulk. One of her crew was probably wishing that he'd been allowed to sail on board the AMETHYST. The Irish schooner's master was bound for Barnstaple and had requested his help in piloting across the Bristol Channel and over Appledore Bar, but his own captain would not let him go. He must however have been relieved when he was later to identify the body of that same Irish captain and learn that from the AMETHYST's crew there had been no survivors.

Also lost with all hands was the JEUNE CELINE. Her crew had failed to make the safety of the pilot hulk, their vessel smashed to pieces on the rocks.

To add to the confusion in the estuary the north easterly wind, that had deserted them and left them to the mercy of the waves, now returned with greater strength. Opposing the incoming tide it caused havoc to the vessels grounding in Broughton Bay but gave those lucky enough to have sea room a chance to get away from the land.

In all eight ships made it to safety although until reports of their arrival at their destinations filtered through they were numbered amongst the lost.

From the lack of contrary evidence it seems that that CHARLES, the CONCORDE, and the ELIZABETH DAVIES survived disaster undamaged. The smack ANN AND ELIZABETH of Barnstaple made it across the bay to put into TENBY harbour on the following afternoon. She was greatly disabled having lost her boat, bulwarks, water cask and binnacle. Her master, Captain John Williams, reported that he had been twice washed

overboard and that with six feet of water in her hold it had taken the crew twelve hours of continuous pumping to keep her afloat.

During the next week came the news that the CHARLES WALKER had arrived in Milford, the JULIA in Falmouth and to the great joy and immense relief of the family of pilot Daniel Rees news of the ELIZA's arrival in St. Malo reached the town. It wasn't however until February 7th that fears for the SOPHIE were allayed when she put in safely at Regneville, her home port.

Two vessels successfully returned to Llanelli on the Thursday morning, the RHOS and the TAMAR QUEEN. The latter had struck the ground several times throughout the night but although she was making water badly her crew working ceaselessly on the pumps had kept her afloat until her master, Captain Hodge, managed to get a tow from an incoming steamer, the CUMBRIA of Llanelli, and she arrived back in port with her bulwarks lost and her decks swept.

Of the MARY FANNY nothing more was heard that night. She had rounded the Holmes ahead of the BROTHERS but some of the men ashore thought they heard Captain Williams' voice calling to them to throw a rope. In the darkness they couldn't see him but a rope was thrown towards the sound but to no avail. He was never to be seen alive again.

The events had taken place late on a January evening, the beaches were deserted and being Wednesday the local villagers of Llanmadoc and Llangennith were in church for their weekly choir practice. There was no storm to attract their attention so none were aware of the catastrophe taking place nearby. It was only when dawn finally broke and the villagers went down to the sands in the morning that the local community became aware of the awesome event that had taken place. From Burry Holes to Whitford Point the high water mark was covered with broken spars, planking, ropes, torn sails, seamen's clothes and tools, and vast quantities of coal. Even worse many bodies lay in evidence of the full depth of the tragedy.

On the rocks leading out to Burry Holmes lay what was left of the smashed and mastless hull of the ONWARD. Nearby on Broughton sands was the damaged hull of the ANN, next to her the remains of the WATERLILY. About a mile further up the coast to the northeast on Whitford sands were the BROTHERS, the JEUNE CELINE, the HUNTRESS and the ST. CATHERINE. Further out in the estuary was the AMETHYST and the ROSCIUS, while around the Holmes in Rhossili Bay lay the MARY FANNY broadside on the sands opposite Llangennith. The owner of the cargo found her two days later after riding on horseback along the Gower coast in search of her.

It scarcely needs saying that the disaster numbed the entire district. Many of the unfortunate mariners belonged to Llanelli and their being wrecked within sight of their homes and within a few hours of leaving rendered it still more depressing. The bodies of those lost continued to come ashore for many days afterwards. Once the formalities had been completed those who had not been identified were buried in the churchyards of the parishes where they were picked up. Unfortunately no evidence as to their graves can be found today. There is still a question mark over the exact number of lives lost and several accounts refer to over thirty being buried in Llanmadoc alone with others in neighbouring parishes. This would put the final death toll to nearer forty. From my researches however, I would suggest that twenty to twenty five as a more realistic figure.

Those bodies that were identified were returned home for burial, among them that of Captain Williams of the MARY FANNY. Despite his short acquaintance with the town he had become much respected by the local seafaring community of Llanelli and a large concourse followed his remains to the railway station when they were sent home to Amlwch by rail.

For a number of the ships wrecked this was not to be the end of their stories. Men were hired to unload the cargoes of those whose hulls were only slightly damaged. Broken spars and tangled rigging were cut away, splits in the planking were patched up and strenuous efforts were made to get them off. The HUNTRESS was refloated on the 11th February and towed into Llanelli for refitting. She had undergone extensive repairs on the beach but still required a great deal of major work to be carried out in port.

The MARY FANNY was also to be saved from a premature end although at first it was feared that she would end her days being pounded to pieces by the breakers in Rhossili Bay. On the 27th January an attempt to raise her was made after the removal of 550 boxes of tin plate from the hold, but she had settled deep into the soft sand and the attempt failed. She was now lying so low that even at low water there was still four feet of water over the remainder of her cargo. She was eventually bought and salvaged by my Great, Great Grandfather David Morris and his son George of Llanelli who, after many months of hard work, repaired her hull and refloated her on a spring tide and towed her back to Llanelli for further repairs. She was finally ready to resume trading in 1872 and remained in the family until 1881. She then sailed out of first Bridgewater, then Gloucester and finally Appledore. She was re-rigged as a ketch in 1916 and had a gun mounted during the war in 1918, and was finally sunk by a German submarine, UB64, on the 15th September 1918 after a short exchange of gunfire 14 miles ESE of the Codling bank between the Connibay Lightship and the Tusker Rock off the coast of Ireland.

The rest remained on the beaches, as a terrible reminder to the sailors of vessels using the estuary of the dangers of the unpredictable profession they chose to follow. The dark ruins of their hulls standing out clearly against the pale yellow of the sands until the seas, sands and beachcombers reduced them first to stark skeletons and finally wiped away all trace of the tragedy. Yet even today the restless constantly moving sands of Carmarthen Bay continue to release grim reminders of that day so long ago. The latest being an anchor pulled up in the nets of a local fisherman in 1980. Not positively identified but clearly of that period and believed to be off the TAMAR QUEEN. Sad souvenirs to remind us that in the days of sail too little wind could be as fateful as too much.

The events of that day in 1868 made an immense and indelible impression on the people of Llanelli. So great that stories of the wrecks have been handed down from generation to generation, that even today men still talk of the night over a hundred years ago when ships became 'the sport of the waves' and the seas were mysteriously moved to such violence never before or since known.

THE END