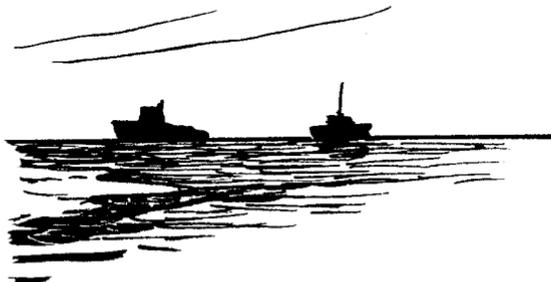


A Princess in Peril



The last week of January 1953 will be remembered throughout Britain and Ireland as one of the stormiest and wettest ever recorded. The storms caused what came to be known as the ‘North Sea Flood’ in England. There, the waters of the sea had swept inland over the low lying areas causing severe flooding to large parts of England’s east coast, resulting in the death of over five hundred people.

In 1947, the *Princess Victoria* became the first ‘roll-on-roll-off’ passenger ferry (where vehicles could be driven on and off the ship) to be built and sail in British waters. The ship ran every day between the ports of Stranraer, in Scotland and Larne, in Northern Ireland. The ferry was not large by today’s standards but was thought to be revolutionary back in the days following the Second World War. The ship weighed 2,444 tonnes, was 94 metres long, 15 metres wide and had a maximum speed of 19 knots. It was capable of carrying 1500 passengers, 40 cars and had sleeping compartments for 54 people.

On 31st January 1953, the *Princess Victoria* set sail from Stranraer at 7.45 a.m. carrying 128 passengers and a crew of 51. The captain was James Ferguson who, at 55, was vastly experienced,

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having been in command of various ships sailing this route for almost seventeen years. Despite a severe gale warning being in place, the *Princess Victoria* began her journey to Larne.

After leaving the shelter of Loch Ryan and entering the Irish Sea, the ship was exposed to the full power of the raging winds and mountainous seas. The waves crashing over her stern broke open the 1.52 metre high doors to the car deck, allowing water to flood in, making the ship unstable. Despite the valiant efforts of the crew to fix and secure the damaged doors, over 200 tonnes of water poured in, causing the ship to list to starboard.

Captain Ferguson immediately attempted a return to the relative safety of Loch Ryan. However, in trying to keep the damaged rear of the ship out of the worst of the weather, he found it impossible to manoeuvre safely back towards Stranraer. Approximately two hours after setting sail, the *Princess Victoria* sent out a distress call, stating that she was out of control and required the immediate assistance of tugs to tow her back to port. Three-quarters of an hour later at 10.30 a.m., the *Princess Victoria* sent out her first S.O.S distress message, and a full scale rescue operation began: lifeboats from Portpatrick in Scotland, Donaghadee, in Northern Ireland, as well as Royal Navy ships from Rothesay set sail. An RAF Hastings aircraft flew down towards the scene, leaving another rescue operation in the Western Isles.

Despite the danger she was in, the *Princess Victoria*, by keeping her engines going, drifted further away from the coast of Scotland and closer to the coast of Ireland. The crew, however, continued to send out distress calls, giving the location of the ship as being closer to Scotland. The Royal Navy destroyer, HMS *Contest*, made good time in spite of the severe weather conditions

which forced her to slow from 31 knots to 16 knots. Despite this she still managed to cover the 96.6 kilometre distance in just under two-and-a-half hours.

Sadly, most people in the world do not realise that they are in the wrong position with regard to God. The Bible says that ‘your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear’ (Isaiah 59:2). Once we are prepared to acknowledge that we are sinful and separated from God we can turn from our sin and trust his Son, the Lord Jesus, who promises to save all who come to him as Saviour.

Once in the locality provided by the stricken vessel, the *Contest’s* crew were unable to see the sinking ship, due to poor visibility and the fact that the *Princess Victoria* had moved from her reported position. At about 1:30 p.m., with her engines now stopped, the crew of the sinking ship sighted the coast of Northern Ireland. They immediately relayed the ship’s new location via Morse code [the ship did not have conventional wireless radio communication] to the rescue vessels which were trying desperately to find her. Just before 2.00 p.m., the final message was relayed, confirming that the ship was now sinking and that the order to abandon ship had been given.

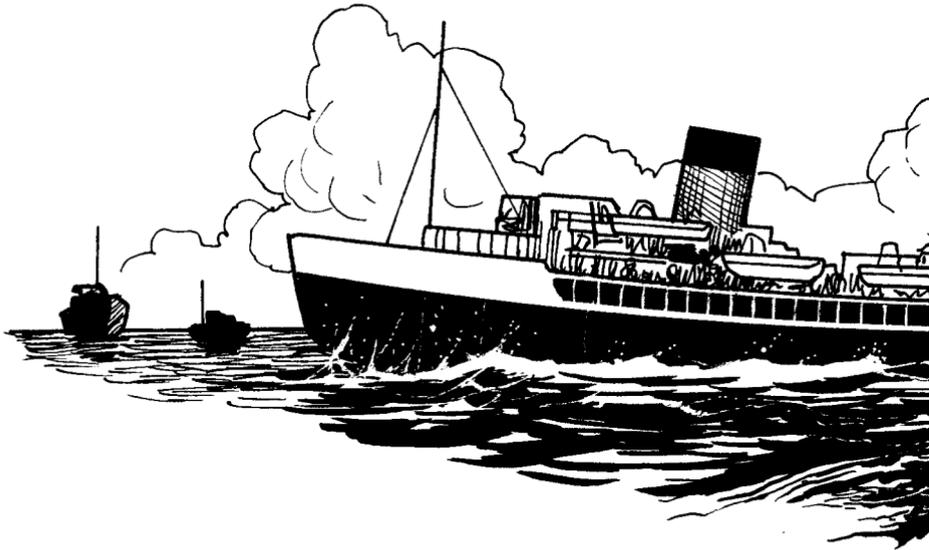
Once the *Princess Victoria* had established her position, being close to the mouth of Belfast Lough rather than in Scottish waters, four ships, which had been sheltering from the raging storm in the Lough, immediately put to sea in an attempt to assist in the rescue effort.

However, the strong winds and giant waves proved too much for the ferry and the *Princess Victoria* foundered at around 2.00 p.m.

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The continuing severity of the storm, meant that when the rescue ships finally arrived, they were unable to lift the survivors from the lifeboats. The ships positioned themselves around the lifeboats providing some protection from the fierce storm and mountainous seas. Eventually, the Donaghadee lifeboat, called *Sir Samuel Kelly*, arrived on the scene and was able to pluck the fortunate survivors from the lifeboats.

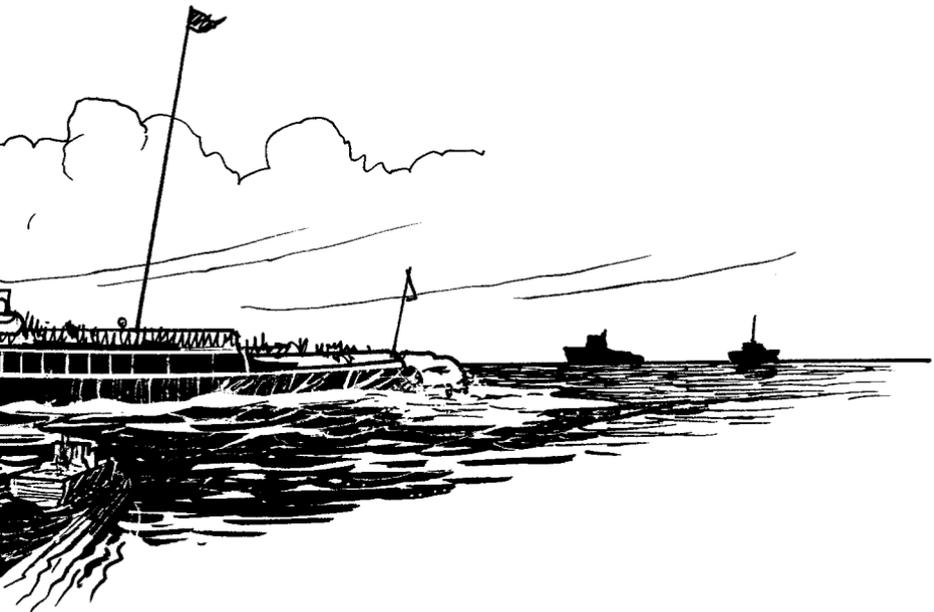
The disaster claimed the lives of 133 people, including all the officers of the ship. The captain, James Ferguson, was observed by some survivors standing to attention and saluting as his ship sank beneath him. Forty-four survivors were rescued from the lifeboats which had been launched but, tragically, not a single woman or child survived. The radio operator, David Broadfoot,



was awarded the George Cross, the highest civilian award for bravery, for staying at his post until the ship sank, in a desperate attempt to relay help to the stricken vessel.

Many questions were asked in the weeks and months following the disaster. Why had the ship sailed into such a gale in the first place, why had the stern doors not been strong enough or high enough to withstand the storm and why had the *Princess Victoria* continued to provide wrong information about her location?

We can all learn an important lesson from this disaster. Sin, the wrong things we all do, is like a storm in our lives. The greatest danger that sin brings is that it will keep us out of heaven forever. We need to make sure that we have a Saviour who can save us from this tragedy. God's Word, the Bible, points us to the Lord



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Jesus who is the only one who can rescue us and give us a great and wonderful hope of a home in heaven.

On one occasion, the Lord's disciples were in a small boat, in the middle of a great storm, when the Lord came to them, walking upon the water. Peter, wanting to do the same as the Lord climbed out of the small boat and began to walk on the water towards him. However, something happened and poor Peter began to sink down into the water crying out: 'Lord save me' (Matthew 14:30). Immediately, the strong arm of the Lord Jesus Christ reached down and lifted Peter out of the waves. In the same way, when we call upon the Lord, realising the awful danger we are in because of our sin, the Lord will save us and make us fit for heaven. The Bible says: 'Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved' (Romans 10:13).

THINGS TO SEE AND DO:

- *Princess Victoria Memorial Cairn - Agnew Park - Stranraer, Scotland.*
- *Princess Victoria Memorial Monument - Bay Road - Larne.*
- *Ulster Folk and Transport Museum - Can be found just off the A2 Belfast Bangor Road at Holywood. The lifeboat *Sir Samuel Kelly* is on display here, as is a model of the *Princess Victoria*.*