

180th anniversary of the Frolic steamer disaster

AN entry in the burial records of Holy Cross Church in Cowbridge, reads: **Mary Henderson, St Mary's Parish, Pembroke, buried March 23, 1831, age 19 - "This young lady was drowned off Marcross at the wreck of the Frolic steam packet."**

The following entry: **Thomas Henderson, buried May 3, 1831, age 20 - "This young man was brother to the above, and was lost in the same wreck".**

The curate, Thomas Edmondes, performed both ceremonies. They both lie in the graveyard together to this day. The same sad details are to be found around the parishes of the Vale, Hester Turner, age 25, St

Athan, Thomas Benjamin, age 16, Llantwit Major, and many more with entries which record: "Washed up on the sea shore, male, name unknown".

Many victims of the worst passenger disaster in the maritime history of the Bristol Channel were never found.

The event was the loss of the *Frolic* packet steamer en route from Haverfordwest to Bristol.

Some 78-80 passengers and crew were lost and not one soul survived to tell the tale of the events leading up to the catastrophe.

Communities in south Pembrokeshire were devastated by the news, as were families of the crew, mainly from Bristol.

The sense of despair was also felt in the Vale, as relatives and friends spent days walking about the Vale coastline in search of the victims.

by **Brian Keitch**

Bodies came ashore over many months from Southerndown in the west to Cadoxton in the east - many beyond recognition.

All agreed that something had to be done once and for all to prevent such a tragedy happening again.

Ironically, only a year before a petition had been organised around the Bristol Channel ports to the Brethren of Trinity House to provide lights to prevent such a calamity from occurring - but there were influential objectors to the cost of any provision.

After the loss of the *Frolic*, Trinity House responded to the outcry by building not one, but two lighthouses on Nash Point, opened within 12 months of the tragedy.

The paddle packet steamer *Frolic* was built at Greenock in 1827 by John Scott & Co for the Glasgow to Belfast service.

Perhaps she was too small for this expanding trade because, in 1830, she was lengthened by six-and-a-half feet and sold south to the Bristol Steam Navigation Company for use on the west Wales run.

It was largely at the instigation of Lieutenant Edward Jenkins RN of Haverfordwest that the service commenced on Thursday, October 14, 1830, departing Bristol

dining room and even a female stewardess for lady passengers.

Being powered by steam, *Frolic* could boast a timetable to adhere to.

With a speed of about 10 knots, she could make the journey to or from Bristol in about 10 hours.

The alternative was the stage coach and a risky crossing of the River Severn at Beachley.

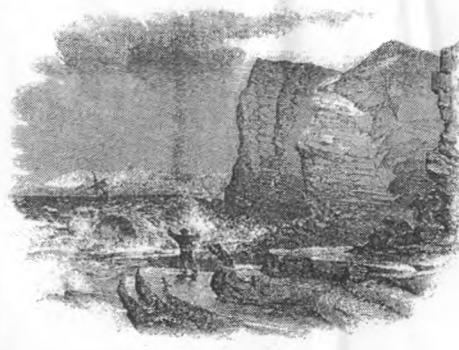
Her arrival on Friday, October 15, at Haverfordwest was met with a celebration hitherto never seen there - she was the first steamer to be based there.

Furthermore, *Frolic* was to maintain a year round service, calling at Tenby and other locations such as Milford and Pater (Pembroke Dock).

Frolic quickly acquired a keen following. She was a very pretty vessel with a schooner rig and a harlequin figurehead.

In November, she added Carmarthen to her ports of call. She was the preferred way to travel to Bristol, where merchants from west Wales did much of their business.

By March 1831, she seemed very well established on the route - having come through the winter and there was the prospect of additional



Nash Sands

made for Bristol in the evening. He knew that any further delay would also cause problems with the return sailing due from Bristol on March 18.

Meanwhile, unbeknown to the commander a drama was unfolding up channel at Breaksea Point, Aberthaw, where the sailing vessel *Diligence* had been blown ashore and wrecked, though its skipper, Captain Shaddock and crew made it ashore safely.

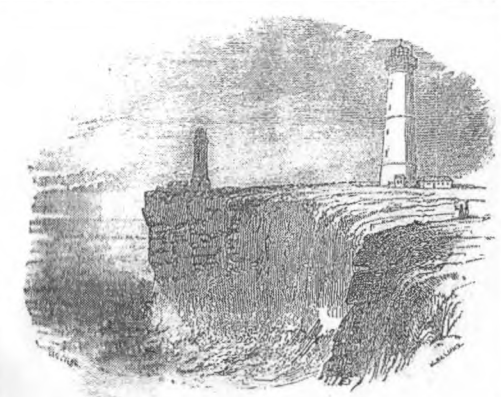
Lloyd's register of wrecks records strong south west/westerly gales. Far from moderating, the gale increased to storm force.

Captain Jenkins and

his crew were sailing into the night. He had to avoid the Helwick Sands, the Mixon Sands, the Scarweather Sands and Tusker Rock, and above all - the six-and-a-half mile long Nash Sands to round Nash Point and relative safety.

The last lighthouse en route was Mumbles - no use for the remainder of the journey. A combination of wind and incoming tide needed to push *Frolic* a degree or so to port and the Nash Sands awaited.

In Bristol, Mr H W Hartnell recalled: "I well remember her failing to arrive on the forenoon tide, and my waiting expected her arrival at the Hotwells



Nash Lighthouse

late in the evening, when a report came up from Pill that she had gone on the Nash Sands the previous night, which was fully confirmed by the boats and craft sent down Channel".

The scene was one of devastation. The Captain of the packet steamer *Bristol*, en route from Swansea, reported being impeded by wreckage - a ship's boiler and machinery on the sands and a paddle box on the shore.

Later the Cork packet *City of Bristol* reported the same scene, with bedding and stores all over the Nash Passage.

It was soon clear there were no survivors. A young woman was found on the beach with a child clasped in her hands, the captain was lashed to a spar with a young boy.

His watch had stopped at just before 4.am, at about which time the disaster is

thought to have happened.

Mary Henderson was found on the beach with her suitcases nearby - did she try to use them to float ashore?

Bodies were washed up for months afterwards - some in groups which suggest they were trapped in the wreckage until it finally broke up.

March 17 is the occasion of the 180th anniversary of this most melancholy event in the history of the Vale and it is intended to hold a meeting at Nash Point at about midday to commemorate the event and all who have lost their lives along our coastline.

Trinity House has made Nash Lighthouse available and anyone interested in participating in this meeting should contact me at brian_keitch2002@hotmail.com or text me on 07982862671.

Compared with the sailing vessels which had previously plied these routes, *Frolic* seemed positively luxurious.

The ship provided cabin accommodation, a

coming summer months. The March 15, 1831, sailing was advertised as a 7am departure from the Quay, Haverfordwest.

In addition, Captain Jenkins had every reason to be pleased — there were more passengers booked on this voyage than on any to date.

There was a delegation of top merchants from Haverfordwest and Milford, and a large contingent of senior army personnel from Tenby (including Gen McCleod, 1st Royal Regiment of Foot, Col Gordon of the Queen's Bays and Major Boyd — all with family and servants). The *Frolic* was due in Bristol the same evening.

March gales are not uncommon on our coastline and this was just such an occasion.

It would appear that sea conditions were sufficiently bad for the ship to remain stormbound — probably in Milford Haven. The morning tide of March 16 was also lost.

Pressure must have been mounting on Captain Jenkins.

Merchants had meetings to attend, many passengers were on their way to London. Hoping, no doubt, that the weather would moderate, Captain Jenkins finally