

Loss of the Nostar Boat

The year 1893 was a particularly bad year for losses at sea with 97 boats wrecked around the Scottish Coast resulting in the loss of 82 men, compared with the loss of 10 boats and 12 men in 1892.

Of the 1893 losses 10 boats and 12 men were from the Stornoway District alone and one of these was the 30 ft. boat belonging to Donald MacInnes (Domhnall Nostair) from Nostar, near Rhenigidale, Harris, which was found wrecked, with the loss of its five crew, at Sandwood Bay, near Kinlochbervie on the North West Sutherland coast.

On Friday 8th December 1893 Donald and his crew were at anchor in one of the lochs on the West Coast along with two other Rhenigidale boats, the 33 ½ ft. “Claymore” SY 533, belonging to Neil MacKay (Niall Mor), and the 32 ft. “Abstainer?/ Try Again?” skippered by Angus Campbell (Aonghas ‘n Bhic).

As the forecast was poor they were considering whether they should risk the passage home to Harris for the weekend after having been at the herring fishing out of Lochinver. Angus Campbell had gone ashore for stores in case they had to remain at anchor over the week-end and spoke to a shepherd who advised him that, while the weather was favourable then, they should not leave as the skies looked menacingly bleak. As they were talking they noticed the Nostar boat, the smallest of the three, preparing to sail and it was decided that if one left they would all go.

Angus returned on board and the boats set sail in a reasonably favourable wind and hoped they would get into the lee of the Lewis shore before the weather broke. However, by the time they were approaching the Shiant Isles the wind had increased to gale force and they were caught in the severe storm that then raged on the West Coast. The crews were trying to keep the boats close together as best they could and they remained like this until they were passing the Shiant Isles where they lost sight of one another when the visibility was severely reduced by a heavy snowstorm and driving sea spray.

The “Try Again?” and the “Claymore” weathered the storm and made a landfall on the Lewis shore in Loch Marvig where they navigated up the loch heading for the only house that had a light on. Fortunately this house had a light on because a woman was in labour there.

When they found that Donald’s boat had not followed them they became concerned for him and his crew as the last sighting they had had of the boat was at about 3-o- clock in the afternoon about a mile off the Shiant Isles when the crew had been seen trying to reef the sail in storm-force winds.

Fearing the worst Angus Campbell made his way to Rhenigidale, keeping clear of Eilean Anabuich in case he met anyone who might enquire why he was there, to break the news that Donald’s boat was missing, and searching the coastline as he went in case the boat had reached safety somewhere along the coast.

No evidence of the boat was seen and he continued to Rhenigidale to report that the boat had not made the Lewis or Harris shore.

The missing crew were Donald MacInnes (45), and his son, Norman (about 15), both residing at Rhenigidale; Donald's brother in law, Roderick Shaw (40) and his son, Angus (22), unmarried, and Roderick's brother, Angus (37), unmarried, all residing at Eilean Anabuich.

On Tuesday 12th December Farquhar MacRae, a shepherd from Sandwood, along with a young lad, had been passing the west end of Sandwood Bay on his evening rounds when they came across two bodies, tied together, in the shelter of the beach between Herd Point and Sandwood Bay.

Farquhar, who had previously been a shepherd at Kenmore on the Lewis side of Loch Seaforth and knew the people of Rhenigidale, recognised the bodies as that of Donald MacInnes and his eldest son, Norman.

When they had placed the bodies in a safe place they set off to the neighbouring township of Blairmore, about 4 miles away, and informed the township of Oldshorebeg of their findings. The postmaster at Kinlochbervie sent a telegram to Harris reporting the finding of two bodies and this confirmed to the relatives in Rhenigidale that the boat had foundered and that the men had perished in the storm.

A party of men set off for Sandwood Bay to look after the bodies and give information to the local policeman, while carpenters prepared coffins.

A search party along the shore the next day found the wreck, in Strath Calleach Bay, of a boat with a Registration No., CY 58. As the boat was registered in Castlebay, Barra, contact was made with the Authorities there and a telegram from there stated that a boat of that description was missing from Harris with a crew of five.

This information let the searchers know how many to look for, but the two bodies found had to be buried first. The people of the Parish placed the remains of the two in the coffins that had been specially made for them and carried them a distance of 6 miles to the Cemetery at Oldshoremore where they buried them with all due respect.

After the burial the search resumed for the remainder of the crew and on Monday 18th December the search party were successful in finding another two bodies, identified as Angus Shaw and his nephew, Angus, a little below the wreck in Strath Calleach Bay. As soon as the search party made known that two other bodies had been found two carpenters set to work to make the coffins and a third one travelled 9 miles to lend a hand.

The coffins, similar to the first two, beautifully finished with pall and pure linen for shrouds, were completed by 3 a.m. Before daybreak the people of the Parish turned out in hundreds, many of them in their seaboots as they had to cross the Strath Calleach and Sandwood rivers which were in spate due to the constant heavy rain.

Amidst a great and profound silence the bodies were placed in the coffins but for a time it looked as if the rivers could not be crossed due to the spate of the water. However the march to the burial ground was commenced at noon and the procession, all wet to their waists after fording the rivers, arrived at the Cemetery at Oldshoremore at 3.30 p.m. Both the Established and Free Church Ministers officiated at the burial services.

Despite an extensive search the body of the remaining crewman, Roderick Shaw, was never found and it is thought that a sea had washed him overboard at the Shiant Isles and that Donald had then turned the boat round to run with the weather as best he could. The boat would have been driven towards the coast, with very little to control its direction as sometime thereafter the sail was torn and the yard broken at the strap, until it ran aground in the heavy seas and swell at Sandwood Bay.

When the wreck was found the ballast was in a heap on the shore with the anchor and chain close by therefore it is considered that the boat was whole until it foundered on the shore. It is believed that Donald and his son were either washed overboard, or made for the shore using a buoy, on approaching Herd Point. The bodies were found above the High Water mark therefore it is considered that they got ashore alive and died of exposure or exhaustion from the battering they had received. A buoy similar to those found near the wreck was found close to the bodies.

The bodies of the two Angus' were recovered close to the wreck therefore it is likely that they remained on board until the boat was wrecked on the shore.

When the wreck was found only the boat's registration, CY 58, was found and it is thought that Donald had only purchased it shortly before the disaster and was in the process of changing its name.

According to the Customs & Excise Register CY 58 was named "Knight Commander", 30ft and 8T, of Boreray, North Uist, and Skippered by J. MacLean. This confirms that the boat had been bought just prior to the loss and that the transfer of the documents had not been completed.

Donald MacInnes left a widow, Chirsty (Caristiona Rhuadh), with a young family on the croft at Nostar. The children were Duncan (13); Roderick (11); William (9); Margaret (6); Marion (4); Donald (2); and Norman (10 months).

Roderick Shaw left a widow, Salvia (Slainte), Donald MacInnes' sister, with a young family on the croft at Eilean Anabuich. The children were Duncan (14); Donald (13); Kenneth (11); Margaret (8); and Mary Kate (18 months).

Angus Shaw, senior, and Angus Shaw, junior, were unmarried.

The following information has been received from the Registrar at Brora:
Deaths registered at Inshegra, Kinlochbervie, on 8th January 1894 by Farquhar MacRae, finder.

Place of death	- Sandwood Bay, Kinlochbervie
Cause of death	- Drowning
Donald MacInnes	- Age (supposed) 40
Norman MacInnes	- Age (supposed) 16
Angus Shaw	- Age (supposed) 35
Angus Shaw	- Age (supposed) 21
Buried at Oldshoremore, Kinlochbervie (Old Cemetery).	

The graves, marked by two unnamed stones, have been found and are at the front western end of the old Cemetery at Oldshoremore.

The above was compiled by Donald John Campbell from oral history; a report by D.R. Morrison, Scalpay, in the Stornoway Gazette in 1969; a report in the newspaper "Scottish Highlander" of 21st December 1893; and from three letters, dated December 1893 and February 1894, written by William MacKay, Schoolmaster at Kinlochbervie, to Murdo MacLennan, Donald MacInnes' brother-in-law, in Rhenigidale. These original letters were found, in May 2001, at 25 Fiscavaig, Portnalong, Isle of Skye, the home of the family of John MacKay, Murdo MacLennan's son-in-law, who had moved to Skye in 1923.
Information on William MacKay:

William Gunn MacKay was born in Skerry, Sutherland in 1853 and married Elizabeth Grant, born in Huntly in 1851, in 1881 in Old Machar, Aberdeen. They had 6 children.

In 1900 Elizabeth moved to Newcastle with children; Caroline Mary (1885), Henrietta Roberta (1886), William Grant (1890), and Stephen Grant (1892). Elizabeth died in 1925. In 1901 William emigrated to Canada with children; Elizabeth Grant (1883), and Stephen Grant (1892). William died in 1911 in Port Arthur, Ontario.