



A MARINE TRAGEDY IN THE HEART OF HEREFORDSHIRE



A country churchyard over seventy miles from the nearest seacoast may seem an unlikely spot in which to find a memorial to the victims of one of the most ill-fated maritime disasters of the late Victorian era. Coming upon this memorial tablet which in its few bare words on brass hints hauntingly at a deep personal tragedy is a strange enough experience, strange enough, indeed, to arouse one's curiosity.

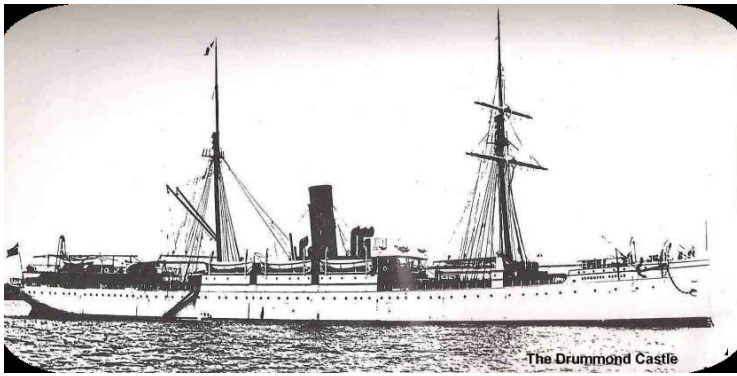
That a family of two young parents, their two children of tender years, the children's nurse and an old family friend should all, within a matter of minutes, lose their lives is tragedy indeed.

So, what is the story? On 28 May 1896 the Castle Mail Packet Co. Ltd's steamship Drummond Castle, Official No. 82861, of 3,706 tons, sailed from Cape Town bound for London, with an intermediate call at Las Palmas, where she took on coal, mail and further passengers bound for London. The Drummond Castle, owned by The Castle Mail Packet Co. Ltd. was not one of that company's larger vessels. She had been built in 1881 by John Elder & Co. Her dimensions were 365 ft. length overall, 43.5 ft. beam and 31.3 ft. draught. She was equipped with triple-expansion steam engines which gave her a nominal horsepower of 600 and a speed of 12.5 knots. She was rated A1 at Lloyds.

Boarding the ship at East London, Cape Province, was a young family consisting of John Gethin, his wife Emily, aged 30 and 25 respectively, their two young children, Lorna, aged 4 and John, aged 2, the children's nurse Eliza Preston, and an old family friend Jemima Peace. They had come out to South Africa in September 1895, chiefly for the benefit of Mrs Gethin's health.

John Gethin's forebears were well-known in Herefordshire, in which county his grandfather, also John, was renowned as an architect, and builder of bridges, and also held the appointment of Herefordshire's County Surveyor. Many of his bridges in the Welsh Border country are still standing and some of them now carry burden and quantity of road traffic unheard of at the time they were built. A number of the Gethin family are buried in Kingsland churchyard (see an example of one of the many superb graves on the right). The John Gethin lost in the Drummond Castle had an architect's practice in Cardiff. Another Welsh connection was that his wife Emily was the daughter of Mr T.R. Thompson, one of the Directors of the Barry Railway Company.





The captain had just gone to his cabin when, at about 11 pm, the vessel ploughed into the reef of rocks known as the Pierres Vertes at the south entrance to the Fromvert Sound, off Ushant. Although immediate efforts were made to launch the ship's boats, many of crewmen and passengers on the deck were thrown into the sea as the shock of collision with the rocks brought her to a juddering halt. She went down in minutes, her hull opened up like a sardine

can by the razor-edged granite rocks. Those below in their cabins had no opportunity to escape as the sea water rushed in. Two crew members, Charles Wood, the quartermaster, and William Godbolt, a seaman, were picked up in the water some hours later by Breton fishermen. They were clinging to some floating wood and were in the last stages of exhaustion. The only passenger to survive, a Mr Charles Marquardt, who had boarded the Drummond Castle at Cape Town and was travelling First Class, had also been picked up out of the water by other Breton fishermen and landed at Ushant.

News of the disaster soon reached Queen Victoria at Balmoral, and a few hours later a telegram from the Queen was the received by the manager of the Castle Line, expressing her deep distress at news of the terrible accident and asking that she be given full particulars. On the Thursday after the sinking questions were asked in the House of Commons, to which Mr Chamberlain replied that he could add nothing to what was ready known. He confirmed, however, that a Board of Trade Inquiry into the causes of the accident would shortly be convened in Westminster.

Sadly, no member of the Gethin party was recovered from the sea, so the tablet in Kingsland Church is their only tangible memorial.

This brief summary of the events of the Drummond Castle's loss is based on the story of "Marine Tragedy in the Heart of Herefordshire" by A. B. Demaus and available at Kingsland Church