

Fred's Thread

August 2010

A sad journey back in time to my gr gr grandfather, Moses Wood of the yawl *Isabella*



Let me quote directly from the Aberdeen Journal of Thursday 22nd April 1880 to set the tone for what transpired during "The Late Gale":

"A strong gale of wind from S.S.W. sprang up yesterday along the north east coast and ere mid-day had resulted in the loss of life and property such has not been experienced by our fishing population for many years. The

fishing village of Downies has lost three men by the swamping of one of its boat, and a yawl from the same place, manned by six fishermen all of whom bear the same name, remained unaccounted for last night. A boat belonging to the adjoining village of Skateraw was capsized off Stonehaven, and of that crew of six only one survived to tell of his father's and comrade's fate; and a Footdee boat, with five men onboard, was amissing last night. The storm seems to have risen with most extraordinary suddenness as to take the fishermen completely by surprise. Till several hours past midnight the weather was comparatively calm, and most of the boats working from the villages along the coast left about one o'clock in the morning to prosecute the deep sea fishing, proceeding to sea for distances varying from 20 to 30 and 40 miles. At sea, the glass began to fall about four o'clock in the morning, in two hours the wind was a strong gale, with a sea correspondingly high, and at eight o'clock, and for at least three hours after, the storm was violent to a degree unequalled in the experience of the men who have passed the greater part of a long life on the sea.

In the various fishing villages along the coast the utmost excitement prevailed all yesterday. In Skateraw and Downies the blow has fallen with fearful weight in the almost certain loss of no less than 14 lives, nor is the effect of the calamity lessened by the fact that, in common with other fishing villages, each

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Fred's Thread

community is like nothing so much as a large family. At all the stations along the Caledonian line between Aberdeen and Stonehaven large crowds waited the arrival of the afternoon and evening trains to learn the latest tidings as to the effects of the gale”.

So two small boats from Downies foundered and a total of nine men lost their lives. This would have accounted for a huge percentage of the population of the village and many children would have been left without a father.



The Isabella had six of a crew, all named Wood, most of them related to each other. Onboard were Moses Wood, senior, and his sons Moses Wood, junior and James Wood, another James

Wood, yet another James Wood and George Wood, the last two both being nephews of Moses Wood, senior.

The Isabella was probably swamped in the heavy seas in the same way that many others were that day. It is probable that the crew clung on to her as long as they could, possibly for many hours, however the unfortunate men were, in all likelihood, swept away one by one. None of the victim's bodies were ever recovered.

The other small vessel from Downies that suffered was the Twilight. She had a crew of five, of which three drowned when the boat capsized off the coast near Newtonhill. Being that there were survivors and a rescue party involved there are more details of this tragedy than that of the Isabella.

The Twilight was pursuing the line fishing out at sea when the gale sprang up. Like many others she attempted to head for a safe haven but as they did they were struck by a heavy sea which swamped her and threw the crew into the water.

The boat Favourite, of Newtonhill, was in the area at the time and had hauled her lines and was returning home when the crew spotted an object in the water. They went to have a closer look and on nearing it they saw what appeared to be some wreckage. They lowered their sail and put out their oars

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so that they could approach in a safe manner, the weather still being very stormy. As they got alongside they were to discover that it was a yawl lying on its side with its sail still set and spread over the surface of the water, and amazingly there were two men clinging to the wreckage.

Given that the wreck was lying in a precarious position and being battered by the waves, the crew had to make a cautious approach but finally they got within a few yards and close enough to throw a rope across it. The men, although exhausted still had enough energy to grab the rope and allow themselves to be dragged across the open water from where they were hauled onboard the Favourite by their rescuers.

The two survivors were William Main and his son Robert. The unfortunate men who were lost at sea were James Wood, John Wood and Alexander Main. After spending the day recovering at a house in Skateraw the older Main was able to walk home to Downies that same evening. His son recovered too and was able to make his way home the next day.