

# ANOTHER TRAGIC LOSS ~ THE PRINCESS IRENE

In the latter half of the 19th century some Scottish Canadian businessmen considered the possibility of building a railway to link up the west and east coasts of Canada. Their idea blossomed into the forming of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company. The construction of a railway across 3,000 miles of forest, prairie and surmounting the Rocky Mountains through Kicking Horse Pass, over 5,000-feet above sea level was a formidable one. Enlisting over 9,000 Chinese labourers the work began in February 1881 and was completed six years ahead of schedule in November 1885. The first train left Vancouver for Montreal in 1886 and during that year the Canadian Pacific Railway Company secured a contract to carry mail and cargo.

Tea was a financially rewarding cargo and there was competition among the importers to get their product from the Far East into the North American and European markets as quickly as possible. The Canadian Pacific Railway became a vital conduit for this trade. A cargo of tea on arrival at Vancouver from Japan could be transported by rail to New York in 49 days after leaving Yokohama. The Fastest tea clipper ships of the day would have taken four months.

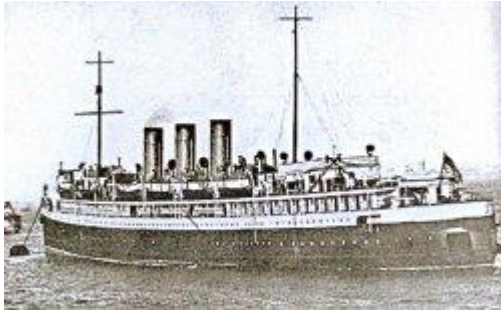
In June 1887 a Cunard steam ship with a cargo of tea destined for London docked at Vancouver. The tea was then taken by rail to New York where it was loaded onto another steam ship which arrived at the port of London on the 29th June just 29 days after leaving Japan. Having established a reliable railway service the Canadian Pacific Railway Company had also entered into ship owning and operated steamships on the Great Lakes.

By the beginning of the 20th century they had in conjunction with other shipping companies established a Pacific and Trans-Atlantic passenger and cargo service. The Canadian Pacific Railway Company's mercantile operations expanded and later became the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company. By the outbreak of the First World War the company had in their fleet passenger and cargo ships capable of speeds up to 22-knots.

The Royal Navy, although having a large fleet of warships had to requisition for war service two ships from the Canadian Pacific Railway Company the Princess Irene and Princess Margaret as fast minelayers.

On the 27th May, 1915, His Majesty's Auxiliary Ship Princess Irene was undergoing repairs at Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey, when at about 1115 hours, she blew up.

The Princess Irene and her sister ship the Princess Margaret were new vessels having been completed in 1914. Their technical details were as follows:-



Builder ~ W. Denny & Brothers of Dumbarton;  
Class & Type ~ Ocean Liner; later Royal Naval Auxiliary Minelayer;  
Launched ~ 20th October 1914;  
Length ~ 395-ft; Breadth ~ 55-ft; Draft ~ 17-ft; Displacement ~ 5,494-tons;  
Shaft Horse Power ~ 15,000; Speed ~ 22-knots; Machinery ~ 4 x Steam Turbines;  
Armament ~ 2 x 4-inch Guns; 2 x 3-inch Guns;  
Crew ~ 225

Both ships were built to operate between Vancouver, Victoria and the American city of Seattle. Registered at the port of Victoria on completion in the autumn of 1914 the Princess Irene and Princess Margaret were requisitioned by the Admiralty on the 20th January, 1915. By March each ship had been converted to fast minelayers with a capacity to carry 400 mines. The Princess Irene commanded by Captain Mervyn Cobbe R.N., was based at Sheerness and on the morning of the 27th May, 1915 she was moored in Salt Pan Reach at No.28 buoy in the River Medway, approximately three miles from Sheerness town centre. Her crew and naval personnel drafted from Chatham were preparing the ship to lay mines in the North Sea. Additionally there were on board civilian workers from Sheerness Dockyard who were carrying out repairs and modifications to the ship. Mines were also being loaded from barges and stowed on the ship's two mine decks. At about 1115 hours there was an explosion and the Princess Irene disintegrated. A column of flame 300-feet high was followed by smoke and further eruptions of flame above where the Princess Irene had been moored. A small steam ship and two barges lying alongside were also destroyed and a collier moored half-a-mile away downstream had its crane blown off its mountings.

The explosion was considerably larger than that which had destroyed H.M.S. Bulwark six months before in November 1914, though the loss of life was less. Three crew members from the Princess Irene had a fortunate escape as they were ashore at the time of the explosion. There was only one survivor, a stoker who was found amongst the floating wreckage and rescued. 273 officers and men and 76 civilians perished in the explosion. Across the river, one-an-a-half miles away on the Isle of Grain, a nine-year-old girl Ida Barden was struck by a piece of metal

and killed and a farm labourer working in a field nearby died of shock.

Wreckage fell up to twenty miles away from Sheerness. Civilians in Sittingbourne were injured by falling debris and a 10-ton section of a boiler damaged Admiralty oil storage tanks on the Isle of Grain. A box of butter landed in Rainham six miles from Sheerness and body parts were found at Hartlip and on the Isle of Grain.

The Bulwark disaster did not directly affect many Sheerness families but the Princess Irene explosion plunged many into deep mourning. As the news of the tragedy and the loss of life amongst local men became apparent, families gathered together outside the main gate of Sheerness Dockyard. During the evening the police posted on the main gate a provisional list of names of the local men who were missing and presumed dead. Some of the relatives seeing the names collapsed with grief. The notice contained seventy-six names and was signed by Rear-Admiral R.J. Prendergast, Superintendent of Sheerness Dockyard. Before listing the names he had written: 'It is much regretted that the following workmen, as far as can be ascertained at present, have lost their lives whilst in the execution of their duty at Sheerness'.

Later that evening the Admiralty also issued a statement: 'Thursday night. H.M. Auxiliary Ship Princess Irene was accidentally blown up in Sheerness Harbour this morning. So far as it is yet known, only one survivor Stoker David Wills was picked up. Wills has sustained burns from the explosion. Three men Able Seaman W.J. Paice, Signalman J.T. Sutton and Chief Steward J. Thompson were not on board at time of the disaster. 76 Dockyard workmen are reported to have been on board the Princess Irene this morning and must have perished. Several men belonging to vessels lying close to the Princess Irene were wounded by falling splinters'.

A further statement issued by the Admiralty read: '273 persons on board H.M Ship Princess Irene who, in the absence of evidence to the contrary must be regarded to have lost their lives. Of this number 30 were officers, 243 petty officers, non-commissioned officers and men including mercantile crew ratings, chiefly firemen and five ratings serving in steam launch No.263 which was alongside at the time of the accident'.

Flags on public buildings, in naval and military establishments in Sheerness and surrounding towns were flown at half-mast. Many private dwellings in Sheerness drew their curtains in sympathetic mourning. Messages of condolence and letters of sympathy were received by the naval and civil authorities at Sheerness from around the country. At a meeting of the Sheerness Urban District Council the members met, 'under the shadow of what was probably the greatest calamity that had ever befallen Sheerness. Their deep sympathy and words of condolence were inadequate to fully express their sentiments'. Churches on the Isle of Sheppey held

special services for the bereaved and townspeople. A special memorial service was held at St George's Church in Chatham Dockyard on the 30th May. The following day another Memorial Service led by the Archbishop of Canterbury was held at Sheerness Dockyard Church attended by the all the local clergy and non-conformist ministers. Senior naval representatives from Sheerness, Chatham, the Admiralty and representatives from, Army establishments, the urban district council and local people packed the church. An area in the church was reserved for the bereaved families. Before the service began a wreath of white flowers from the chairman and directors of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company was placed in the chancel.

On Monday the 31st May the County Coroner Mr C.B. Harris opened the Inquest on two of the recovered bodies from the disaster at Sheerness Court House. The two deceased men were Shipwright Mr George Turner and Electrical Fitter Mr Victor Potter. Among those present at the inquest were the Admiralty Law Agent, Mr E. Baker, Captain J.U. Fairie, R.N., member of the Board of Enquiry, Chief Inspector Sly of the Metropolitan Police, Inspector Mepsted of the Kent County Constabulary and Detective H. Hibbard of the Metropolitan Police and Sergeant J.W. Curling Kent County Constabulary. Before proceeding, the Coroner addressed the fourteen jurymen: "I am sure before we proceed any further, you desire through me to tender to the relatives and friends of those who have lost their lives in this unhappy disaster your heartfelt sympathy. It may be some consolation to them to know that death had been extraordinarily rapid and there was no suffering. Of course any friends can quite well assure themselves that the lives of the men were given in their country's service as much as if they were in the trenches. It was, of course, only a small incident in the war, and it caused them to set their teeth more firmly with a view to the securement of ultimate victory".



The Coroner informed those present that the recovered bodies would be taken to the Royal Naval Hospital, Chatham where the mortuary facilities were more adequate than at Sheerness. The deceased from Sheerness would be returned for

the benefit of the relatives. It was proposed that once evidence had established the identity of the victims the coroner would adjourn the hearing until the Admiralty had completed their investigations. The identity of George Turner was confirmed by his son who was also a shipwright at Sheerness Dockyard. The jury later pronounced that his death was due to injuries sustained in the explosion, the cause of which had yet to be determined. Victor Potter, who lived at Sheerness, was working on the C8 a steam vessel, in the harbour. At the time of the explosion Mr Potter was in the charthouse and he was found lying there with a severe head injury having been hit by a large piece of steel plate. After being attended by a doctor he was taken to the Dockyard surgery and diagnosed with a skull fracture and severe concussion. Unable to be operated upon Victor Potter died the following day. The inquest jury returned a verdict that "Death was due to concussion and probable laceration injuries received in consequence of the explosion from causes unascertained".

The Coroner on leaving Sheerness drove to the Isle of Grain where he held two more inquests at the Cock Inn on the body of Ida Barden, the nine-year-old girl who had been killed by a piece of metal from the explosion and on George Bradley, a 47-year-old farm labourer, who died suddenly after the explosion. After hearing evidence from witnesses of the explosion the jury returned a verdict that the injuries to Ida were caused by a piece of steel hurled from the explosion on board H.M. Auxiliary Ship Princess Irene, from a cause at present unexplained. In the case of Mr Bradley, who had been suffering from influenza and a chest infection, died of heart failure which might have been hastened by shock and concussion from the explosion.

The master of the tug Bruno provided an account to the local authorities and newspapers of how Stoker David Wills, the only survivor of the Princess Irene was saved: "I was fifty yards away abreast of the Princess Irene, with a loaded lighter in tow alongside when the accident happened. After the smoke and falling fragments had cleared away one of my crew saw a man who proved to be Stoker Wills struggling in the water among the wreckage and oil about thirty yards away from my tug. I went to his assistance as quickly as possible and as I got near him, my stoker William Rider lay on his stomach on the deck of the lighter and hung over her bow. He caught him by the hand first time and dragged him from between the tug and lighter. If he had missed him, he would surely have drowned. He was covered with thick black oil. If there is any honour or credit due to anyone, I think it is due to my stoker for the way in which he got hold of the man. For myself I have given him great praise of which he is worthy."

On Wednesday, 2nd June another inquest was held at the Royal Naval Hospital Chatham on ten victims whose bodies were burned and mutilated. Four of them were unable to be identified. Mr Joseph Kelly, the mortuary keeper, was the main witness, as identification of the deceased in most cases was not straightforward. He

had been responsible for determining the identification of many of those lost in the Bulwark disaster the previous year. The identity of the deceased from the Princess Irene relied on tattoo marks, pieces of laundry marked clothing and personal effects such as signet rings and other tokens of affection found on the victims.

Lieutenant James Manners R.N., a witness of the explosion gave a detailed account to the Coroner. He was attached to H.M.S. Actaeon for mine sweeping duties. The ship was moored at No.2 buoy and on the morning of the explosion at eight minutes past eleven, he was on the stern of his ship. He estimated they were about 550 yards from the Princess Irene moored at No.28 buoy. He was checking a mooring cable when at the time stated he heard a sharp loud noise followed by a terrific explosion. Those on deck were for a few moments dazed and turning toward the Princess Irene he saw a huge cloud of flame. The area surrounding his ship appeared to be full of it as it surged skywards with fragments flying out from it. At the same time vast quantities of black smoke rose up over the wreck. When it cleared the Princess Irene had completely disappeared together with two or three small vessels moored alongside her. Asked by the Coroner if he had seen other explosions, Lieutenant Manners replied that he was in the harbour when H.M.S. Bulwark blew up, but the Princess Irene's explosion was worse. The jury returned a verdict on all ten of deceased victims that they had been killed by the blowing up of H.M.S. Princess Irene from a cause at present unascertained.



A Princess Irene Disaster Fund was set up to assist bereaved families, according to circumstances including an allocation for funeral expenses. Donations were sent from Chatham, Devonport and Portsmouth Dockyards. A considerable sum was collected from private sources, local authorities and from military establishments. An evening's entertainment was held at the Sheerness Hippodrome in aid of the disaster fund and other local events helped with the fundraising. During mid-June the Government announced in the House of Commons that pensions and

allowances to the widows and children of the naval ratings killed in the Princess Irene explosion would be awarded on the scale recommended in the special report of the Select Committee on Naval and Military Services (Pensions & Grants). Award to the dependants of the specially entered mercantile crew and of the dockyard men who lost their lives in the disaster would be granted under the provisions of the scheme framed under the Injuries in War (Compensation) Act 1914. The widows would receive a pension equal to one-third of the peace pay of their late husband's rank or 10 shillings a week if greater. Children received one twenty-fourth of the pay, or 2s 6d a week if greater up to the age of 16. Awards to other dependants varied according to the degree of dependence and other circumstances within the maximum of a widow's pension. Applications had to be made to the Accountant-General of Navy, at the Admiralty.

At the inquest held at Sheerness Court House on Monday 14th June, the findings of the Naval Enquiry, into the loss of Princess Irene was made public. Mr G.W. Ricketts, council for the Admiralty regretted that although a thorough investigation had been carried out he could not give a conclusive answer as to why the ship blew up. There was only one survivor, who was still in hospital and he knew nothing of the cause. No evidence was found to support the presence of any enemy aircraft or submarines and any external circumstances was ruled out. Sabotage was considered and dismissed although a Chatham Dockyard worker was arrested and cleared of any blame. The civilian workers from Sheerness Dockyard who were working on board that morning had nothing to do with the accident.

There was the possibility that the explosion had been triggered by a faulty mine primer. The priming of those mines may have been hurriedly undertaken by personnel who had had insufficient training. Divers sent down to examine the wreck on the river bed of the River Medway found that there was practically nothing left of the ship. It was therefore the firm opinion of the members of the Naval Enquiry that the cause of the explosion was accidental.

Having heard this evidence the Coroner announced to the inquest jury that they would be able to arrive at a verdict. He continued: "It was common in all cases that evidence of how the explosion occurred was shattered at the same time as the ship. All they were told was that after the Admiralty Enquiry the Admiralty were satisfied that the explosion did not come from any external source. It was due to something internal.

"The only question was whether this was intentional or accidental. All, however, had gone, except one survivor, who knew nothing. The conclusion, which the Court of Naval Enquiry came to, was that the vessel was lost from some accidental cause, but that there was no definite evidence as to the cause. The Princess Irene had carried the mystery of her fate with her." The jury returned a verdict to the

effect that the deceased had lost their lives owing to injuries due to the blowing up of His Majesty Auxiliary Ship Princess Irene, through some unascertained cause.



Inquests continued to be held over the following weeks on the bodies that were recovered from the inlets and shore line around the Isle of Sheppey. As the inquest jury reached verdicts, the bodies of the deceased were released and claimed by their families for burial. Six locally identified victims were buried in Sheerness cemetery.

Among them was Assistant-Paymaster Sidney Cole the only son of Mr W. Cole, Chief Constructor at Sheerness Dockyard and his wife. Some of the deceased were claimed by their families for burial elsewhere. Sixteen identified men and one unknown crew member lie buried in the Naval Section of Gillingham (Woodlands Road) Cemetery. The unidentified victims were interred in a large plot in the cemetery with those from H.M.S. Bulwark who were unidentified. A skilled labourer Bertie Clary was also buried in this grave.

The inscription on the screen wall enclosing the grave reads:-

To The Honoured Memory Of Seventy Sailors  
Of H.M.S. Bulwark Ten Of H.M.S. Princess Irene  
And Bertie Clary A Skilled Labourer Of  
H.M. Dockyard All Of Who Lost Their Lives  
Through The Internal Explosion Of The Two  
Ships Off Sheerness And Lie Buried Here

The majority of those lost have no known grave and their names are inscribed on the Chatham and Portsmouth Naval Memorials. The civilian employee's names including those from Sheerness are inscribed on Panel No.15 of the Chatham Naval Memorial. The Sheerness men are also remembered on the Sheerness War Memorial and in Holy Trinity Church. Some of the men from Sheerness who have no known grave also have their names inscribed on family headstones in Sheerness Cemetery. Private Frederick Cottrell, R.M.L.I., was buried in Ash Cemetery, Surrey; Shipwrights Mr H. Farley and Mr F. Adams were buried in Ramsgate Cemetery; Painter 1st Class W. Dore R.N., was buried in Highland Road Cemetery, Portsmouth; Shipwright Mr George Turner was buried in Chatham



Cemetery; Electrician Mr Victor Potter was buried in South Ealing Cemetery. Three men with a Dorset or Wiltshire connection with no known grave have their names inscribed on the following War Memorials: Petty Officer Stoker Charles Still, Chickerall; Able Seaman Frederick Gifford, West Knighton; Leading Seaman William Snook, Mere, Wiltshire.



Sheerness, with its surrounding villages and hamlets on the Isle of Sheppey is a relatively quiet and peaceful area. There are a number of holiday homes, caravan parks, places of leisure and interest for local people and holidaymakers to enjoy, industrial units, shopping facilities, a railway and bus station all to support modern life styles. It was from Eastchurch airfield in 1909 that the first controlled flight by a British pilot was flown. The Royal Naval Air Service established a base there which became operational in June 1913 as RNAS Eastchurch and handed over to the RAF in April 1918. Perhaps, during and over the years since the First World War some local inhabitants may have pondered as to why Sheerness witnessed the terrible destruction of two warships with hundreds of lives lost so close to their town and that such events would never happen again.

However, during the Second World War another shipping incident with the ingredients for a third disaster caused serious concern. On the 20th August, 1944 the Richard Montgomery, an American Liberty ship with a cargo of 1,500-tons of explosives dragged its anchor and ran aground on the Sheerness Middle Sands sandbank. As the tide receded the ship broke its back tearing open its cargo holds. A salvage operation commenced to remove the explosives but was abandoned by the middle of September as the ship was filled with sea water and split into two halves. The wreck lays approximately half-a-mile from the River Medway approach channel, marked by wreck buoys and is an exclusion zone to all shipping. In 1973 it was designated as a dangerous wreck under the Protection of Wrecks Act. The presence of a large quantity of unexploded ordnance is still potentially dangerous and its condition is regularly checked by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. The wreck of the Richard Montgomery can be clearly observed from Sheerness waterfront at low tides.

Although the chance of an explosion is remote some people still worry what would happen if a ship blundered in to wreck or there was a serious earth tremor or some other cause to ignite the explosives. Concern was heightened when it was

announced that a feasibility study was to be undertaken into building of an airport in the Thames Estuary. Incidents do and have happened since the Second World War to remind the good people of Sheerness that wars cast a long shadow.

Roger W Coleman