

SINKING OF HMS FISGARD II
5303/A SEAMAN JOHN MacRITCHIE
ROYAL NAVL RESERVE ~ H.M.S FISHGUARD II

John MacRitchie was born on the 26th July 1892 at Swainbost, Ness, Isle of Lewis, the fifth son of Malcolm and Catherine MacRitchie. The family were living at 45 Swainbost and the household members were Malcolm aged 57, Catherine aged 52, sons Angus aged 28, Alexander aged 19, Donald aged 23, Mudro aged 12, John aged 9 and daughters Margaret and Annie aged 26 and 16 years of age respectively.

Swainbost – (Gaelic: Suaineabost) – is a village on the Isle of Lewis in the district of Ness in the Outer Hebrides, Scotland. The name Swainbost, meaning Sweins Steading is of Viking derivation. Situated in the civil parish of Barvas – (Gaelic: Barabhasor or Barbhas) – it has the highest concentration of Scottish Gaelic speakers in Scotland.

Malcolm MacRitchie was born c.1845 in Barvas and was a fisherman and crofter. He married his wife Catherine (neé McKenzie) on the 9th January 1872. She was born c.1849 in the village of Skigersta, on the coast of the Isle of Lewis, a few miles from Swainbost. During the 19th century the village industry was primarily the curing of fish.

John received his education locally on the Isle of Lewis and later was employed as a fisherman. On the 8th December 1913 he was enrolled as a seaman into the Royal Naval Reserve and was described as being 5ft -11¼-inches in height, with blue eyes, a chest measurement of 37½-inches, a fresh complexion and had no distinguishing marks. He satisfactorily passed his medical examination and spent three months fourteen days under training at Devonport and ‘C’ Depot, London. His rating as a Seaman was confirmed on the 1st April 1914.

In May 1914 he made a voyage on the S.S. Letitia from Glasgow to Montreal. The S.S. Letitia was a passenger ship built at Scott’s Shipbuilding & Engineering Shipyard in Greenock, Scotland. She was launched on the 21st February and commenced her maiden voyage on the 4th May 1912. Built for the trans-Atlantic route Glasgow-Quebec-Montreal, her technical details were as follows:

Displacement ~ 8,991-tons.

Dimensions ~ Length 470-ft 2-inches; Beam 56ft 9-inches; Draught 28-ft 10-inches.

Machinery ~ 2 x Triple Expansion Steam Engines; Coal Fired; 2 x Double Screw Propellers.

Speed ~ 14-knots.

Capacity ~ 1,250 Passengers; Crew 137.

The S.S. Letitia was requisitioned by the Admiralty as a Hospital Ship in November 1914 and placed under the command of the Royal Canadian Naval Medical Services. Assigned to the Mediterranean she came under heavy fire whilst evacuating troops from Gallipoli. Later she was relocated to the Atlantic to convey wounded Canadian soldiers stationed in the United Kingdom back to Canada. On the 1st August 1917 fog off the coast of Nova Scotia had reduced the visibility to zero and the HMHS Letitia ran aground on Portuguese Cove in Halifax Harbour. All passengers and crew were rescued except for a stoker who was drowned. The pilot was found guilty of a gross error of judgement. Later the HMHS Letitia broke into two sections and sank.

Seaman John MacRitchie returned to Glasgow on the S.S. Letitia in June 1914 and was discharged, with his character and ability marked as 'Very Good'. He was 'Called Out For Service In The Royal Navy By Proclamation' on the 24th August 1914 and reported to the shore establishment, HMS Victory at Portsmouth and was drafted to HMS Fisgard II. Sadly his wartime active service in the navy was less than one month. On the 17th September 1914 HMS Fisgard II sank in a gale whilst under tow to Scapa Flow off Portland Bill. Seaman John MacRitchie was rescued and taken aboard HMS Diamond and later to the Royal Naval Hospital, Portland where he died later that day. He was 22 years of age.

Training Ship HMS Fisgard II

Originally the training ship HMS Fisgard II had been commissioned as H.M.S. Invincible (1869) an Audacious-class ironclad battleship built by Robert Napier & Sons, of Glasgow. She was laid down on the 28th June, 1867, launched on the 29th May, 1869 and commissioned on the 1st October, 1870. Her technical details were as follows:-

Displacement ~ 6106-tons.

Dimensions ~ Length 280-ft; Beam 54-ft; Draught 22ft 7-inches.

Machinery ~ 1 x Coal-fired Steam Reciprocating Engine, 6 x Boilers, 4021 IHP.

Speed ~ Under Sail 10-knots, Under Steam 13½-knots.

Armament ~ 10 x Rifled Muzzle Loading 9-inch Guns, 4 x 64-pounder Guns.

Armour ~ 8-inch Belt Amidships; 6-inch Ends; Central Battery 6-inches to 8-inches.

Complement ~ 450 Officers & Ratings.

During her first year, after commissioning HMS Invincible was stationed at Hull as guardship and then was transferred to the Mediterranean until 1886. She sailed to China in the same year transporting a new crew for HMS Audacious.

On return to the United Kingdom she was assigned to Southampton as a guardship until 1893. Her machinery was removed in 1901 and she became a depot ship for a destroyer flotilla at Sheerness and renamed HMS Erebus in 1904. Converted two years later into a training ship for engineering artificers at Portsmouth, she was renamed HMS Fisgard II.

On the 17th September, 1914, HMS Fisgard II was being towed by two tugs, the Danube and the Southampton, in very heavy weather off Portland Bill. Without boilers, engines or steering gear HMS Fisgard II was manned by a crew of 64 ratings under the command of Chief Petty Officer Coll and was being towed to Scotland for conversion into a floating workshop for boy artificers.

During the day her condition became serious owing to the quantity of water she was shipping through her hawser pipes. The crew endeavoured to trim her by shifting a quantity of machinery from the upper deck to the lower, but this failed to assist, and HMS Fisgard II began to heel over until she lay on her beam ends. She carried four boats and twenty lifebelts, but one boat was smashed as soon as it was launched.



Portland Royal Naval Cemetery

The hired transport ship Crown of Galicia and the two tugs did what they could to save life, but at 1620 hours, HMS Fisgard II foundered five miles off Portland Bill with the loss of 21 ratings. From statements made by the captains of the tugs it was established that HMS Fisgard II had made signals of distress earlier in the day and it was decided to put into Portland Harbour. This was however, was prevented by the heavy seas and the ship's lack of steering gear.

Southern Times ~ Saturday, 26th September, 1914.

The Sinking Of The Fisgard II – Death Roll Reduced To Sixteen

The Coroners Comments

The inquest on two of the crew of the old battleship Fisgard II was held at the Royal Naval Hospital on Friday afternoon by the Coroner (Mr G.P. Symes), the foreman of the jury being Mr W. John Score.

The jury viewed the both bodies – Jno. Green and Jno McRitchie, in the hospital mortuary, then returning to the library for the inquest. The case of John Green was taken first.

Charles Allen, shipwright in H.M. Dockyard, Portsmouth, identified the body. John Green was a skilled labourer in the dockyard. He was about 26 years of age, married and living at Portsmouth. Witness and deceased went aboard the Fisgard II at Portsmouth on Thursday to make the voyage to Scotland round the west coast.

At 8 o'clock in the morning he noticed the ship beginning to leak and list over. She was a floating workshop for boy artificers and was to be made into a workshop in the north. At 4.20 p.m. the ship foundered off Portland Bill. Witness was picked up and brought aboard a warship.

Saved Quartermaster's Narrative

George Ambrose Mann, petty officer first class of the Royal Navy, stated he left Portsmouth in the ship on Wednesday at 9 a.m. having been drafted to her. C.P.O. Cobb was actually in command of the ship and witness was quartermaster. There were, two other first class P.O.'s aboard as well. The Fisgard was being towed by the tugs Danube and Southampton. She was an old ship fitted up with lathes for repairing work. She had formerly done seven commissions.

The Coroner: Was she fit to go to sea?

Witness: I am not qualified to answer, sir.

On leaving Portsmouth there was a moderate breeze, which increased as the ship advanced. On Thursday it was a hard gale with heavy seas. Witness suspected that she might be in danger. Signals were sent to the tugs, but there was great difficulty in sending or receiving any messages, owing to the position of the ship and the heavy seas. The signals were to the effect that the ship was in danger. A few lifebuoys were aboard for the 64 men who were aboard. Perhaps there might be 20 lifebelts aboard and they were, taken by the men nearest them. There were four boats aboard, and one was got out but it immediately broke along the side of the ship.

By the Coroner: There were about six naval ratings – a C.P.O., three P.O.'s I, and signalman and shipwright, with nine R.N.R. ratings. All those would know how to manage a boat.

Every possible effort was made to bring the ship upright. They moved machines, &c., and tons of it to try to get her up. The ship was taking a list to starboard and the machinery was moved to keep her up. At last she turned so that everyone was ordered up from the 'tween decks to the deck itself, and when she turned turtle every man was told to look out for himself.

Everyone kept perfect order, acted as British sailors should, and witness thought the men should all be commended on their splendid discipline. Finally the ship rolled over and threw everyone in the water. Witness swam away from the ship to the Danube. Both tugs did all they could to help the men in the water. He could not identify the body by name; all he could say was that they belonged to the crew.

Cross-examined: There was no steering the ship. The rudder was locked, and there was no steering-wheel. She was simply a floating hulk, roofed in. The tugs had perfect control.

By the Foreman: After turning to come in to Portland the ship drifted broadside on to the wind. If the tugs had cut her adrift she would have been at the mercy of the waves.

By Mr Stevens: They started signalling for assistance at 10 a.m. and she sank at 4.35 p.m. There were sufficient boats for every man aboard and all were fitted out properly. They had lifebelts aboard.

The ship was in dock for six weeks and he could not say if the boats were ever lowered since the ship went into dock. As regards his own boat he personally knew that that was all right. In lowering the gig the foremost fall failed and the boat was smashed. The boat had three men in it when it smashed, but all three were rescued.

By Mr Stevens: As one of the crew he had no complaint to make.

The Captain Of The Tug's Story

Capt. Harry Lewis, of the tug Danube, chartered by the Government from the Tilbury Contract Dredging Co., London, said his tug was of 227 tons gross. He left Portsmouth on Wednesday and got into the Channel abreast of the Isle of Wight, when the wind freshened. He came down the Channel with the wind increasing, and passed Portland light at 4 a.m. on Thursday (another ship had gone down Channel). At daylight the Fisgard had a slight list and at 9.30 the signalman received a message that she was making water. They were then 15 to 20 miles west of Portland.

They turned in for Portland giving the ship the message. From that time, when they were 10 miles off the Bill, 20 miles away from Portland, they turned N, by E, to get into Portland. From 9:30 a.m. they were making heavy work as the ship had no steering gear she made the work very heavy. They could not go very quickly, though they were using 90 furlong of 4-inch manila and 45 fathoms of steel wire (4½-inch). They were trying to come straight in and up the Channel. She seemed to go hours without listing any more. At 11 a.m. the ship asked how long it would take to get into harbour. Half an hour later he could see he was 12 miles from land.

By Mr Stevens: She foundered 2 or 3 miles off the Bill. A tramp steamer stood by and helped them. After he put the N.C. – (Not Under Control) – signal the tramp asked if she should use wireless. He replied “No, but stand by”.

She was the Crown of Galicia and rendered very good service. The steamer launched lifeboats before the ship sank and was transferring men quite an hour before the Fisgard sank. She sent out a dozen men aboard the Danube. But for the Crown of Galicia the loss of life must have been heavier. Her small lifeboat did excellent work, the bigger one being unable to get under the Fisgard. He considered the Crown of Galicia acted in a most noble manner, doing everything that was possible to save life. When the ship foundered she cast off lines and went to the spot and picked up seven men among a lot of scaffold poles where the lifeboats could not go. If the Fisgard had been fitted with steering gear she might have been saved. He had towed round a sister ship in calm weather, but not without a lot of trouble.

By the Foreman: He could not say that the ship was not seaworthy. No merchant ship would be allowed to go to sea without steering gear.

Witness had towed the old Temeraire round before this. An extra tug could not have helped them much. At any rate another tug even though lashed alongside her, could not have steered her. He could not say if anyone had inspected the Fisgard to see if she was seaworthy. All he had to do in the matter was to overhaul the towing gear, which was of 2½-inch chain.

Mr Stevens: As the tug master you were satisfied?

Captain: Oh yes.

Mr Stevens: You would not be expected to see if she was seaworthy?

Captain: Oh no.

By the Foreman: The towing bollards were very low.

By the Foreman: They could not slip the Fisgard, as she had no steering gear, and would have been at the mercy of the sea. No rudder could have saved her.

By Mr Stevens: The leakage must have been caused by the bad weather.

Capt. August Couves who corroborated Capt. Jewis' evidence, said he would endorse his fellow captain's tribute to the Crown of Galicia.

The Coroner: I suggest the next time you are working you must stand out for steering gear.

Capt. Couves: I don't want to get six months.

Arthur Thomas Pipe, fitter, acting engineer, of the ship, said the chief point he had to mention was the water passing through the hawsers pipes. The first night they had little water, but the next night he had a dam built to throw the water back through the scuppers. The chain cable passed through the hawser pipes and the water came in through them and caused the damage. Every drop of water that came in increased the list. The pumps were kept going, and all the men worked magnificently, the stokers up to their waists in water. The water left the pumps owing to the list. The suction came up instead of water. Given fine weather the water could not have got into the ship at all. They were all in fear of their lives from 10 o'clock in the morning.

By Mr Stevens: Steering gear would not have saved them. She would have shipped even more water. In answer to questions put, Pipe said that when they started making water he had plugs made of oakum, &c., but everything they put in worked out and was carried away by the sea. After that they dared not go down there again, as the water was rushing in so rapidly through the 24-inch bores.

By the Supt: The two hawser pipes were never meant for towing. Even if they had been it would have been no better.

Mr Hobbs (a juror): A watertight bulkhead abaft the hawser pipes was the only thing, which could have saved her.

A shipwright in the crew: The nearest bulkhead was 100 feet aft of the pipes.

The Coroner: Then it seems to me the ship was unfit for anything. They might as well put men in an old tub and towed it into the Channel, and then wonder why she upset. I don't know what they were doing to send vessels like this to sea.

Petty Officer Mann recalled there were 64 people aboard. 48 of whom were now alive, two corpses brought in and 14 unaccounted for.

The evidence as to McRitchie was then taken.

Alec Morrison, late of the Fisgard, said he was picked up by a lifeboat, and so was deceased, who was put aboard H.M.S. —. Deceased was 23 years of age, and a native of Lewis. Surgeon Donald Monroe, of R.N. Hospital, said McRitchie died at 11·55 p.m., on Thursday night, and Green at 9·30 a.m. on Friday morning.

The Coroner: It was an extraordinary thing to send these men aboard a ship in the state this one was.

Several of the men expressed the opinion that the ship would have been all right but for the bad weather.

The Coroner: It is good of you to say so; but there are a lot of things, which might have been done. She might have had a bulkhead there and steering gear. It certainly does not seem right to have sent her into the Channel in heavy weather.

Petty Officer Mann: There would be a greater risk in towing a floating dock round. That would have no steering gear and would be higher out of the water.

Captain Couves: The other ship is still going on all right.

A Shipwright: The hawser pipes ought to have been higher up.



Grave of Seaman J. MacRitchie RNR

It further transpired that Green was, injured by being crushed between the lifeboat and the sides of the Crown of Galicia. The eye-witness said they saw the boatswain and the ship's steward of the ship jump over to rescue deceased.

The jury returned a verdict of "Death by misadventure," and highly commended the captain of the tugs on the way in which they handled their vessels, expressing the opinion that they could have done nothing more. They also complimented the crew of the Crown of Galicia on her most valuable work in getting lifeboats out in a heavy sea and saving so many lives.

Mr Stevens: I will see that this commendation goes forward to the Admiralty. It was stated that the Crown of Galicia had 25 lives to her credit, the Danube 19 and the Southampton (which gave a lee side to the lifeboats) four.

An Inauspicious Start ~ Ominous Happening Aboard The Fisgard II

Before all the survivors of the Fisgard II catastrophe left Portland for Portsmouth, several of them sought out our representative in order to make a public expression of their gratitude to the captains and crews of the tugs and the steamer Crown of Galicia and to the people ashore for their hospitality and kindness. Some of the men were taken aboard the Crown of Galicia, and there received every attention and comfort, afterwards being transferred to H.M.S. —. It was very late at night when they got aboard but the reception awaiting them was most cordial. Bluejackets turned out of their hammocks and lay down on the bare decks so that the survivors might turn in, in comfort. Changes of clothing were offered and accepted, and in the word of one of the rescued, “We were treated like gods.”

Aboard the Danube and the Southampton things were much the same. On being landed the men who had lost or ruined their clothing were served with hospital suits and slippers, while many of them were presented with Union Jack neckerchiefs at the R.N. Canteen, where they slept at nights.

In public conversation our representative learned of the ominous start made from Portsmouth by the ship and for a run of unlucky incidents it is hard to beat. It seems from the stories of the survivors that for some time while the ship was fitting out a stray dog, more than half starved, was brought aboard and devouring food, was soon on the way to becoming the ship’s pet. On the morning of sailing, however, it suddenly went half-mad, refused its food, and dashed over the side. On being rescued by a catamaran and brought back, the dog once again jumped over the side and was last seen tearing down through the yard as one mad.

The Government tug Volcano had to tow the Fisgard out of the harbour and she broke two hawsers before she could get a move on her, while she did get the old hulk under way, it fouled two buoys.

In addition to these events there is the matter of the smoking concert. Of the 64 men aboard all attended a concert the night before getting into the Channel. The eatables were a tin of biscuits and the drinkables some “tots” of rum. A better advertisement for navy rum could not be devised than the fact that of all the men who took their tots, every man was saved, while of those who refused, all but about three were drowned.

The Funerals

The body of labourer Green was taken back to Portsmouth by the 1.30 train of Saturday, and that of McRitchie was buried in the Naval and Military Cemetery on Sunday, the Rev. S.V. Wylie, Presbyterian chaplain officiating.

Seaman John MacRitchie now rests in peace in Portland Royal Naval Cemetery. Grave Location: Plot 534.

Portland Royal Naval Cemetery

Portland Harbour is a manmade harbour attached to the north of Portland. Originally it was a natural anchorage known as Portland Roads, protected by Portland to the south, Chesil Beach to the west and mainland Dorset to the north. Portland Roads was transformed into a naval base following the building of two breakwater arms in the mid-19th century. The Cemetery was established by the War Office in 1876 for the burial of the soldiers garrisoned at Verne Citadel (part of the harbour defence fortifications) and Royal Navy sailors based at Portland. In 1907 the site was transferred to the Admiralty, who went on to extend the site to the west in 1914. Throughout the First World War, Portland Harbour was used regularly for training exercises and patrols for German U-boats. There are



Grave of Seaman John MacRitchie RNR

67 burials from the First World War, 50 of which are unidentified. In addition, there is a Special Memorial to a casualty buried in Portland (St George) Churchyard. After the War the maintenance of the Cemetery was passed to the Imperial War Graves Commission and in November 1926, the Cross of Sacrifice was unveiled in the presence of detachments from ships stationed at Portland and the local garrison. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Portland continued hosting training exercises. However, after Germany's successful invasion of France, the naval base quickly became the target of air attacks. On the 4th July, 1940 HMS Foylebank was attacked while at Portland Harbour, which resulted in her sinking on the 5th. Over 70 crew members lost their lives, some of whom are buried at Portland Royal Naval Cemetery, the rest are commemorated on memorials to the missing. By May 1944, both Portland

Harbour and Weymouth Harbour were used as part of the D-Day preparations. They were major embarkation points for American troops, particularly the US 1st Division who embarked for 'Omaha Beach' in June 1944. There are 103 burials (including 1 Norwegian Merchant Navy seaman and 12 German airmen) 10 of which are unidentified, from the Second World War, the majority of which are in the Church of England section, near the Cross of Sacrifice. The Cemetery was extended eastwards in the mid-20th century, where many post-Second World War burials are found. In 1996 the Naval Base at Portland was closed.

Malcolm MacRitchie was nominated by John as next-of-kin and he received news of his son's death on the 18th September, the day after the tragedy. He later received John's War Gratuity payment of £5 and his British War Medal 1914-1920, Bronze Memorial Plaque and Scroll.

Seaman John MacRitchie's name is inscribed in the Isle of Lewis Roll of Honour 1914-1919. 6,000 men from the Isle of Lewis served during the First World War and the Roll of Honour contains approximately 1,300 names, grouped by the villages from which the men departed for service in the First World War. John's name and that of his brother Angus are also inscribed on the Ness North Lewis War Memorial.

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Southern Times ~ Saturday, 26th September 1914.

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