

On October 13 1910 Fishguard's new motor lifeboat **Charterhouse** went to the aid of a neighbouring lifeboat, **Gem**, and the Ketch **Democrat**

This is the tragic story as reported in the South Wales Daily Post of the day

FEARFUL SEAS AT FISHGUARD. ST. DAVID'S LIFEBOAT ON THE ROCKS.

This would be the first real test of the new motor lifeboat **Charterhouse** that had only been stationed at Fishguard for less than a year.

The RNLI log book detailing the **Charterhouse's** launches gives the following information about this rescue :

Site of rescue:- Ramsey Sound

Motor and sail used

St David's lifeboat and a shore boat had put off from St.Davids.

Launch time 11.20am

Return time 5.45

Lives Saved:10

A handwritten note reads:

Saved shore boat and 5 survivors and 5 crew. Lifeboat towed back to station by GWR Co. Tug.

These details don't give much of an impression of the tragic drama that had taken place over two days but the official magazine of the RNLI of the time together with several long articles in the South Wales Daily Post tell the story of two neighbouring lifeboats and their crews.

Ramsey Sound is a dangerous deep water gap between the mainland of St David's head and Ramsey island. There are rocks and strong currents. This took place on a dark winter's night with only a few oil lamps for light...

"... shortly after 1am a deplorable disaster overtook the St.Davids lifeboat, after she had rescued three men from the ketch Democrat of Barnstable.

The Democrat was riding with her two anchors down on the night of the 12th October, when the prevailing moderate NNE gale increased, and the master, fearing that his anchors would drag, made signals for assistance.

*The crew of the St. Davids' lifeboat **Gem** were assembled, and in a heavy sea the boat was launched. The night was very dark and it was then blowing a full gale from N.E., with occasional showers. After two unsuccessful attempts the lifeboat got alongside the vessel, which was in close proximity to a dangerous reef of rocks known as "The Bitches". The three men on board were taken into the lifeboat and orders given to sheer off. Although the crew pulled hard they were unable to straighten the Lifeboat's head up against the wind, sea, and tide, and she was rapidly swept towards the reef. Seeing that it was impossible to pull clear the Coxswain made an effort to manoeuvre his boat through a narrow passage, which in the darkness was only discernible by its foam, the sea in the whole of the vicinity being described as "boiling mad". Unfortunately, in attempting to make this passage the lifeboat struck a rock, and all the men were thrown out, some on to the rock and some into the sea, the lifeboat being washed away and totally wrecked.*

Fifteen men, including the crew of Democrat, succeeded in getting upon the rock, but John Stephens, the Coxswain, and two other lifeboatmen [Henry Rowlands and James Price.] were not seen again until their bodies were picked up. On land nothing was known of the accident until about 9am when one of the men on the rock burnt some oilskins to attract attention. Sidney Mortimer, a fisherman, hearing that an accident had happened to the lifeboat, at once called for volunteers to go to their assistance. Samuel Guppy and Samuel Husk, two coastguardsmen, promptly responded, and the three men put off in a shore-boat in a very heavy sea. When they reached the vicinity of the rock the sea was too rough for

them to attempt to approach it, and the men on the rock were too exhausted by exposure and the hardships they had undergone to allow an attempt to haul them through the sea from the rock to the boat. Mortimer therefore decided to stand by until the tide had fallen. Four hours later he took five men off and landed them safely on Ramsey Island. He then returned and took five more ashore, and was going back a third time when another boat, which had put off about 3.30pm., manned by Eleazer James and four other men, rescued the remaining men. In the meantime those on shore had done all that was possible, and had telegraphed the Fishguard motor lifeboat, **Charterhouse**. That boat was promptly manned, and in the face of a sea described as running mountains high, proceeded upwards of sixteen miles to the the help of their comrades in distress. Although the **Charterhouse** was not in time to take any of the men from the rock, her arrival was most opportune, as the boat manned by James and the four other men was frail, and she was in imminent danger of being swamped, and was not under control. A rope was thrown to the boat, and the lifeboat towed her to safety. An hour later the rescued men, who had been landed on Ramsey Isle, were brought to St. David's. Many of the survivors were so exhausted that they were in a state of collapse. Restoratives were administered, and everything possible was done for their comfort.

The deepest sympathy was felt by all for the relatives of the three brave men who had risked and lost their lives to save their fellows. A fund was opened locally for their benefit and to this the Institution contributed £225, at the same time passing a vote of deep sympathy.

The gallant conduct of Sydney Mortimer and the two men who accompanied him met with the highest commendation from all, and the Committee of Management awarded votes of thanks inscribed on vellum, together with pecuniary rewards, to each of them, while Mortimer's heroic conduct was especially distinguished by the award of the silver medal of the Institution. Monetary rewards were also made to the men who went off in the other shore boat, and additional rewards were granted to the crew of the Fishguard lifeboat, whose splendid work was performed in very severe weather.

It is very gratifying to be able to record that the St. David's lifeboatmen showed their appreciation of Mortimer's gallantry by electing him, in spite of his youth, their Coxswain Superintendent, in place of poor Stephens, who had lost his life in the performance of a noble service nobly rendered.



The ketch Democrat

Courtesy of Braunton Museum

POSTSCRIPT

Lieutenant Drury, district inspector of the Lifeboat Institution, visited the scene at St. David's and reported that the lifeboat **Gem** was a total wreck. He decided to let her remain on the rocks and she soon broke up and was washed away. Later the steamship **Atlas (or Atalantis?)**, of London, arrived at St. Justinian's with a reserve RNLI lifeboat called the **Charlotte**, which had arrived at Goodwick from London by train.

The St David's lifeboat **Gem**, ON 59, had been built in 1885 and was a 'pulling and sailing' lifeboat with twelve oars. Following this disaster the local lifeboat committee sought and were awarded a motor lifeboat similar in size and type to the **Charterhouse** called the **General Farrell**.

The **Democrat** was delivering coal to Ramsey island. She was a ketch built in 1909 in Castle Pill, near Milford Haven, on the Cleddau and is only a few miles from where the **Charterhouse** is now on display at the West Wales Maritime Heritage Museum. Following the rescue of October 1910 the **Democrat** was towed to Porthgain (midway between St. Davids and Fishguard) perhaps for repair or to unload her cargo. She was registered in Barnstable.

The **Charterhouse** went to her rescue again a few months later on January 12th the following year when three men were again rescued while she was sheltering in Fishguard bay during a storm.