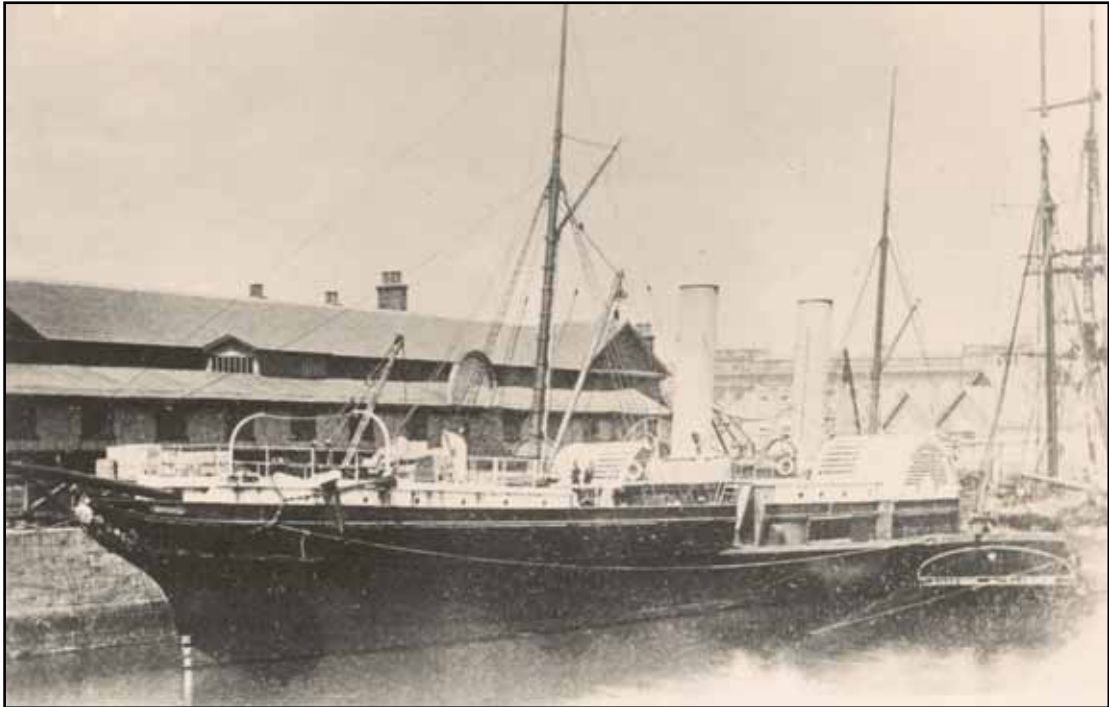


The Wreck of the Stella – Titanic of the Channel Islands

Introduction – The Channel Islands Crossing.

During the nineteenth century increased wealth and improvements in technology led to a growth in travel. The Channel Islands began to be a popular destination for travellers from mainland Britain, both for their own attractions, and as a stepping-off point for the continent. A summer season paddle-steamer service from Southampton to the Islands operated as early as 1824.



The Paddle Steamer Alice. Built 1859.

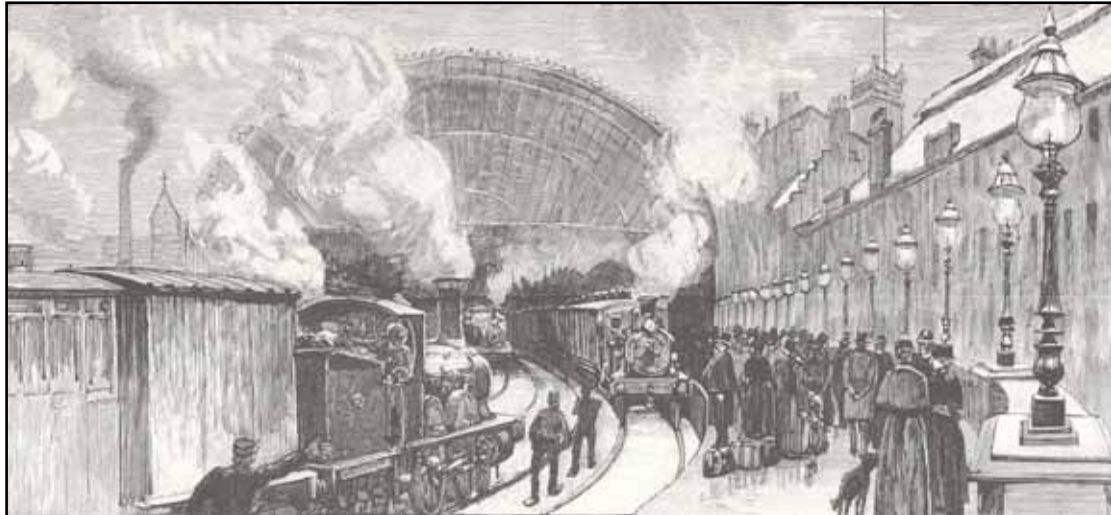
In 1840 Southampton was linked by railway to London, and the London and South Western Railway Company saw the operation of ferryboats from the port as a natural extension of its service. Its success was quickly imitated by other companies, notably the Great Western Railway working via Weymouth.



Victorian travellers purchasing rail tickets.

Although other English south coast ports occasionally laid claim, by the nineteenth century, Southampton and Weymouth were the traditional points of departure for the Channel Islands. Weymouth offers the advantage of the shortest crossing, but is farther from London. The crossing from

Southampton takes longer by sea, but from 1840 the London and South Western Railway provided a link of less than two hours travelling time to Waterloo and the major London market. Weymouth had been the prime packet port for the Islands, but with Southampton obtaining the railway first, passengers began to use the Southampton route in increasing numbers.



The Great Western Railway's line from London (Paddington) reached Weymouth in 1857 and the company chartered new ships to rejuvenate Weymouth's Channel Island route. It was so successful that in 1861 it regained the mail carrying licence which it had lost to Southampton.

The Quest for Speed

By 1860 the Channel Islands were served by ferries operated by two railway companies – the London and South Western Railway from Southampton; and the Great Western Railway from Weymouth. Rivalry between the companies and the towns was intense, with first one partnership, then the other, holding the advantage. Speed became the vital issue, supported by improvements in steamship technology. Accidents, even a disaster, became inevitable.

In 1877 the London & South Western Railway introduced a daily service to the Channel Islands with fast screw steamers.

With a dredged harbour, an extended pier, and three new GWR twin-screw steamers to provide a daily service, Weymouth was ready to strike back in 1889. The GWR advertisements proclaimed Weymouth as the "Quickest and Best" route and passenger numbers rose rapidly. Within a year Weymouth was again the prime port for the Islands.

Not to be outdone, the L & SWR also ordered three new twin-screw steamers (*Frederica, Lydia and Stella*) and began intensive advertising which relied heavily on publicising their best crossing times.

In 1895 the GWR introduced Saturday daylight runs, and in 1896 the L & SWR followed suit.

Boats were by now timed to arrive together at Guernsey, and from the Casquets down would sometimes race in parallel, urged on by passengers. The race was then on to St. Helier where only one ship could enter at a time, and where a low-tide could prevent access to the harbour, forcing a runner-up to land passengers and luggage by dinghy, which lost the Company money and prestige.

Racing did not occur on every crossing and officially never took place. The companies' stated intention was only to cut their best times, and publicity never mentioned the opposition. Nevertheless, the competition caught the public imagination, particularly in the Channel Islands, and was eagerly reported by the newspapers.

It was all very exciting, but running the boats flat out led to excessive wear and tear, and the expectation of achieving record times placed crews and managers under stress. By the 1899 season the two railway companies were making tentative efforts to call a halt, but nothing was achieved before Easter that year.

Easter marked the time of the first daylight runs of the season, and rivalry was particularly keen. Both the L & SWR and the GWR were running their first daylight service of the year on Maundy Thursday, March 30th.

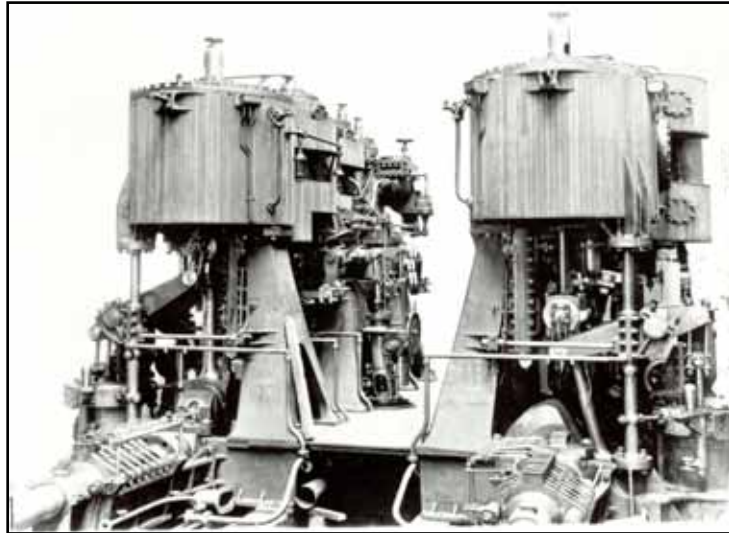
The Stella

The *Stella* entered service in November 1890. She was one of three sister ships ordered by the London & South Western Railway, designed for speed and comfort. She was built by J. and G. Thomson of Glasgow



The Stella

at a cost of almost £62,000. Her two powerful compound steam engines drove twin screws to give her a top speed of over 19 knots. She was licensed to carry 750 passengers, with sleeping accommodation for 240. No expense was spared on passenger comfort and she was fitted with electric lighting.

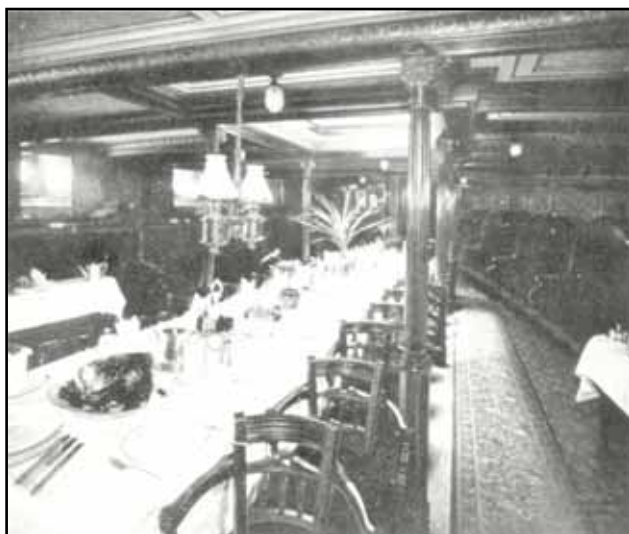


Compound steam engines as fitted in the *Stella*.

The *Stella* was the third of the London and South Western Railway's new fleet of luxury twin-screw steamers. Her sister ships, *Frederica* and *Lydia* were already in service when she was completed in October 1890.

J. and G. Thomson was established in 1872 and held the reputation as the first and finest shipyard on Clydebank. Thomson's represented the "golden age" of Clydebank shipbuilding, and the yard produced over four hundred ships before 1920. Thomson's was absorbed by John Brown in 1899 and went on to build *Lusitania*, *Aquitania*, *Queen Mary*, *Queen Elizabeth* and the *Queen Elizabeth II*.

The *Stella*, ship number 252 out of the Thomson/Brown yard, was a product of "state of the art" technology and superb craftsmanship.



Dining Saloon on board the *Lydia*, *Stella*'s sister ship.

She was 253 feet long, with a gross tonnage of 1058 tons, was powered by two compound triple-expansion steam engines and her twin propellers gave her a top speed of 19.28 knots. She was highly powered for her size, and her elegant, slender hull with its "knife edge" bow was designed for speed.

First class cabins had en-suite lavatories, and a Ladies' Saloon and Smoking Room for gentlemen were provided.

The Casquets

The main Casquets reef lies seven miles west of Alderney and extends nearly a mile east-west, with further large banks to the north-east and south. Apart from the numerous rocks permanently above water, some of which are eighty feet high, there are extensive shoals and submerged ledges, some with only three feet of water over them at high tide.



The Casquets 1868. An etching print published in the Illustrated London News at the time of the Stella tragedy.

Within the reef there is a constant clashing of tides with fierce overfalls that can run at ten knots over the uneven bottom. At low water the tide rips through the gullies between the rocks like a mill race.

Every traveller up and down the English Channel, whether by ship or aircraft, is well aware of the Casquets. They lie half way up the Channel and approximately 50 miles off Portland Bill. They mark the approach to an area of sea and islands renowned for the great strength and uncertain sets of its tidal streams.

Nearly three hundred ships are recorded as having come to grief on the Casquets. Most notable perhaps is the 110 gun First Rate warship, HMS Victory which struck the Casquets in 1744 and was lost with all 1100 hands.

Although the Casquets have taken a heavy toll of shipping and lives over the centuries, their light is a friend of the mariner for it points the way to safety.

For ships entering the busy Channel lanes from the Atlantic it is often the first light seen, and the last for those leaving. The Casquets was until 1860 the only light in the Channel Isles.

In 1724, Thomas Le Cocq, under licence from Trinity House first lit the Casquets. Wishing to provide a light easily identifiable from anything else off England or France he built a triangle of three towers, each of which was equipped with a coal fire enclosed in a glass lantern.

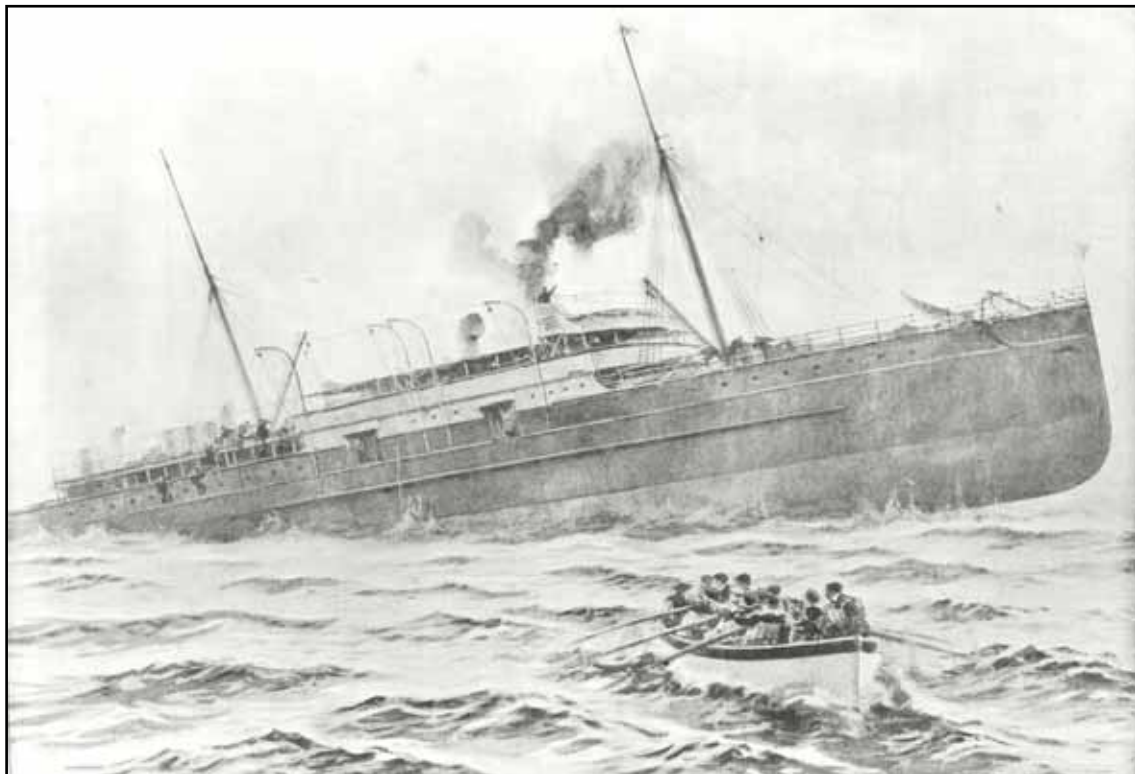
In 1785 the Casquets' lease reverted to Trinity House and in 1790 oil powered Argand lamps replaced the fires. In 1818 clockwork revolving apparatus was installed.

In 1877 Trinity House replaced the three lighthouses with just one of increased power. The oil burning light gave a flashing signal five times every 30 seconds. The steam powered fog signal provided three blasts every five minutes.

The light was converted to electricity in 1952, and increased in power to give a range of fourteen miles. It was automated in the early 1990s. Today the light flashes 3 times every 30 seconds

The Fateful Voyage.

On Maundy Thursday, April 30th 1899 the *Stella* was on the first daylight service of the season from Southampton to the Channel Islands. She encountered fog on the way but continued to steam at full



Artist's impression of the Stella tragedy. J. Nash. Illustrated London News, April 1899.

speed. When the *Stella* had run the estimated distance to the Casquets, nothing could be seen of the lighthouse. Rocks suddenly became visible through the fog but there was no time to stop or alter course. The ship struck at full speed, tearing out the bottom of her hull.

The *Stella* sank in 8 minutes. Of her passengers and crew 105 were lost and 112 saved.

Timetable for Disaster

Maundy Thursday, March 30th 1899

8.55am L & SWR Boat train leaves Waterloo.

11.00am Boat train arrives at Southampton.

11.25am *Stella* leaves her berth at Southampton, ten minutes late.

12.44pm *Stella* drops the Needles astern. Her log is set.
Was there a delay of 10 minutes due to its rope being tangled?

1.50pm The Log is checked giving the distance *Stella* has travelled.

2.00pm. *Vera* passes en route to Southampton.

2.30pm approx. *Stella* runs into the first sea mist. Capt. Reeks orders half speed.

2.42pm approx. The mist clears. *Stella* resumes full speed.

2.45 approx. *Stella* enters another bank of sea mist. Reeks orders half speed.

2.53 approx. Good visibility again. Reeks orders full speed ahead.

3.00pm approx. Thick, patchy fog encountered. *Stella* keeps at full speed.

3.30pm. *Stella* is sounding a fog whistle. Reeks sets a look out in the bows to listen for the Casquets foghorn. The Casquets are reckoned to be 35 - 40 mins away.

3.55pm *Stella's* Chief Engineer rings up 27000 revolutions of the engines, indicating that the Casquets should be 4 miles away.

- 4.00pm Simultaneously -
1. A foghorn of immense strength sounds directly above *Stella*.
 2. The bow lookout yells “Stop her!”
 3. An immense rock looms out of the fog 80 yards ahead.

Reeks orders “Full Speed Astern” and spins the wheel hard to starboard. The *Stella* scrapes her port side. Another rock looms dead ahead, and the ship runs over submerged rocks. Her engines are torn from their mountings and water pours in along half her length. She runs into clear water and begins to settle, stern first.

4.08pm *Stella* vanishes beneath the surface.

5.30pm *Stella* due in Guernsey

7.30pm *Stella* due in Jersey

The *Stella* was 2.5 to 3 miles ahead of where Reeks believed her to be. With the tidal conditions prevailing she should have been 1.5 miles clear of Casquets to the west. Why she wasn't remains a mystery

“Ladies and Children First!”



Captain Reeks immediately ordered “Boat Stations. Ladies and children first!” The boats were out with remarkable speed and calmness. Problems arose in launching the port lifeboat due to the angle of the ship. A number of passengers including women waited to board it but it capsized as it was finally lowered.

Passengers and crew leapt into the sea as *Stella* rose until she was almost vertical, remained poised for a moment, then slid abruptly down.

Eight minutes had elapsed since *Stella*'s initial striking.

The *Stella*'s final moments. Illustrated London News, April 1899.

In an air of curious calm Captain Reeks' orders were speedily obeyed - the crew went to their boat stations and the stewards to assist passengers and distribute lifejackets.



Artist's impression of the scene onboard the *Stella* moments after impact. Frank Dadd. *Illustrated London News*, April 1899.

There was some panic among passengers, many of whom had been lying in their cabins or in the Ladies' Saloon. Some women lingered on deck, uncertain about leaving. Others yelled from the lifeboats for their men to join them and crew members had to restrain some of the men. The *Stella* filled by the stern, listing slightly to port.



Stella carried two lifeboats, two cutters and a dinghy, giving a total capacity of 148. Two Berthon collapsible boats were not launched through lack of time, and the capsized port lifeboat left its passengers stranded. As the *Stella* settled lower men jumped over the rails. Others found pieces of planking and pushed off from the stern deck. The water was bitterly cold.

From the boats, pulling away from the

On the deck of the *Stella*. Brian Byron. 1999.

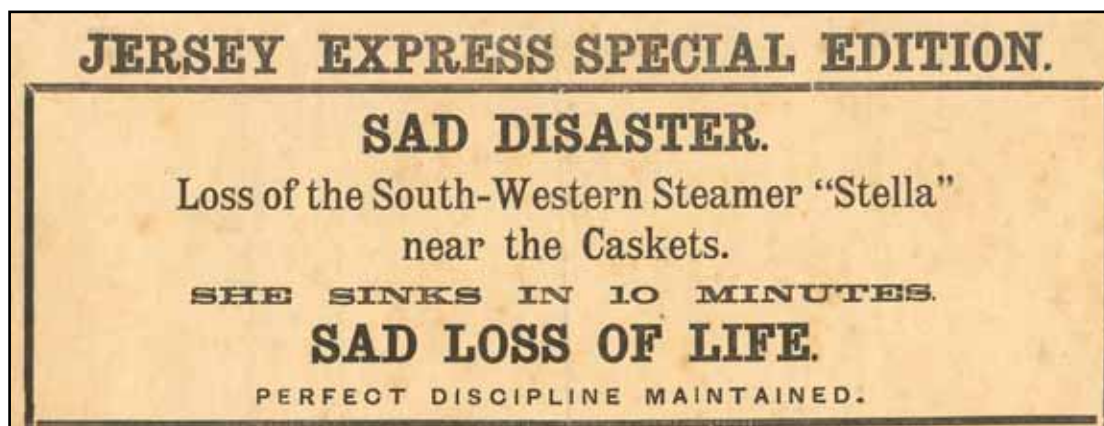
Stella, the passengers saw an awful scene. The *Stella*, black smoke pouring from her funnel, was tilted at a steep angle, her bows in the air. Passengers and crew were leaping into the sea, already littered with lifebelts, timber, luggage, and a furniture van. On the promenade deck a small number of women knelt around a clergyman. Captain Reeks and his Chief Engineer stood on the bridge.

The *Stella* rose until she was almost vertical, remained poised for a moment, then slid abruptly down, the colossal air pressure generated inside her by the inflowing water bursting the planks of her forward deck as she vanished.

All this took place without the keepers in the lighthouse being aware of it.

“The News hits”

Fears for the *Stella* began to grow by nightfall. Telegrams passed between the fog shrouded Channel Islands and Southampton and anxious relatives began to gather. Nothing was known until the morning of Good Friday when the night ferries *Vera* and *Lynx* entered St. Peter Port and landed the first survivors. Searches of the Casquets area were carried out and slowly the scale of the disaster became evident. By Saturday the Islands were in mourning and in England the newspapers published the tragic news.



Headline announcing the tragedy in Jersey Express Special Edition.

The survivors brought the appalling news to Guernsey and from there it spread. A telegram in the window of St. Helier Post Office was at first treated as a joke in poor taste.

The L & SWR offices in Southampton and at Waterloo were besieged by frantic relations, and conflicting reports of those lost and saved began to be issued.

Boats were sent out to search the Casquets area but brought back only reports of wreckage. The Casquets lighthouse keepers knew nothing.

By Saturday the Channel Islands were in official mourning and flags flew at half-mast. At this stage only surnames of the victims were published but it was clear that they came not only from Jersey, Guernsey and Southampton but from London and the Home Counties, Sussex, Hampshire, Leicester and Stockport.

Usually there were no papers on Good Friday but “Specials” were published in the Islands and Southampton. From Saturday the newspapers began to be full of the tragic news, speculation as to the cause, rumours and accusations. The disaster assumed national proportions. It was the worst disaster to civilian travellers ever to have occurred in the English Channel.

Queen Victoria sent a message of sympathy via the L & SWR. The French President sent a message of sympathy to the Queen, and the Bishop of Winchester sent his condolences to the Channel Islanders as members of his diocese.

Relief Funds for the bereaved were quickly opened in Jersey, Guernsey and Southampton.

The Survivors

The ship's lifeboats were lowered very speedily. Had they not been, the loss of life would have been much greater. Most of the women and children were saved. The four fully loaded boats drifted for many hours at the mercy of rocks and fierce tides. The first two boats were not found by the *Vera* until 7am on Good Friday. One boat drifted for 23 hours before being rescued off Cherbourg.

The port lifeboat.



Artist's impression of the survivors in one of the lifeboats. T.S.C. Crowther. Illustrated London News. April 1899.

The capsized port lifeboat drifted upside down for several hours before a high wave righted it and the survivors on it managed to pull themselves in

The boat's bung could not be found and the boat filled almost to its top, kept afloat only by its air tanks. The survivors sat in water over their waists, trying to bale with hats and shoes.

The boat drifted all Thursday night and Friday morning, up towards Cap de la Hague and back again. It passed Alderney breakwater but the rowers were unable to pull out of the tidal race. Four people died during the night, including the only woman aboard.

At 3.00 pm on Good Friday, after 23 hours adrift, the lifeboat was picked up by the French tug *Marsouin*. Ironically a French seaman immediately located the bung, secured by a chain!

The starboard cutter and the dinghy

The mainly female passengers endured 15 hours exposure in fog and increasingly rough seas as the boats pulled westwards towards the shipping lanes, aided by a compass belonging to one of the passengers.



Artist's impression of survivors in lifeboats during the night. G.K. Jones. Illustrated London News. April 1899.



Survivors in lifeboats. Brian Byron. 1999.

Between 6.30 and 7.00 am the boats were picked up ten miles west of the Casquets, by the GWR *Lynx*, the night boat from Weymouth.

The starboard lifeboat and port cutter.

Second officer Reynolds was in command of the starboard lifeboat. The port cutter followed and for a long time it was towed. The tidal race took the boats past Alderney and Cap de la Hague. At about midnight the tide turned and they drifted back again. Reynolds took care to avoid the Casquets and tried to make for Guernsey after the fog lifted early in the morning.

At about 7am the boats were sighted by the *Vera*, the L & SWR's night boat from Southampton.



Artist's impression of female survivors being comforted on the *Vera*. J. Nash. Illustrated London News. April 1899.

The Dead

No passenger list had been kept at Southampton and early estimates of the numbers lost varied widely. It was not until months later that an official figure could be arrived at.

The first bodies were recovered on Good Friday. The dead continued to be found for weeks after. One body was located at the mouth of the River Seine, and the final corpse was washed up on Guernsey nine months later. Most were found floating in their lifebelts, having died from exposure rather than drowning.

Rewards were offered for the recovery of corpses and a search office was set up by Advocate Philip Ahier at the Pollet in St. Peter Port. He dealt with officials on both sides of the Channel and placed advertisements in the press on behalf of the relatives of those still missing.

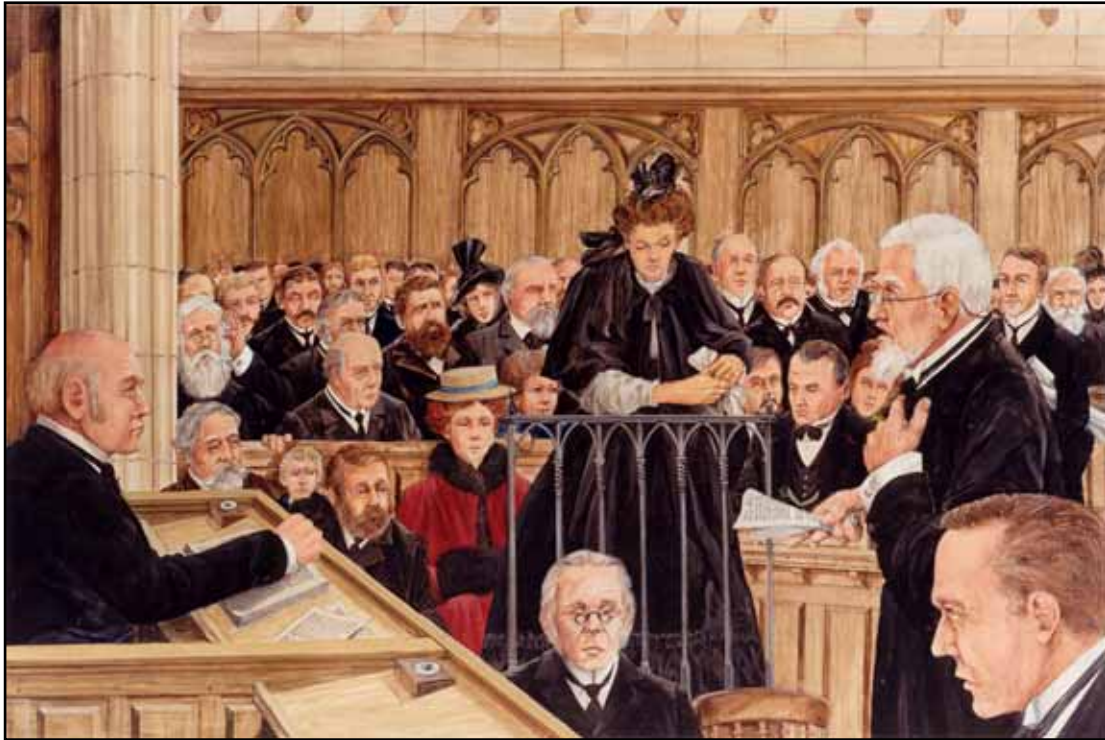
Many of the dead were never found and pathetic press notices detailing physical characteristics and offering rewards of up to £100 continued to be placed.

The final body found, that of Mr. Hirst, was washed up on Telegraph Bay, Guernsey on December 16th 1899, nine months after the disaster.

The Enquiry

The Board of Trade Enquiry opened amid great public interest on Thursday April 27th 1899 at the Guildhall, Westminster, and continued for six days. The reputation of the L & SWR was at stake and heavy financial loss was a possibility if the Company was found to be negligent.

The sole surviving officer of the *Stella*, Second Officer George Reynolds, bore the brunt of the questioning. The ship's operating procedures were



Artist's impression of the *Stella* tragedy enquiry. Brian Byron. 1999.

brought into question and particularly the speed of the *Stella* at the time of the disaster. Racing was suggested.

Mr. R.H.B. Marsham, a barrister and police magistrate presided. There were three Board of Trade assessors. Sixteen civil actions were being brought against the L & SWR, and the various interests were represented by twenty-eight members of counsel.

Witnesses included surviving passengers and crew members who were cross examined during five days.

On Saturday May 6th, the legal representatives summed up. Five key questions were identified :

Was Captain Reeks on the bridge at the time *Stella* struck?

Was the log put over late at the start of the crossing?

Why did the ship proceed at full-speed when her fog whistle was blowing?

Why was the Casquets fog-horn not heard?

Since it was known that the GWR boat was crossing at the same time, was there racing?

Mr. Marsham gave the assessors' findings on Thursday May 11th. Basically they were:

The *Stella*'s compasses and course were correct

To the complete credit of the crew, the lifeboats were out swiftly and efficiently.

Captain Reeks was a skilled seaman experienced in Channel Islands navigation, and aware of Company procedure for fog. The log was set at the Needles according to procedure. Captain Reeks was on the bridge at the time of striking. The Casquets fog horn was sounding all afternoon, but might have been muffled by the fog.



Captain Reeks

The *Stella's* speed was rashly excessive for the conditions.

At 3.55 the ship should have been on dead slow or stopped and the lead used to check her position.

Because neither of these was done, the assessors were forced to conclude that the *Stella* was not navigated with proper and seamanlike care.

On racing, the assessors were unable to come to a definite conclusion. They merely recommended that in future the arrival of the two companies' ships at St. Peter Port should be timed not to coincide.

Aftermath

The findings of the Enquiry were a defeat for the L&SWR. Forty bereaved families immediately brought in claims for compensation.

The L & SWR attempted through the courts to circumvent large sums of compensation to any individual. Several wholly justified claims by widows and orphans were denied until the Court of Appeal found in favour of the families, and gave leave for further compensation cases to be heard. A series of awards was made to individuals, at considerable cost to the L & SWR

The Insurance Companies paid out heavily, and many "technicalities" were ingeniously produced to withhold payment. One passenger had taken out £2000 worth of insurance for himself and his wife at Waterloo, just prior to their boarding the boat-train. The documents had been lost with the husband, and since his widow could not produce them, the company refused to pay out.

Many widows and children were left destitute as a result of the disaster. Seaman Thomas Glover, lost on the *Stella*, had five children by his first marriage before he was widowed. His second wife, unable to support them, sent the children to Southampton Workhouse, from where they were split up, never to see each other again.

The L & SWR immediately entered into discussion with the Great Western Railway on the matter of co-operation in running the Channel Island ferry services. It was agreed that from autumn 1899 the companies would run on

alternate days, pooling ticket receipts. Return tickets would be valid on either company's boats.

The *Stella* represented "state of the art" late nineteenth century technology, but her navigation depended on methods which were medieval. Less than two months after reporting the *Stella* disaster, the newspapers carried coverage of a revolutionary new system of "wireless" telegraphy developed by Signor Marconi. Trinity House was already investigating the possibility of putting wireless transmitters on all dangerous reefs to emit danger signals to ships.

Myth & Memory

The loss of the *Stella* caught the public imagination. Heroic deeds, real or imagined, were commemorated by memorials, and in poetry and prose. The poet laureate, Alfred Austin, contributed a lengthy poem, as did the unique William McGonagall.

Senior Stewardess Mary Anne Rogers had several memorials raised to her. Her heroic action, last words and poignant death made her a national heroine.

Mrs. Rogers had worked calmly and speedily to get women passengers up onto the deck, and fitted with lifebelts. She then assisted the women into the boats, ensuring that they had priority. Seeing a woman without a lifebelt, she removed her own and put it on her, then helped her into a boat. The occupants of the boat had called Mrs. Rogers to join them, but she refused, saying that the boat was full, and that it would be endangered if she got in. As she turned away the *Stella* began her final plunge. Mary Rogers' last reported cry was "Lord, have me" and she vanished with the ship.

Mary Rogers was born in 1855 in Frome, Somerset. She was the widow of a seaman, washed overboard from a Channel Island boat in 1883. Mary had two children - a son aged 16 and a daughter aged 20. She also had a dependent ailing father.



Stewardess Mary Rogers

A letter soon appeared in the *Times* from the radical and champion of women's suffrage Miss Frances Power Cobbe. She described Mary Rogers as "one of the most sublime figures in our island history" and proposed a memorial to her, for which she would donate the first £25. The Memorial

Fund eventually raised £570, of which £250 went to Mary Rogers' family. The rest purchased the memorial on Town Quay, Southampton.

In 1908, the committee of the new Anglican Liverpool Cathedral chose twenty one "noble women" for depiction in stained glass windows. Mary Rogers was included, and is depicted in her window alongside Grace Darling and Elizabeth Fry.

In 1900 the Memorial of Heroic Deeds, designed by G.F. Watts RA, was opened at Postman's Park in the City of London. It commemorated courageous deeds by ordinary people and included a tablet to Mary Rogers.

Rediscovery.

The technology to locate the *Stella* was not available until the 1940s. Even so her precise location had remained a mystery for decades.



Diver on one of the two propellor shafts.

In June 1973, Richard Keen a Guernsey diver, And Fred Shaw a diver from Alderney, were working together south of the Casquets on a scholarly project to locate the elusive wreck of *Victory* which went onto the reef in 1744.

Their boat had an echo sounder and a proton magnetron, a device which indicated on a monitor the presence of metallic objects on the sea bed. The two men had hoped

to locate the *Victory* by her ballast and iron cannonballs.



Diver passing over the wreck.

At the end of an unproductive day, the magnetometer suddenly registered a major mass of iron - a large ship. Both divers realised together that it must be the *Stella*, although they were well south of where she was believed to lie. Both men had searched for her for many years.

Richard and Fred kept the *Stella's* location a secret for over twenty years, whilst diving on her occasionally.

In 1991, John Ovenden, an amateur diver from Jersey determined to find the wreck. Guided by an approximate position he and a team of divers from Jersey Sub-Aqua Club were eventually able to dive on the wreck. Inspired by



Alderney

her intact condition, John launched a project to make a detailed photographic survey of the vessel.

Video filming began in summer 1992. To ensure that *Stella* was not stripped, John applied for the wreck to be legally protected, and she became the responsibility of the Maritime Trust of Alderney, acting on behalf of the States of

Preparing to dive on the *Stella*. 1992.



John Ovenden with an R.O.V.

John Ovenden's video footage with contributions from Richard Keen and Fred Shaw, has formed the basis of a documentary film "The Wreck of the *Stella*" which has been shown on BBC television, the Discovery channel and NDR Germany.



Raising an artefact from the wreck of the *Stella*. 1992. Part of the official Alderney Maritime Trust project.

Relics from the Deep.

Unfortunately, the *Stella's* protected status has not prevented illegal diving, and a great number of relics have been unofficially removed from her. Small items are now almost all gone, and even major equipment has been removed.

The ship is now beginning to break up under natural forces, and less of her survives than even twenty years ago. Rust has eaten through parts of the hull and hull plates have come away. The *Stella* is beginning to lose her shape as she gradually subsides into the sea bed.

The depth of water in which the ship lies has helped in her preservation, but she is in the tide run, which means that divers can work on her only at times of slack. Two decompression stops are required on the way up, and this limits time on her to no more than 10 - 15 minutes. The *Stella* remains a difficult, but awe-inspiring dive!

Each dive is different as the tide moves silt over the *Stella's* remains, covering and uncovering different sections.

Relics brought up from the *Stella* since 1973 range from substantial pieces of her machinery to personal possessions and small intact items of great delicacy. Even after a century underwater many items bear testimony to the high quality of materials and workmanship that were a feature of the ship.