

The Meikle Ferry Disaster

Alan B. Lawson recalls how tragedy struck 175 years ago this month.

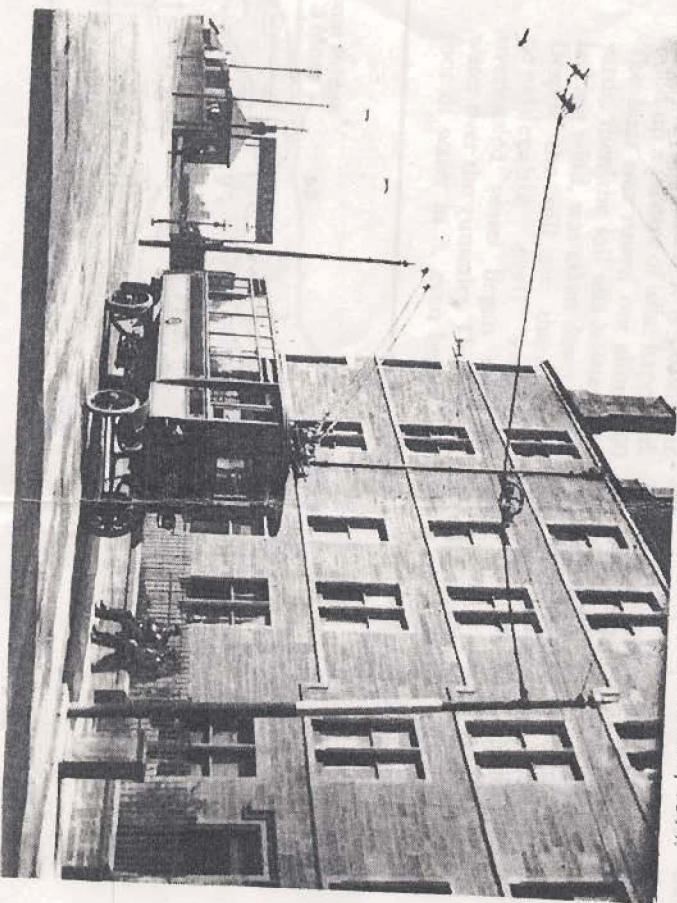


This German submarine arouses only passing interest from the dockside strollers in pre-Great War Dundee. Just above the conning tower is the foot of Commercial Street, one of the few identifiable features in an area that has changed radically today with the filling-in of the harbour area to accommodate the Tay Road Bridge approaches.

FROM MY ALBUM

Readers' Pictures From The Past

Stewart M. Milne of Dundee sent both this month's photographs taken by his father Henry C. Milne. Below is another unusual transport sight, one of the city's two trolleybuses at Fairmuir. Along with Glasgow, Dundee made use of this hybrid, although only on one short route and only from September 1912 to May 1914.



ON Wednesday, 16th August, 1809, a gentleman was riding along the track leading to the Meikle Ferry on the Dornoch Firth. In the distance he saw the boat putting out and shouted for it to wait. The sand-dunes must have obscured his view briefly, for when he turned down to the beach, the boat had disappeared.

The rider was John Mitchell, one of Thomas Telford's roads inspectors, and it was fortunate for him that he missed the ferry, or he probably would have perished with the many who drowned that day.

His account of what happened was given by his son Joseph in his *Reminiscences*, but he was writing more than 70 years later and made the mistake of saying that the accident took place in the evening. The Reverend Donald Sage in his *Memorabilia Domestica*, also written many years afterwards, made a similar error, dramatising the event as occurring "in the darkness of night". However, the records of the Committee for Managing the Meikle Ferry Fund, set up to help the dependents of the victims, make it clear that the disaster took place in the morning.

The annual Lammas Fair was being held in Tain that day and this drew people from many parts of the

North, some to do business, but more, particularly many young folk, simply to enjoy the fun. From East Sutherland their route lay across the Firth by the Meikle Ferry, and that morning a large crowd gathered on the northern shore to cross the half-mile of water.

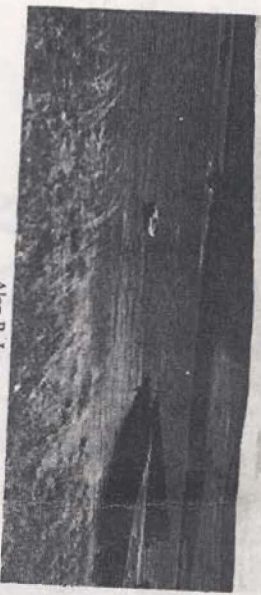
Joseph Mitchell comments that the crossing was one he heartily disliked: the boats were ill-equipped and the ferrymen unconcerned about deficiencies such as missing thole-pins, torn sails, frayed ropes and even broken rudders. There were no jetties, and on the north side, shallow water made it impossible to beach the boat except when the tide was fairly high.

The eager fair-goers had crowded into the vessel, grossly overloading it. One passenger, ex-Sheriff McCulloch, protested to the

John Mitchell was lucky. He was too late to catch the ferry.

Drawings by
Charles Bannerman





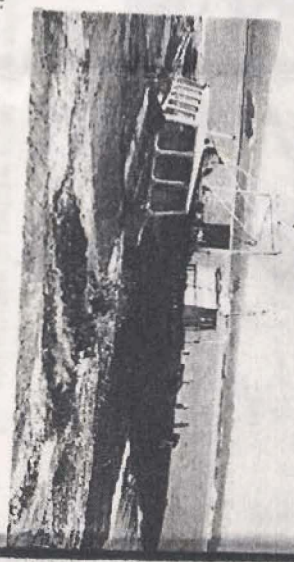
Left, the Sutherland side of the Meikle Ferry crossing today. Below, the jerry on the Ross-shire shore.

Alan B. Lawson

ferryman, but was assured that there was no danger, as it was calm. However, a few were made to disembark, grumbling, no doubt, as they joined many others left behind. Even so, there were 111 people on board when the ferry set off.

Clearly, a vessel capable of taking such a number was not the one normally used for passengers. It was probably one employed to carry goods, including cattle for the southern trysts, although drovers more often swam their beasts across at Creich, farther up the kyle.

From statements made by survivors to a local J.P., and from the accounts of others, it is possible to build up a picture of what happened. The boat was rowed out about 100 yards, then the sail was hoisted but, lacking wind, was taken down again. Despite the still air, there was a considerable swell and the overloaded vessel began shipping water over the gunwales. There was a foot of water in it, even before the



Alan B. Lawson

sails were raised.

The three ferryman took to the oars again, but, despite strenuous efforts, could make no headway. The passengers now grew alarmed and began to demand that the boat be returned to shore. This was attempted, but during the manoeuvre more water came in and the boat began to sink.

In a panic, people all moved to one side and the boat turned over, ending bottom up. Some were trapped under the hull, while around the wreck were thrashing arms, screams and despairing cries for help. Then came silence, with only a few heads bobbing in the water.

All this happened in full view of the horrified onlookers and they hurriedly put out the small ferry-boat. One survivor reported that he had managed to take hold of the mast, which must have broken loose, until he was washed on to the bottom of

the boat where he was joined by six others, two men, three women and a young girl. One or two were able to swim ashore, but of the 111 who had been aboard the stricken boat, only 12 escaped drowning. One was a ferryman. His two colleagues paid with their lives for their tragic disregard of safety.

Scenes of anguish followed for many days, as distraught relatives and friends scanned the beaches for bodies washed up by the tide. The number found has never been established: possibly some were never recovered, even when boats with drag-nets were engaged to search.

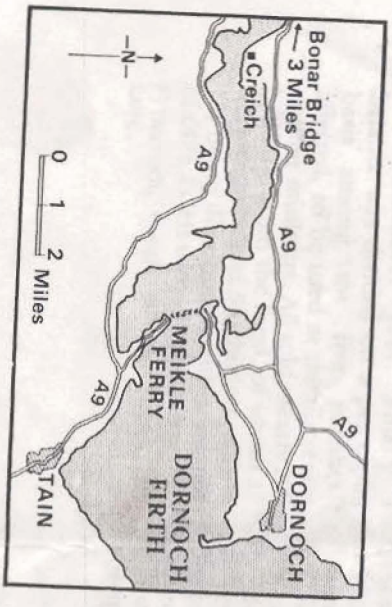
Of the 99 victims, 56 came from Dornoch town and parish, and 24 from neighbouring Creich. The district was stunned by the calamity and some gentlemen in Dornoch set about gathering subscriptions to relieve the distressed relatives. On 25th August, a committee was formed which issued a public appeal not only throughout the North, but also to "Noblemen & Gentlemen

connected with the North Country, residing in Edinburgh, London, etc."

On 8th September, the Committee was confirmed as a Committee of Management, and expenses already incurred were approved. These included payments to eight searching boats, with a premium of five shillings for each of the 19 bodies they found, and to sawyers "for sawing Wood on Sunday for Coffins" (that such a breach of the Lord's Day in Sabbatarian Sutherland should be approved shows the sense of emergency felt. Indeed, a stock of coffins was got ready "so as the bodies may be committed to the earth within the space of an hour at least after being brought into Town (Dornoch) to prevent infection therefrom."

Another emergency payment was made—£11s to widow Munro, whose husband was drowned. He was Sergeant Hector Munro of the Seaforth, in charge of a recruiting party. His wife was "a stranger to the place and in very indigent

A lucky few survived by clambering onto the upturned boat.





For many days afterwards, bodies were being washed up with the tide.

circumstances", without friends to help her and her child in their distress.

There was another recruiting party among those drowned, led by Sergeant Morrison of the Black Watch, whose wife was drowned with him, leaving a destitute infant. The recruiters had been busy in Sutherland and were no doubt hoping for catches among the young men at the Tain fair.

A first payment from the fund was made on 14th December, and as subscriptions came in, there were further distributions in March, 1810 and December, 1811. Finally a balance was divided on a per capita basis among the five parishes* affected, to be used at the discretion of their ministers. All told, nearly 200 had help from the fund, of whom 17 were widows and 96 children, £2909 15s being distributed, with a balance of £485 2s left with the ministers.

* Dornoch, Creich, Golspie, Rogart, and Lairg.

The minutes and reports of the Committee list each victim, giving residence, surviving dependents, with some indication of their circumstances, and the amounts given to them at each distribution. Some of the cases were very distressing. Widows were left with large families, husbands to cope with motherless children: some families lost both parents and most of the unmarried girls and young men had supported someone, perhaps an aged father or mother. The McLeods of Spinningdale lost their three young sons and several other families two sons or daughters.

With one exception, the victims "being of the lower class of society, left families in extreme poverty". The exception was Hugh McCulloch, the former Sheriff Substitute of Sutherland. From the initial distribution, his family received nothing, presumably as they were not in immediate need, but from the two subsequent handouts, they received a

total of £155. Only two other families had more than half that amount—the widow of Alexander Mackay, Balvraid, Dornoch, who had six young children and received £82, and the widow of John McDonald, Eiden, Rogart, who had seven children and was expecting another. She was given £81.

The payments to the McCullochs may seem very preferential in our more egalitarian days, especially as they included grants to two married daughters and a sister-in-law, but Mr McCulloch had recently lost his appointment as Sheriff Substitute, and although acting as Town Clerk in Dornoch was in reduced circumstances, so that his bereaved family were no doubt objects of sympathy in Dornoch as taking double blows from fate.

Donald Sage tells a rather romantic story of the Sheriff's death. It seems that, as a boy, McCulloch had narrowly escaped death from drowning and, in relating this story, Sage wrote of the Sheriff's reaction, "if God were to give him his choice of deaths, he would choose drowning, for, he said, he felt, as he was in the act of sinking... as if he were falling into a gentle sleep. That choice, in the inscrutable providence of God was given him..." Sage also tells how "The Sheriff's body was among the last to be found. He had appeared to a friend in a dream, telling him where he lay and that the fish of the sea were restrained from putting a tooth upon his (body) which would be found entire. The dream was realised in every particular."

Donations to the fund came from all over Scotland, from London, Liverpool and elsewhere in England, and eventually from India, Grenada and Cape of Good Hope, where the 93rd Sutherland Highlanders were stationed. They came from all ranks

of society—from the Marquis of Stafford to the servants of Brahan Castle, from generals to militiamen.

Some entries in the subscription list catch the eye. From Dingwall, came five guineas from Mrs Gladstone, reminding us that the mother of W. E. was a daughter of Provost Robertson of that town. In Thurso, a collection was taken at a ball "in honor (sic) of His Majesty's Coronation". Were they really celebrating the old mad King's accession 50 years after the event? One guinea was sent being a "Bet lost on the Expedition of the Moray and Sutherland Packet". One subscription from Cupar is of personal interest to me as it was made by a distant relation.

The shock of the disaster does not seem to have improved the management of the Meikle Ferry to judge from Joseph Mitchell's strictures, and the service was to claim at least one other victim. In October, 1835, the *Inverness Courier* reported that the boat had struck an anchor 15-20 yards from the shore on the Tain side. She was holed and filled with water and the lives of 17 passengers were in great danger. One man struck out for the shore, but was swept away and drowned. However, worse calamity was averted by a ferryman who managed to swim to a small boat moored nearby and so rescue the other passengers.

After the erection of Telford's iron Bonar Bridge and the construction of decent roads, the dangerous Meikle Ferry was less used, but the long detour by the bridge kept it going until 1957.

Today there is promise of a modern bridge over the firth just at the narrows where the old ferry-boats plied. How many rushing across in their cars will have any thought for the Meikle Ferry Disaster of 1809?