

The Last Voyage of the M.V. Plassy

The 8th March, 2010 marked the 50th anniversary of the grounding of the M.V. *Plassy* on the Finnis Rock, Inisheer Island, County Galway. The ship is shown on the opening credits of the well-known TV comedy series "Fr Ted."

Limerick Steamship Company Limited

The *Plassy* was owned by the *Limerick Steamship Company Limited*, which dates back to 1893. In the early 1960's there were five ships in the fleet with Irish place names: *Plassy*, *Galtee*, *Derrynane*, *Mulcair* and *Dromineer*. They mainly traded between the European ports of Liverpool, Antwerp and Rotterdam and the west coast ports of Ireland such as Fenit, Galway, Westport, Sligo, Ballina and Limerick. They had a distinctive black and red hull with the red below the water line. The funnel was black with a wide red stripe and a narrow white stripe under it.

The M.V. Plassy

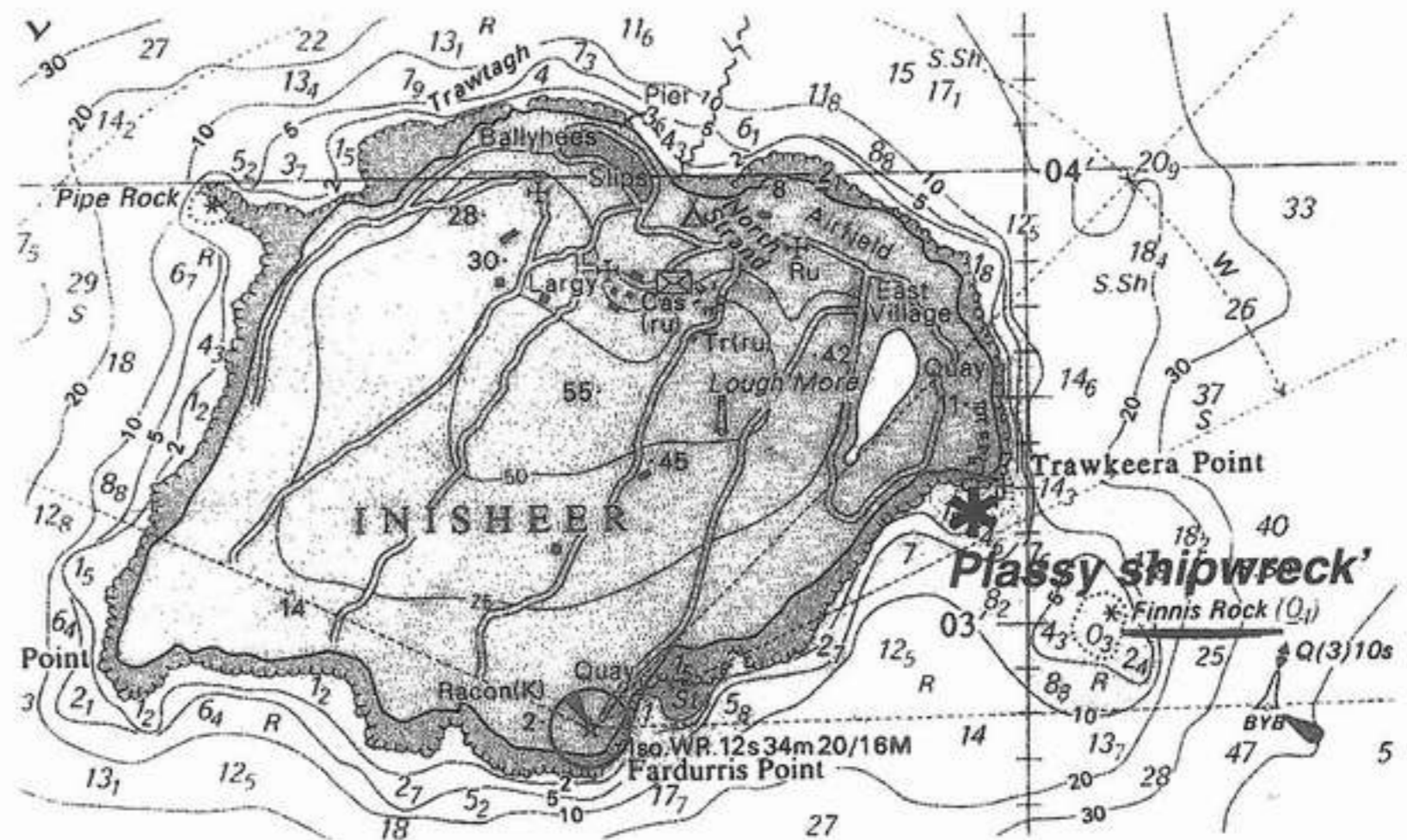
The *Plassy* was 585 tons and registered in London and was the first motor vessel acquired by the company. She was originally an armed Admiralty steamship trawler built by Cook, Welton & Gemmell in Beverley, Yorkshire in 1941 as the Shakespearian class *H.M.S Juliet*. In 1947 she was converted to a motor vessel cargo ship and an extra hatch was fitted and renamed *Peterjon*. In 1951 she was bought by *Limerick Steamship Company Limited* and renamed *Plassy*. She traded as a tramp

by Michael Kirwan

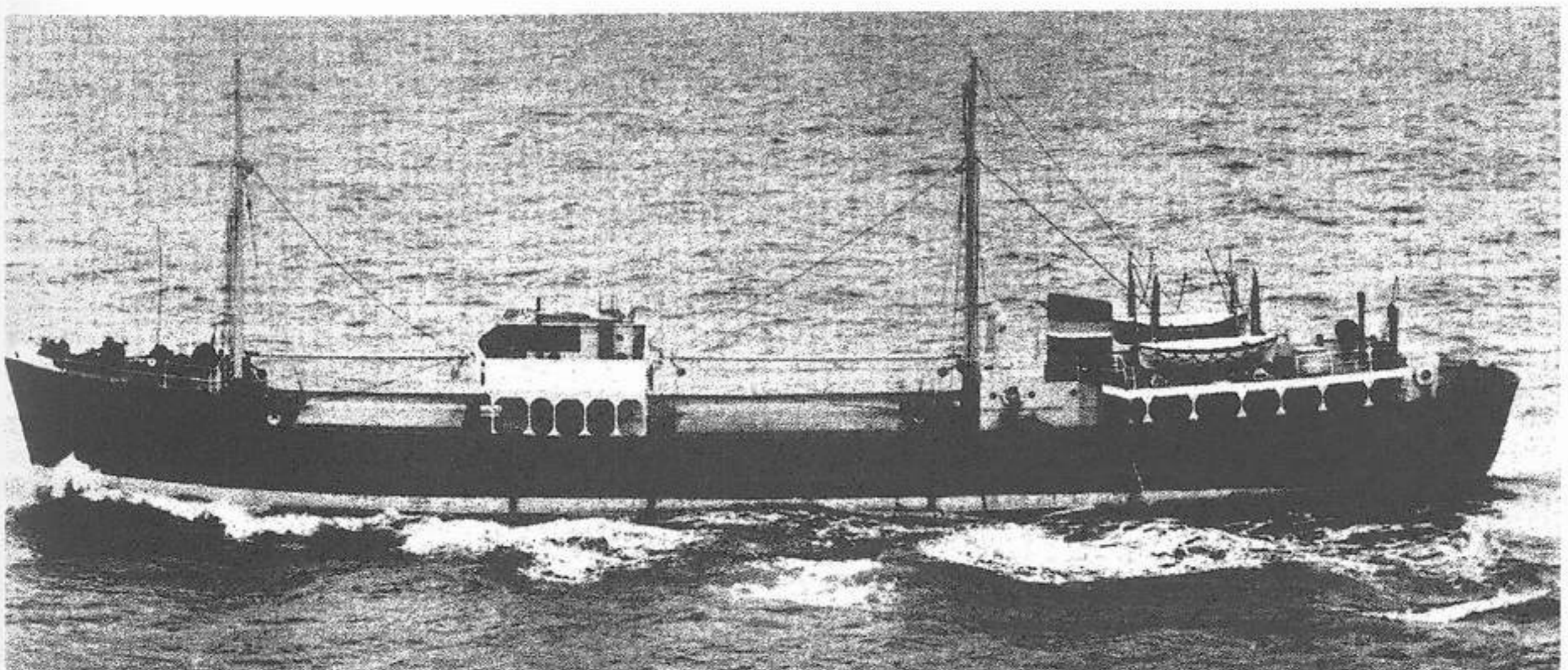
ship, going wherever the cargo was, to such places as South Africa, Greece, Iceland, Finland and Russia. She was a chilled boat with insulated hatches and was often used to carry fruit and fish. One such voyage was carrying tunny fish from Lobito, Angola to Genoa in Italy. She usually had a crew of eleven.

In March 1960 the *Plassy* replaced the *Derrynane*, while the latter was in dry dock, on the Liverpool - Fenit - Galway run. She had discharged a cargo of steel in

Fenit, County Kerry, for the Liebherr crane factory in Killarney. After Fenit she was going to Galway with general cargo for towns in the Galway area. The voyage between Fenit and Galway was to take her about 12 to 14 hours. After leaving Fenit on Monday evening March 7th she headed for Kerry Head and then crossed the Shannon Estuary for Loop Head. She passed about three to four miles off Loop Head and then altered course for Black Head off County Clare. The plan was to pass through the South Sound between the Clare coast and Inisheer Island. The weather was atrocious at the time with a vigorous depression off the west coast of Ireland. Valentia Radio



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M.V. Plassy

(Bill Brennan Collection)

Station was broadcasting gale warnings on 2182kHz of gale force 8 to 9 with occasional storm force 10 with a southeast wind blowing.

South Sound

On Tuesday morning at 4 a.m. 'the watch' changed. Jim Dempsey, Mick Tobin and Tony King were on the bridge. They handed over to Jim Henchy, Eddie Reidy and Tom (Junior) Finnan. Charlie Murray was in the engine room. Coming up towards South Sound the deck crew were posted on lookout and watching out for the twenty second white red isophase light (Iso WR 12s) from the lighthouse on Inisheer Island and the white red twelve second flash (Fl WR 5s) from the lighthouse on Black Head on the Clare coast. It was pitch dark and there were heavy squalls of rain. The ship was pitching and tossing on the waves. They knew that Finnis Rock on Inisheer was dangerous as it was a flat limestone plateau rock barely covered by the sea stretching out about three quarters of a mile from the shore. It had a blind buoy on it, which was only visible during daylight. Eddie Reidy had been relieved from the helm at 5 a.m. to make a cup of tea and toast and Tom Finnan was at the helm steering a course of northeast by a half east, or about forty degrees on the compass. All the time he was compensating for drift to the port side because of the off shore wind and the high deck cargo of a caravan and lifeboat on the hatches. Jim Henchy was watching out for the lights from the lighthouses. Visibility was very poor and a mist was blowing over the bridge and to make matters worse the bridge and lookout area was low down.

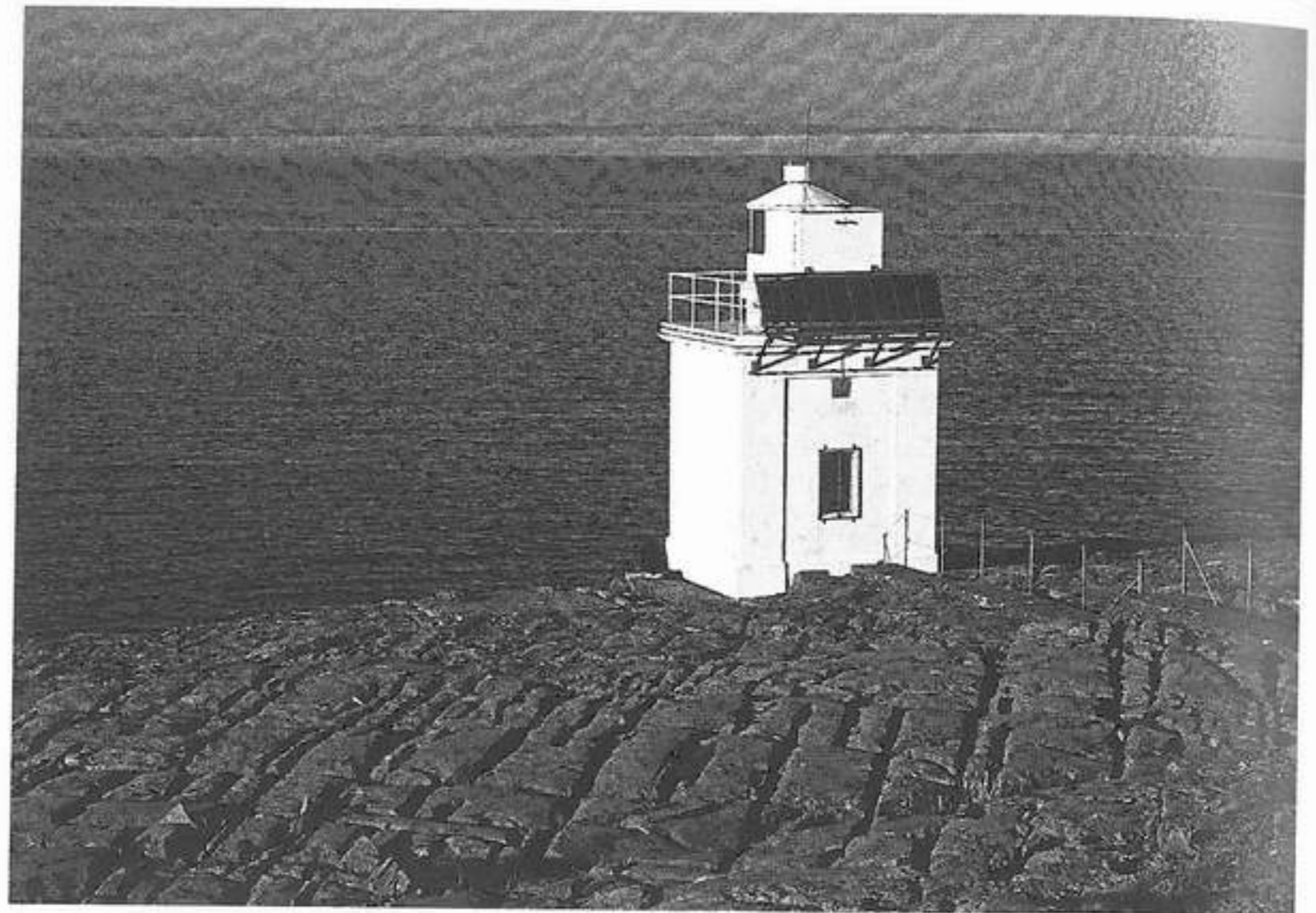
Finnis Rock

At 5.10 a.m. there was a grinding and tearing of metal as the ship hit Finnis Rock, off Tra Caorach. As the ship was only able to travel at 7 or 8 knots there was no way the course could be adjusted quickly. Eddie Reidy vividly describes the moment of impact:

"We were coming along the lee of the land. I was on the 4 to 8 watch and in the galley making tea and toast. Next thing, Wallop, such a thump. We hit it so hard. I was taken off the deck and hit the ceiling. Water started to rush in from underneath. There was shouting and running in all directions."

A hole was torn on her bottom and water started to pour rapidly into the engine room. The bilge pumps could not pump out the water fast enough. The ship lost power and the lights went out. Fortunately the radio still worked as it was run by batteries. Everyone got up, picked up a lifejacket and ran to the bridge. The Captain, Thomas Wilson, sent out a distress message by radio, which was picked up by Valentia Radio Station, stating she was "taking water fast, abandoning ship."

With the strong gales and mountainous



Black Head Lighthouse

(John Power)

seas the ship was being pushed more and more up on the rocks. The worry was that the ship would capsize or break up on the rocks. The Captain gave the order to abandon ship. Mick Tobin, Jim Dempsey and Tom Finnan ran to the starboard lifeboat and took the cover off and launched it. When the boat was lowered, due to the swell in the sea, it was only two or three feet below the deck level and at times rose above the deck. It was attached to the ship with the painter rope at the stern and amidships. Everyone jumped into the lifeboat but the worry was as it was rising up and down it was hitting the bilge keel and might turn over. When they were all in the lifeboat Jim Dempsey had the hatchet ready to cut the painter rope when the Captain decided it was safer to go back on board the *Plassy*. It was decided to jump back on board as the Captain feared deck cargo would fall on top of them or that the lifeboat might break up on the rocks if they got ashore.

Fifty years later Mick Tobin, the deckhand vividly recalls jumping back on board.

"Some of the younger lads jumped back on board the *Plassy* and the older lads were pushed and pulled back on. Just after jumping back on board the painter ropes burst free and the lifeboat drifted away."

There was still the constant grinding noise of the stern tearing on the rocks and the bow was still moving back and forth. Some of the crew went forehead to drop the two anchors to hold the bow down. There was no hope of swimming ashore or getting into a currach or lifeboat at this stage because of the mountainous seas.

Valentia Radio Station

The Radio Officers at Valentia Radio Station had alerted the RNLI lifeboats at Kilronan and Fenit. The Galway Bay lifeboat in Kilronan, the *Mabel Marion*

Thompson, was already at sea searching for a missing man whose boat was found washed ashore on Inishbofin Island close to the mainland. The Coxswain, Coleman Hernon had been appointed just over a week earlier. Meanwhile, at 6.33 a.m. the new Fenit lifeboat the *Hilton Briggs* under Coxswain William Crowley was called out. This was its first call out.

Coast Life Saving Service

In addition to Valentia Radio contacting the emergency services, there were two young boys on the shore collecting seaweed at daylight and when they spotted the ship on the rocks they ran for help.

The Life Saving Service was contacted and two rockets were fired to muster assistance. The service had fifteen volunteers on the island. Word was sent to the ship via Valentia Radio Station that they would attempt to bring the crew ashore using the Breeches Buoy. The volunteers headed by Martin O'Domhnaill ran to the Coast Guard station or Rocket House. The Rocket House stored a rocket life saving apparatus or breeches buoy. Fortunately, on the Aran Islands two people in every village were trained in the use of this equipment. It is a pulley and rope-based rescue device used to bring people ashore from wrecked vessels. It is basically a lifebuoy with a large pair of canvas shorts sewn into it. The person being rescued sits into it and is hauled ashore by rope joined to the ship and shore. It had never been used before on the island. This equipment was put on a cart and taken to as near as possible to the shipwreck site. At that time there were no cars or horses on the island and the boreens were in a poor state. The cart had to be manhandled three quarters of a mile down to Gob na Cora. Passing the church it got stuck in a mound of sand and stones which had to be cleared. Gob na Cora was chosen so that they could fire the rocket into the wind. It took about an hour to get there. About sixty islanders turned out to assist.

To operate the breeches buoy, a rope was attached to an iron spike which was then fired from a gun. At 9 a.m. the first rocket line was fired to the ship but did not attach to anything on the ship. The second attempt also failed but on the third attempt it stuck fast to the top of the mast, which was made of pinewood. When the rope was caught on the ship it was made secure on the ship and shore and the breeches buoy was pulled out. Eddie Reidy was first to try it. One by one the crew were hauled ashore. This was a rather precarious operation as with the length of the rope and the weight of the person it was impossible to keep the rope taut and the crew were submerged several times as they were hauled ashore. The Captain, Tom Wilson was last off the ship. As they came ashore they were then taken to local houses where they were given dry clothing and were looked after well.

Rescued on Inisheer

Incidentally, the day before the *Plassy* had left Fenit the crew had been paid two weeks wages. Typical two week pay for a Bosun in the early 1960's was £16/11/10. (€21.06) Due to continuous bad weather the rescued crew stayed on the island for a few days. This gave them time to recuperate. While on the island they made a few visits to the local pub where they had a great time and all the locals gathered to hear the story first hand.

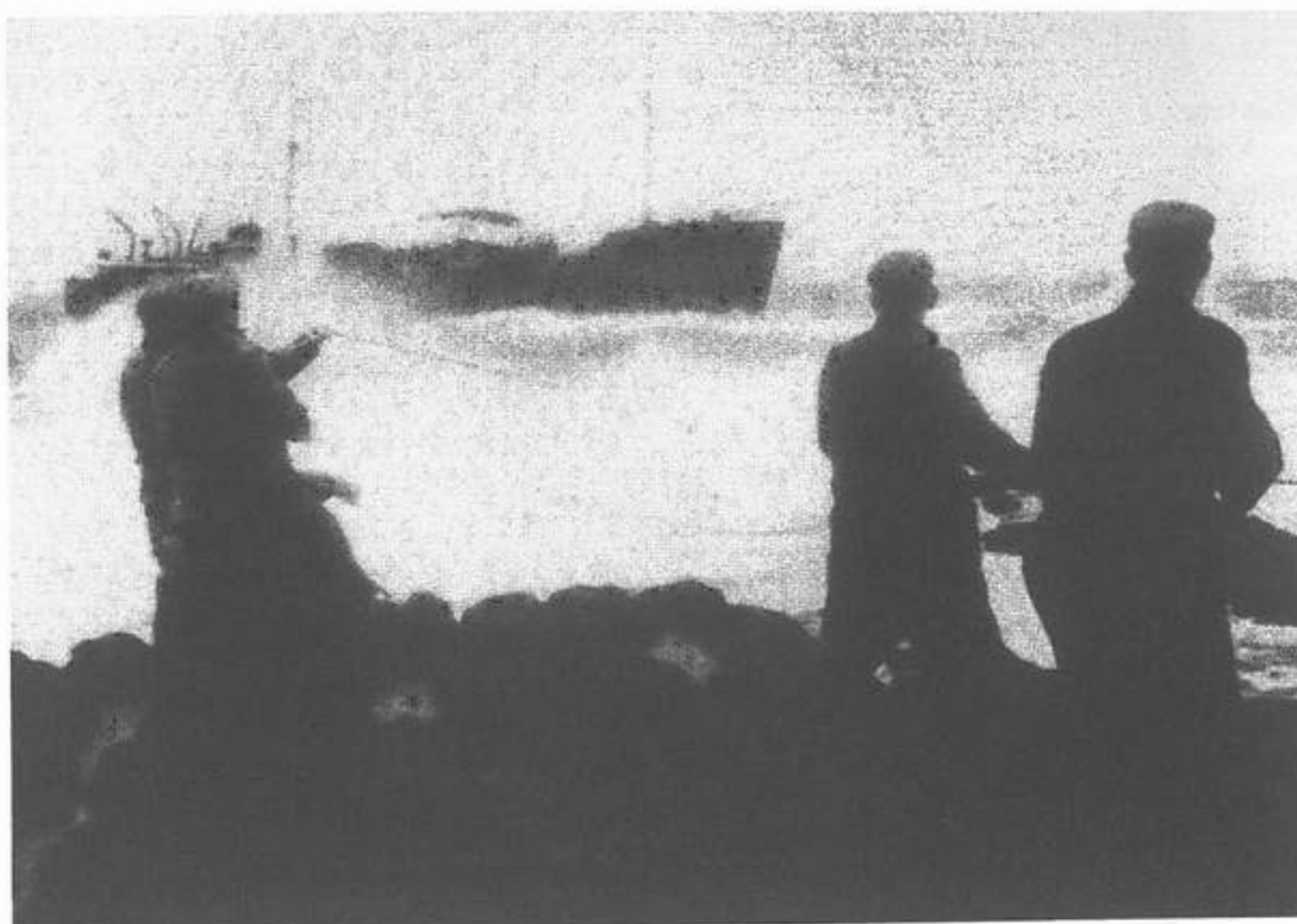
As the *Naomh Eanna* ferry from Galway to the Aran Islands was unable to make the trip due to the continuous bad weather, Harry Hofler, the Galway manager of *Limerick Steamship Company Limited* and William Southerland, the companies' Marine Superintendent came out on board the trawler, *Ros Brasil*, to inspect the ship and meet the crew. Michael Tobin recalls meeting them and that "they gave us all £1 to buy drinks. However, two weeks later the £1 was deducted from our wages."

On Thursday morning when the weather improved the crew came off the island on the *Naomh Eanna*.

Aftermath

Two weeks later Mr J. Sweeney, a businessman from Achill Island, commenced salvaging the general cargo from the *Plassy*. The salvage was carried out from shore as it was possible to board the ship at low tide. Much of the 50 tons of cotton on board was washed away but some bales were washed ashore. Among the items salvaged were copper tubing, wash hand basins, toilets, childrens go-cars, lawn mowers and Scotch whisky. There were also 2,000 cartridges on board, for use as humane killers, which were destined for abattoirs in Galway.

Engineers from the *Limerick Steamship Company Limited* surveyed the ship together with surveyors from *Lloyds Insurance* of London. It was decided that it was not possible to refloat it because of the extensive damage underneath.



The line is being stretched to make sure it is ready for use (National Maritime Museum)



Crew man being pulled ashore (National Maritime Museum)

Within a few weeks the *Plassy* crew were all back at sea again. Mick Tobin spent another 35 years at sea. Charlie Murray the 2nd Engineer lost his life three years later on October 6th 1963 on the *Oranmore* off Cape Clear, County Cork. Another *Limerick Steamship Company* ship, *The Mulcair*, collided with her. The bow of *The Mulcair* crashed into Charlie Murray's cabin. He was shaving at the time the ships collided and he died shortly afterwards from injuries sustained in the collision.

In the 1960's *Limerick Steamship Company* went into receivership due the changes and improvement in road and rail transport and the introduction of container ships. Specialised container ports were built on the east coast and the containers were lifted on to trucks for onwards

distribution around the country.

Today the Finnis Rock buoy is lit up with 3 quick flashes every 10 seconds. By day it is identified by its livery of black – yellow – black paintwork. The *Plassy* wreck is high and dry on the rocks after being washed further inland as a result of spring tides, high seas and storms over the past fifty years.

Fifty years later, on May 28-30th 2010 the islanders had a "Comoradh 50 bliain An Plassy" (Commemoration of 50 years of *The Plassy*) to celebrate the success of the rescue. Mick Tobin and his wife Kay attended and met with many of the islanders that helped rescue him and his crew. Mick opened the event, as he is the last living survivor of the eleven crew that were on board on that fearful night. A great weekend was had by all.

Crew of Plassy

Captain: Thomas Wilson, 31 Harmonstown Crescent, Artane, Dublin.

Mate: Jim Henchy, 14 Patrick's Terrace, Tarbert, Co. Kerry.

Chief Engineer: Mick Ward, Limerick and Liverpool.

2nd Engineer: Charlie Murray, Rosemary Avenue, Galway.

Donkey man: Joe O'Brien, 32 Wolfe Tone Street, Limerick.

Bosun/2nd Mate: Jim Dempsey, Glandore, Clonakilty, Co. Cork.

Steward: Bob Dixon, Dublin.

Deckhands:

Tony King, Mornington, Drogheda, Co. Louth.

Tom (Junior) Finnan, 176 St. Munchin Street, St Mary's Park, Limerick.

Mick Tobin, 9 Little Barrington Street, Limerick.

Eddie Reidy, Windmill Street and Garryglass Avenue, Limerick.

Men of Inisheer Life Saving Crew

	NAME	FATHER	INISHEER AREA
No.1	Martin O'Donnell	Michael	Lurgan
No.2	Edward Flaherty	Patrick	Formna
No.3	Coleman Conneely	Morgan	West
No.4	Patrick Conneely	Martin	Formna (absent, illness)
No.5	Martin Flaherty	Edward	Formna
No.6	Patrick Conneely	Patrick (Patsy)	West
No.7	Sean Sharry	Michael	West
No.8	Martin Conneely	John	Chapel
No.9	Patrick Griffin	Michael	West
No.10	Martin Sharry	Michael	West
No.11	Martin Folan	Patrick	Chapel
No.12	Patrick Conneely	Coleman	Chapel
No.13	Thomas Costelloe	Martin	Chapel
No.14	Patrick Conneely	Patrick (C.I.E)	West
No.15	Michael O'Donnell	Patrick	West
	Assistant Edward Conneely	Martin	Lurgan
	Assistant Michael Conneely	Peter	West
	Assistant Roger Conneely	Sean	Lurgan
	Substituting for No 4		
	Andrew Conneely	Martin	Lurgan



MV Plassy - wreck

(Paraic Crowe)



Mick Tobin - crew man on Plassy meets Thomas O'Conghaile - one of the rescue team at a re-union in May 2010

(Paraic Crowe)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation to Michael Tobin for the invaluable assistance given in compiling this article. Mr Tobin is the sole surviving member of the crew of the *Plassy* and generously gave his time and clear recollections of his experiences. I also appreciate the help from Kathleen Tierney, *Limerick Steamship Company Limited*, Paraic Crowe and Mairéad Ní Ghallchoir, Inisheer, Roger Kirker of the National Maritime Museum, Dun Laoghaire, Niall Brennan of *Argosea Ltd.*, Robert Sparkes of the *Commissioners of Irish Lights* and Sean Brennan and Gabriel Gregan.

Sincere thanks also to John Messenger and his wife who took the photographs of the rescue. At the time of the rescue they were on holidays from the USA on Inisheer. A full set of the colour pictures can be seen at Áras Éanna Heritage Centre, Inisheer and at the National Maritime Museum, Dun Laoghaire, County Dublin.

This article is dedicated to the crew of the ill-fated *Plassy* and the brave inhabitants of Inisheer who in atrocious weather conditions completed the rescue of the eleven crew with great skill and determination.

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