

## The Wreck of the brig COLUMBUS

On Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1862, The Brig COLUMBUS was on her way from Leith Docks in Edinburgh, heading to the West Indies with a cargo of coal and general cargo. She had a crew of 14 men plus two male passengers aboard. She was captained by Captain Davidson.

During the evening a severe gale blew up from the South South East and the Captain decided to head for Longhope Bay in Orkney to gain some shelter

At around 5.30 am they were heading past Brough in South Ronaldsay, heading into the Pentland Firth when the tide caught them and dragged them onto the Lother Rock.

The Ship started to break up in the storm, the waves breaking over her. First to fall was the main mast, and this killed the captain.

The ship was sighted by Donald Thomson from the shore, and although he found it difficult to believe anyone could have survived, he raised the alarm and a boat was launched with 13 stout hearted men on board.

When they got close to the wreck, they could see several men clinging onto the fore mast, but they were unable to get close, the sea was running too rough and the rocks were a dangerous place.

As they watched, waves broke over the ship and the foremast fell, many of the men clinging on, were washed away. However two men were seen running towards the back of the ship for shelter, One vanished in the next breaking wave, and the other was left clinging onto a piece of wreckage which was washed into the sea.

At first the tide pulled the man clinging to the wreckage out toward the boiling sea, and the rescuers were convinced they would never see him again, however the tide swirled him around and sent him back towards the shore. The men on the rowing boat pulled hard towards him, all the time mindful of their own boat being dragged towards the rocks.

They finally reached him and pulled him on board, cold, wet, bedraggled and barely hanging onto life.

As they realised there was nothing else they could do, they set off back to shore and the boy was taken to Burwick farmhouse where he made a good recovery as he was warmed and dried off.

He was to be the only survivor from that ship. And much of this tale is his eye witness account.

When daylight broke, a part of the rigging was found washed ashore, and tangled up in it was the body of the ships carpenter. He was buried in St Marys Churchyard, his name, as yet unknown, the boy who was rescued was on his first voyage and did not know the names of all his shipmates. No-one else was ever found, the sea had claimed them as her own.

The next morning Mr Louttit , the local agent for Lloyds shipping, and Mr Sutherland who was the receiver of wrecks arrived to take charge of the scene, Much of the cargo had been washed overboard, and some was found 10 miles away on the shores around Longhope Bay in Hoy, Planks of wood and casks of Port amongst the finds.

Salvaged from the ship were 134 bibles, a ships quadrant and a Climex Press and these along with other goods were auctioned at Burwick at a sale on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1862. The bibles were bundled in 6's and sold up to 5/6 per bundle.

We only have names for some of the people on board the ship, and they are as follows

Captain Davidson

John Heddle – Mate from Sanday , Orkney

William Brown – Second Mate

William Lyon – Seaman

James Malcolm - Seaman

William Wandsworth – Seaman

Joseph Pickering – Seaman

William Callister – Seaman

Thomas Haig

John White – Ships boy

In May 1863 Thomas Thomson of Brough, was walking on the shoreline and he found, wedged behind a rock, a gold ring inscribed from a sweetheart to her young man, and miraculously the family of the young man was found and the ring returned to them.

The song/poem about the Columbus was believed to be written by a young Caithness man who was working as a cow herd with Mr Allan at Brough at the time, He would have witnessed the incident, and perhaps even been part of the rescue team.