

## **Coxswain David Sinclair 1823-1913**

Born in Irvine in 1823, David Sinclair served as lifeboat coxswain for 32 years, from 1866 until his retirement in 1898, aged 75. He lived on Harbour Street (1). He assisted at over fifty wrecks and saved forty-three lives. The commemorative plaque to him is on a Maritime Museum structure opposite his home at no.22 (2).

David Sinclair was awarded the RNLI Silver Medal for gallantry in January 1895 after the rescue off Lady Isle, near Troon, on 29 December 1894, of Norwegian sailors from the Tönsberg ship "Frey" by the Irvine lifeboat 'Busbie' in mountainous seas (3). The entire lifeboat crew were all local men - probably Harbourside residents. They were also recognised for their heroics by the Norwegian Government, which presented Coxswain Sinclair with a gold medal, and each of the crew with a replica medal in silver. On the obverse side, in bold relief, is a representation of the head of Oscar II of Sweden and Norway and the reverse, within a laurel wreath, bears the inscription "For Adel Daad" (= "For Noble Deed").

The first of four Irvine lifeboats was the RNLI 'Pringle Kidd' of 1861, gifted by Miss Kidd of Lasswade, followed by the 'Isabella Frew' of 1874, for which a new lifeboat house was erected in that year. The self-righting 'Busbie' arrived in 1887, and its successor was the 'Jane Anne' of 1898. The 'Jane Anne' is currently on display in the Scottish Maritime Museum, but is too fragile to be moved. As, by 1914, local fishermen were unable to compete with steam trawlers, and it became impossible to man the lifeboat, the service was thereafter supplied by the Troon lifeboat (established 1871) kept afloat (from 1905) all year round.

There exists a fine photo of the Irvine crew, pictured in front of the lifeboat 'Busbie' (Strawhorn p.172). At the time of the Norwegian rescue, nine of the fourteen lifeboatmen were Sinclairs, including his brother, sons, nephew, and son-in-law, and another three were related - the last of a dynasty of fishermen.

The stone lifeboat house of 1874 was converted into a shop with changing cubicles at the rear of it in 1927, was used in the 1940s by sea scouts and sea cadets, and was demolished in the 1960s.

For more information, see the account by Mae McEwan, which contains a wealth of information on the lifeboat, the crew and the Norwegian rescue. Also, see the pdf of "The Harbour (Fullarton Folk Reminisce)", ed. Mae McEwan, which contains details of other lifeboat rescues.

Footnotes:

(1) His address in the 1891 census is 22 Harbour St (aged 67, with wife Janet, also 67, and son Peter, 25, both father & son being a fisherman) but the address of his death

aged 89 appears as no. 28. One possibility is that, after his wife's death, he joined one of his family, but we have not investigated this. In the 1861 census, living on the "Quay", he is a "Fisher-Master employing 1 boy".

(2) The plaque was unveiled at a ceremony on the 100th anniversary of his death, 8th July 2013, those present including Provost Joan Sturgeon, Irvine Burns Club President Roger Griffith and local historian Mae McEwan. Mae is the proud possessor of one of the medals - given to her by a recipient who had no family.

(3) The RNLI citation states: It had been impossible to get the Troon lifeboat out of the harbour because of the terrific hurricane blowing from the north-west. Under sail, the Irvine lifeboat covered five miles in half an hour. At the wreck 16 crewmen jumped into the water one by one and were dragged into the lifeboat by ropes. Coxswain Sinclair decided to land at the south beach, Troon, but, nearing the beach, the lifeboat was overwhelmed by 12-15 feet waves and thrown onto her beam ends. The Coxswain and three or four others were thrown out. When the boat was righted, all regained her except one of the rescued Norwegians who had been washed away; the shore was then finally reached safely. Coxswain Sinclair was 70 years old at the time of this service. [In fact, he was 71.]