

*From the Birkenhead News, Saturday November 17, 1906*

## **LIFEBOAT DISASTER**

### **HOYLAKE CREW'S TERRIBLE EXPERIENCE**

#### **YOUNG HERO WASHED OVERBOARD**

#### **GALLANT ATTEMPT AT RESCUE**

The profoundest sorrow was occasioned yesterday when the news was spread of a disaster to the Hoylake lifeboat, involving the loss of one of the men on board. Such a calamity is one, fortunately, almost without precedent so far as the Hoylake district is concerned, although, on many occasions, the lifeboatmen have won laurels by their bravery. Their record is a proud one and the number of lives saved does certainly reflect nobly upon the crew who have manned the boat at one of the most difficult stations on the English coast. The unswerving courage they displayed on Thursday evening will for long live in the memories of all people who are able to appreciate and to admire the high qualities of pluck and daring which the gallant lifeboatmen displayed against overwhelming odds. The people of Hoylake are accustomed to heavy seas and storms, but even the memory of the proverbial oldest inhabitant cannot recall such a hurricane as that which raged on Thursday night and swept the craft on the water like so many corks tossed by the waves. It was in the evening, shortly before eight o'clock, that Thomas Dodd, the captain or coxswain superintendent of the lifeboat, and the hon. secretary, Mr Charles, observed signals of distress in the direction of the Rock Channel, a little over a mile from the shore. The vessel was almost entirely at the mercy of the waves, which beat upon it with great fury. Without a moment's unnecessary delay the rocket was fired, and before many moments had passed, notwithstanding the great peril, a number of men came down to the lifeboat house. All of these were not of the regular crew, for a body of men had left Hoylake to man the Hilbre boat, which went to the assistance of a vessel in distress upon the East Salisbury Bank in the River Dee. Therefore, Coxswain Dodd had to rely to some extent on volunteers, and the deceased young man, named John Isaac Roberts, aged 23 years, was one of the foremost of these. The men were got together and counted – numbering fifteen all told – and with the utmost expedition the lifeboat was launched at 8.28. In a few minutes it was fighting its way through the heavy seas, and the men sitting two abreast worked dauntlessly, well knowing that the lives of their fellow men might depend on their measure of success in battling with the storm. Roberts, the man who lost his life, was sitting about the middle of the boat, and although this was the first time he had been out on service he proved as gallant a comrade as any captain could wish to have. Despite

#### **THE TERRIFIC SEA**

good progress was made, and the intrepid men, thinking only of those whose lives were obviously hanging in the balance, put magnificent energy into the effort. As they came

nearer to the distressed vessel, however, a tremendous wave struck the lifeboat, and the men were for a short time completely staggered. Chaos and confusion reigned and as Mr W. B. Charles, the hon. secretary, who was on the lifeboat, afterwards declared, some of the men were stunned, the terrible force of the sea having tossed them from their seats and sent them sprawling all over the boat. It was this wave that washed the unfortunate Roberts overboard. Thomas Morris, a coastguardsman, stationed at Hoylake, who was one of the crew, saw him disappear, but was unable to inform Coxswain Dodd of the fact for some little time, and before the men were able to let go the anchor and search for him the lifeboat had drifted some way from where Roberts was lost. The most vivid imagination could not present an adequate picture of the tragic scene. The seas beat angrily and fiercely against the men; a short distance away in the gloom could be seen a crew of three clinging helplessly to the rigging of the battered ship; whilst one of the rescuers' comrades was probably making a futile struggle against the surging waves, and was at the same time being carried away from all possible help. Nothing more was seen of Roberts, and the lifeboatmen renewed their efforts to save the crew of the doomed vessel. When they got within hailing distance the men in the rigging were appealed to to abandon her, but they would not venture to come down and take the risk as the deck of the sloop, which proved to be the Swift of Runcorn, had been washed away, thus leaving no foothold for the men. The lifeboat stood by for some hours, and every wave broke over her. The tide turned, and the crew of the Swift still held on desperately, although their strength was

### **FAST EBBING AWAY**

They were again appealed to to leave the rigging, but declined, deeming it a safer course to remain where they were than run a risk of a failure to gain a footing in an endeavour to reach the lifeboat. Coxswain Dodd and his brave men realised the idle folly of remaining longer than was necessary at sea, and after an adventurous return passage the boat was beached. After being exposed to the gale until the tide had ebbed – a matter of seven hours – the crew of the Swift were able to walk ashore, and reached land utterly fatigued and worn out.

### **THE BODY FOUND**

The body of the unfortunate young man was washed ashore early yesterday morning, and Thomas Brassey, a groundsman of the Liscard Golf Links, discovered it at seven o'clock lying about ten yards from the stone wall of the Wallasey Embankment. An examination of the head showed that the deceased had received severe injuries which may have contributed to his death. Shortly after deceased's brother, accompanied by someone else came along, and the body was conveyed to the house of the deceased's mother, No 4, Lake Road, Hoylake.

### **THRILLING STORIES**

#### **CAPTAIN DODD AND MR CHARLES INTERVIEWED**

Interviewed yesterday afternoon by a representative of the "News", Mr Thomas Dodd, who evidently had not recovered from the effects of his experience, said he had been coxswain superintendent of the Hoylake lifeboat for thirteen years, and had been handling it for 20 years before it, making altogether an experience of 33 years, but he had never seen anything as furious as the gale of Thursday night. The great wave which created such havoc filled the boat, and in addition to carrying Roberts away it knocked the men almost senseless, injuring some of them, among others Mr Dodd himself, who sustained a nasty wound just below the left temple.

Mr W.B. Charles, hon. secretary of the Hoylake branch of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, seen by a "News" representative at the Hoylake Sailing Club-house yesterday afternoon, gave a graphic account of the lifeboat's peril. Mr Charles, as already stated, was one of the crew, and rendered valuable service. Mr Charles said "The lifeboat was launched with exceptional quickness within half an hour from the time a warning was first observed. I observed the warning and immediately came down to the shore from the look-out station. That would be at eight o'clock. I consulted the coxswain and we decided to launch immediately. The boat proceeded to the wreck at 8.28, and all went well until we came to the matter of broaching the vessel. A huge sea struck us broadside on, fouling her, doing considerable damage to gear, and stunning several of the crew, one of whom (Roberts) was unfortunately washed overboard. Upon the righting of the lifeboat it was found impossible to render the slightest aid, as no trace of the missing man could be found. Our next interest was for those in the wreck, who were clinging for their lives in the rigging. With this in view the anchor was dropped, and our intention was to drag towards the vicinity of the wreck and so be enabled to get alongside. Owing to the ground at this particular spot being exceedingly hard our one hope failed us in that the anchor would not hold, and we had to see ourselves carried some little distance past the wreck. After heroic struggles, however, we managed to get within hailing distance of the poor men, who, however, refused to leave their position owing to the decks of their craft having been washed away, leaving them no foothold if they came down from the rigging. We remained standing by, riding to two anchors, for several hours and

### **EVERY WAVE BROKE OVER US**

On the turn of the tide we again approached the vessel and asked the crew to avail themselves of our assistance. But they deemed it wiser to remain on their own ship than risk the possibility of missing their foothold. Nothing further could be done, and Coxswain Dodd decided to beach the lifeboat ready for further service. After being exposed to the fury of a north-westerly gale and terrific seas the crew of the unfortunate Swift were enabled to reach a place of safety, when the tide had ebbed and the wreck was left high and dry.

Mr Charles further said that the lifeboat, which was named "Hannah Fawsett Bennett", had never been out on service before, this being her first launch to a vessel. She was presented by the Lifeboat Institution out of two legacies, that of the lady after whom the boat was christened, and Mr C.H. Lear. The men who manned her on this trip were fully

experienced, and the boat proved herself equal to any task she might be called upon to perform.

The lifeboat returned to its station at 9.50 yesterday morning, but was not housed until 2.30 in the afternoon. Five of the oars had been snapped, and six steel thole-pins through which the oars are worked were bent and warped. These were of solid steel.

When seen by the "News" representative at the house, No. 4, Lake-road, yesterday afternoon, the relatives were naturally in great distress, and had by no means recovered from the first shock of the occurrence.

A sister said that deceased was the youngest of a family of eight children, of whom six were sons. He lived at home with their mother, and he was practically her only support. "He was a very popular young man," she continued, "and had many friends. He was a great reader and student, and on that account we called him 'the philosopher'. He was a brave lad, he

### **NEVER KNEW ANY FEAR**

and would be just the sort to go out in a lifeboat to help others." Her other brother, who was at home, had intended to go out with the lifeboat, but was prevented from doing so at the last moment.

Mrs Roberts' daughter went on to say that just a week ago her eldest brother also narrowly escaped being drowned. He was a sailor on the "Daisy", and last Thursday night the crew had to be rescued by a lifeboat in Fishguard Bay. Four of her brothers had been going to sea, and one was a member of the Birkenhead Fire Brigade. The deceased, she added, was a member of the Naval Reserve, and the photograph which appears on this page was taken on board the "Eagle".

The sister also sorrowfully remarked that that day was her mother's birthday. It was the saddest day in their family history.

### **THE INQUEST**

The inquest was held last evening at the Police Station, Prussia-road, Hoylake. The Coroner was Mr J.C. Bate. Mr Charles Finney (of Messrs. Bateson's, Liverpool) represented the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, and expressed sympathy with Mrs. Roberts in the loss she had sustained.

After reviewing the facts the Coroner called

Mrs. Isabella Roberts, of 4, Lake-road, who said she was the mother of the deceased, John Isaac Roberts. He left home about half-past five on Thursday evening, and that was the last time she saw him alive. That was the first time he had rendered service on the