

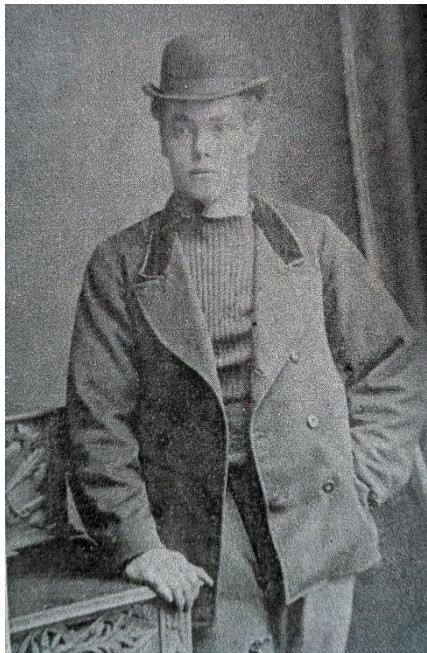


PORTHLEVEN 1948

A FISHING TRAGEDY

The information that follows is 'as remembered by Loveday Matthews, Evelyn Benney, and their brother Ralph Richards'. It was initially compiled by Dorothy Richards & Kenneth Matthews, and shared on by Everett Benney.

FAMILY BACKGROUND



William James Richards, as a young man



Loveday Jane Richards

William James Richards and his wife, Loveday Jane, nee Gilbert, started their married life in Porthleven on 29th October 1887.

As a young man, William joined the fishing fleet and followed the herring shoals to the North Sea. Here he visited many of the famous fishing ports on the east coast, among them Whitby and Scarborough. He sailed as far north as Aberdeen in his quest for a 'good catch'. Often, he returned home via the Caledonian Canal and the Irish Sea. He brought gifts for his wife of Goss china and mementoes of the ports visited.

In 1901 William and Loveday moved to Newlyn with their six sons and three daughters. Here they lived in a typical fisherman's cottage of the day, in the old sector of the port. Vine Cottage illustrates the type of cottage. Vine cottage appears to have been named after the vine which grew around the cottage walls.

There were already Richards living in the Newlyn fishing community. William's brother Perkins was already established in the village. As Perkins' relation, the village recognised and called William and his family by his brother's name of Perkins.

Loveday increased her family by another two sons and a daughter.

Effie was the last child to be born in Porthleven and died at an early age in her sleep. Earlier, two sons, Gilbert and Tom, died in infancy.



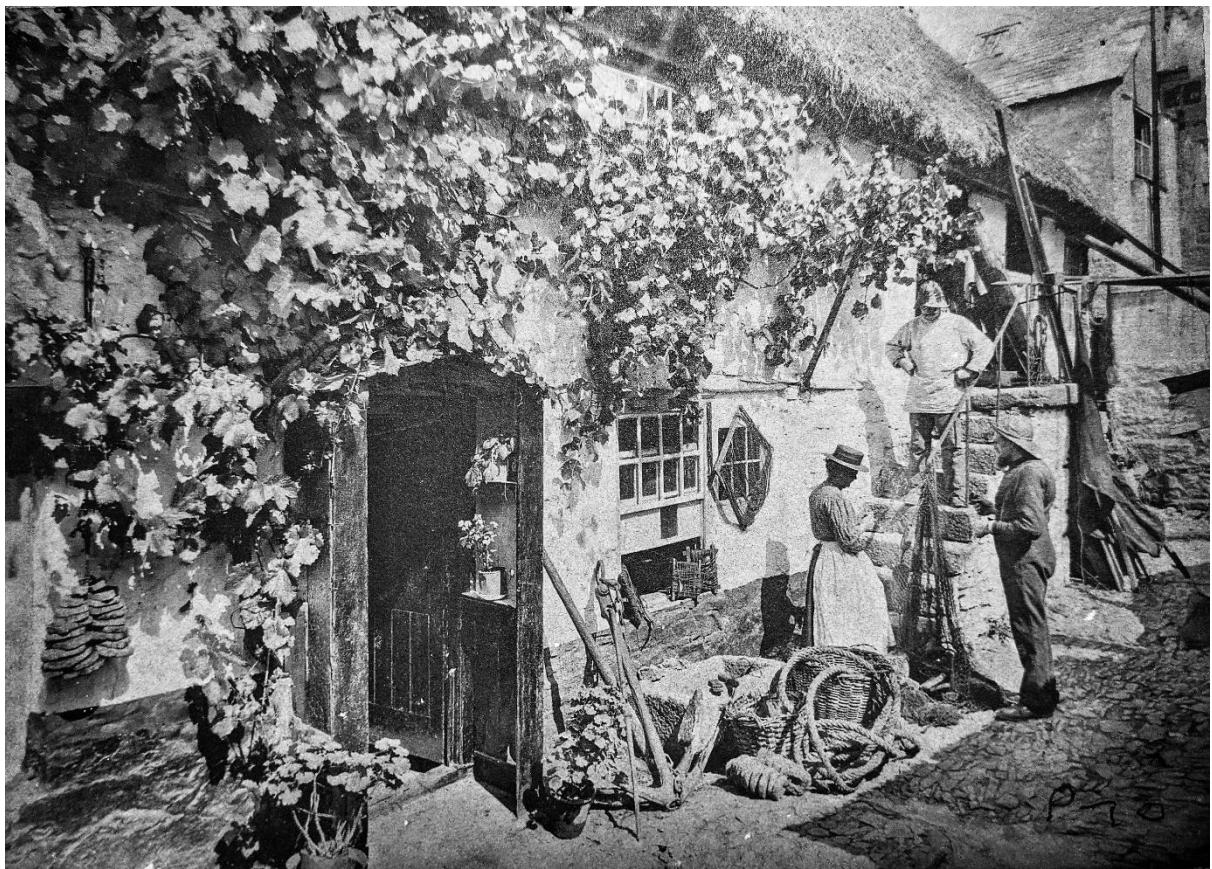
Back row: Jim, Edwin, Billy, Gilbert.

Middle row: Loveday, William, John Henry.

Front row: Loveday, Baby Effie, Evelyn, Tom. About 1901.

Their eldest son, Edwin, did not join his father in the fishing trade. He married and left Newlyn to live in Penzance with his three sons and two daughters. He became work's foreman at the Penzance Gas Works. He died suddenly at work from a heart attack in 1944. His funeral took place in the chapel where he was to have sung a solo on the Sunday.

Jim, their third son, became an apprentice at the Newlyn Copper Works. In 1910, at the age of nineteen, he borrowed £10 from his grandmother and emigrated to Akron, Ohio, in America. He worked for the International Harvester Company and moved to Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1925. He married a Penzance girl who, with her family, had emigrated to the New World. They had one son. He became the production manager of his firm's Truck Division. On his retirement, he moved to Fort Lauderdale, Florida to be near Kenneth, his son. He died on the 25th June 1980.



Vine Cottage. Boase Street, Newlyn. William on the steps.



Ralph, Mother Loveday with Elizabeth on her lap, Loveday, Evelyn, William, Perkins. 1914-18

With her older sons serving in the navy in the First World War, Loveday expressed a desire to return to Porthleven to live. William, Loveday and the family moved back to Porthleven in 1915.

Christmas 1916 was a sad time for the young family of Richards. Loveday, at the age of fifty, died on Christmas Day.

The Richards family owned and worked a number of small 'crabbers'.

EVELYN--PZ 88-- worked by William and his son Perkins.

BOY JIM--PZ 201-Worked by Gilbert and Ralph.

GOLDEN RULE--PZ 167-worked by John Herry, Billy and Tom.

SUPERB-- worked by William. A carvel-built 16-foot-long punt with a mizzen mast. Built by Hendy (?) for his father-in-law. Although retired, most mornings (weather permitting), William could be seen sailing or rowing in the bay around Porthleven. Often alone, much to the concern of the family. On one occasion, he beached the Superb on the 'Slinches' beach and had to be rescued by his irate sons.



John Henry, Billy, and Tom

Around 1925 William Richards had the 'Energetic' built at Porthleven. He taught his sons all he knew about the difficult waters around Mounts Bay. Over the years his sons became partners in the Energetic. On the retirement of William, before the Second World War, his two youngest sons bought his share and became equal partners with their elder brothers. Although in his eighties William sailed with them during the war when his son Perkins was away in the Navy. After the war they sold their small boats and fished solely from the Energetic.

The Energetic was a drifter trawler of 25 tons built in Porthleven and the biggest in the harbour. It last put to sea on Friday 25th June 1948 with three local boats to their usual fishing grounds off the Lizard point. They were to shoot their lines about 10 miles SSE (south south east) of the Lizard. Each line had about 3,000 hooks to catch cod, ling, conger and ray. Usually the crew of the Energetic were the first to put out their crab pots in the spring. Crab fishing in 1948 had not been very lucrative. Following the example of other crews they had brought their crab pots ashore a fortnight previous and turned to the more profitable fishing by long lining.

The day before, the crew had landed a £150 catch, and the six brothers sailed through the fog to try and repeat their previous day's success.



The ENERGETIC returning to harbour Tom, Ralph and Gilbert



Billy, Ralph, Tom and Gilbert. on the Energetic leaving harbour

The Brothers worked as a team on board and on land. They used to travel up the valley to where the reeds grew or went farther afield to Marazion, Gunwalloe and Treliwer to cut the withies to repair and make new crab pots. When they returned from a fishing trip they kept the catch in store pots which they lowered into the sea to keep them alive and fresh until they could take them to market.

A proud father of 6 fishermen sons who were good fishermen and knew their job. William was a distinguished figure who was to be found on the quayside. He no longer fished himself with them but he used to watch his sons go to sea in their boat the 'Energetic'. He was always on the quayside waiting for the boat to return, no doubt proudly informing other bystanders and visitors about his 6 sons working the boat as they entered port and unloaded their catch. The sons in turn would shout to their father each enacting the same little play for the audience which always gathered for the returning boats. This then is the usual scene at the quayside of Porthleven harbour on what appeared to be a sunny and lovely summer's day. It was the Eve of St Peters-

tide when the boys set out on that fateful fishing trip with Mr Mewton a visitor who went for the trip.

William went down to the harbour as was his custom early on that fateful Saturday morning even though he knew by then that they would not return. His concerned son-in-law saw that he went back home. All the brothers were on board. Tom, Perkins, John Henry, Billy, Ralph and Gilbert, all good fishermen who knew their job on the boat and worked together to make the 'Energetic, an efficient fishing boat.

As they were riding their nets in the Channel, out of the fog came the American 7218 ton tanker, the 'Chrysanthy Star'. She was bound for Curacao in the West Indies. She was travelling so fast it was too late to take evasive action and the tragic collision resulted.

All the brothers were married with families at the time of the accident. Billy was 59 and left a wife two sons and a daughter. Gilbert was 56 and left a wife and two sons . John Henry (skipper) was 55 and left a wife and one son. Tom was 51 and left a wife and two sons. Perkins was 39 and left a wife and two sons.

William Leroy Mewton was 61 and left a wife and 2 daughters (a native of the district who was on holiday but also a life long friend of the brothers) He was alive when plucked from the sea but never regained consciousness. When Mr Mewton died on the tanker the Master needed to land the body. If he came within British Territorial Waters or docked, his vessel would have been 'impounded' and subject to British Jurisdiction and consequent delay. So he radioed for the lifeboat from the Scilly Isles to meet his ship and take off the body of Mr Mewton and Ralph.

Ralph was convinced that but for this death the tanker would have continued on her way and he would have been landed in the West Indies. In which case there would have been a considerable delay before he could have been reunited with his family and confirmed what happened to his brothers.

Ralph was 43 with a wife and two daughters at the time of the accident. The sole survivor. He never went to sea again.

Three sisters Loveday, Evelyn and Elizabeth were all married with families and living locally and a brother Jim who was in America were shocked and saddened at the loss of their brothers under such tragic circumstances. There were also a half sister and brother, Marjorie and Bobby.

There was loud knocking on the door until around three o'clock in the morning. This was not a father who had forgotten his key but a grandfather who insisted that his daughter open the door. Overheard snatches of conversation lead to the realisation that all was far from well. Daddy, Daddy the cry of a child not fully awake, for the father who might never return. Similar scenes were experienced in many homes in the village that Saturday morning.

William the heartbroken father, was devastated by his loss. Five sons taken from him in one night so suddenly and all in their prime of life. On the Sunday morning, William's son-in-law and granddaughter called to bring him comfort and news of Ralph, his son. During the visit, his eyes blurred by tears, he requested his granddaughter to read him a particular hymn which contained the words 'Yes, God is good'. When she had finished reading, he said, "In spite of everything, I can still believe God is good". Words of a man of God whose faith remained unshaken even in his darkest hours. The news of a visit from his son Jim from America on compassionate leave from his firm helped to lighten those early days.

The harrowing experience took its toll on this 85-year-old and just nine months later the family were again plunged into mourning. William passed away and, on his deathbed, his last thoughts and words were of his sons. He was laid to rest with his wife in the Porthleven cemetery. As a lasting memorial, their headstone bears not only the names of the mother and father but also their five sons who were lost at sea. The poignant inscription reads "they that sow in tears shall reap in joy".

Ralph wrote about the accident sometime after the event. His words are simple and to the point but there is a mountain of emotion in the story. The tragedy is even greater for those who were left behind to live without their brothers, fathers or uncles.

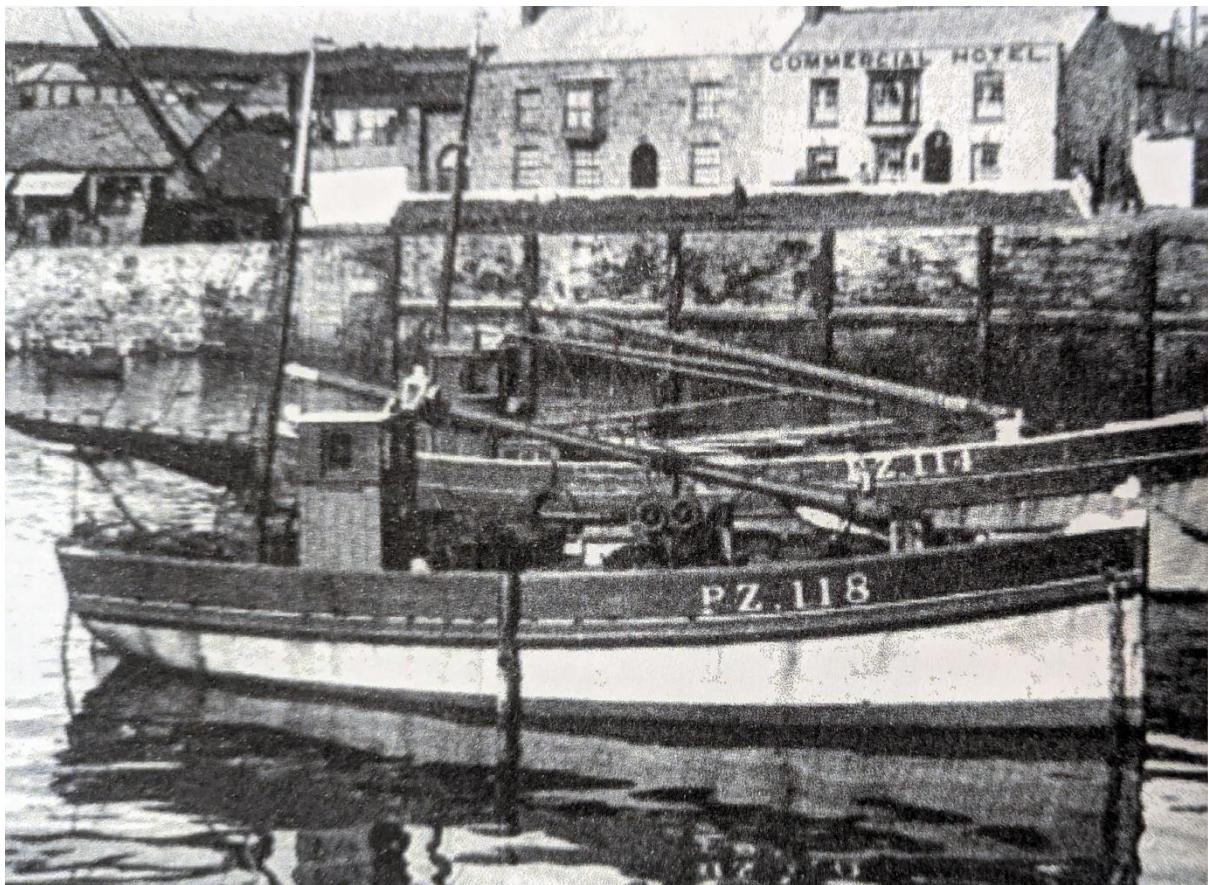
The tragedy was reported in; The Falmouth Packet July 2 1948, Western Morning News 28 June 1948, 30 June 1948. News of the world 27 June 1948. West Briton 1 July 1948. Daily Express 28 June 1948. The Cornishman 1 July 1948



PZ 114 ENERGETIC



THE LOSS OF THE ENERGETIC



Below is an account, told by the sole survivor.

At a quarter past six on the 25th June 1948, on a lovely summer's evening, we left our little home port of Porthleven, after having bid farewell to our loved ones, and telling them to expect us back tomorrow at midday.

We were in company with four or five other boats which comprised the long-line fleet. As we left the harbour and proceeded in a south westerly direction, we could see at a distance a bank of fog and after we had been on our way for an hour we entered into this dense fog; at first we thought it might have been patchy but after having continued for an hour and half longer, we came to the conclusion that it must be widespread.

By this time we had gone far enough and were in a position to shoot our bait nets.

Before doing this, however, we discussed between ourselves the advisability of shooting our nets immediately or whether to wait a while to see if the fog would lift before darkness fell.

The decision hung in the balance for some little time but at last we decided it would be as well to shoot right away. It is needless for me to say how important that decision proved to be.

At this time we were all inwardly conscious of our danger, and were sounding our fog horn at frequent intervals; then we put on our lights and were all on deck waiting for darkness to fall so that we could pull in our nets.

In the meantime, we had heard two or three steamers pass down some distance from us, but now we could hear one approaching from the south east and, by the sound of its fog horn, we had the feeling that it was coming towards us and might come very near us, so we lit a flare and continuously sounded the fog-horn.

Not being under power, we were helpless to anything more, but still the ship came on and on, and at last we saw her break through the fog about 300 yards from us, and coming straight for us.

We did everything in our power to draw attention to our presence, all to no avail, and we now realised that nothing could be done to avoid a collision.

As a crew we now parted company; three of us went forward in the bows and the rest of stayed aft – I never saw them again. All we could do now was wait for the moment of impact. The suspense was terrible and I can see it all happening now. Crash! Into our side went the steamer, its bows going in about a third of the way and pushing us down on an even keel.

The sea was rushing from aft towards us, and the next moment I was going down under the water, seemingly for ages, being drawn down and down by the suction from the boat. While under water I became unconscious of the fact that I was holding something in my right hand. It was a canvas buoy, a float we used on our gear. Just how I came to be in possession of it, I don't know, but it was now drawing me quickly to the surface.

My trip down and up must have been very quick, for when I came to the surface I noticed the steamer had not yet passed by, and the first thought that entered my head was the danger from the ships propellers. So, hanging on to the float, I did my utmost to kick myself away from the ships side.

I remember at this time being conscious of one of my brother being close at hand fighting for his life, but only for a moment for the sea was in a turmoil and he was soon dragged down, never to appear above the surface again.

I was continually being drawn down under water, but after a while the sea became calm and I was able to open my eyes and look around; at once I saw our shooting roller within easy reach of me, I grasped this, and at the same moment I realised that all of the air had gone out of the canvas float onto which I had been holding; I let it go for it was no further use to me.

The spar to which I now clung proved a very insufficient means of support; I kept going down and up and when I was under, because of its circular shape and the motion of the sea, it was inclined to roll away from me, and I had great difficulty in holding on to it.

Then it was that I heard the last dying gasp of one of my brothers and I realised within myself that they were all gone and I was the only one left.

As the full force of this broke upon me, I was overwhelmed and sorely tempted to let go; it seemed far easier for me to die rather than to live. But the Lord bought before me a vision of my wife and two dear children and I pictured all that my loss would mean to them, and so I clung fast. Three times I was sorely tempted to let go, but each time the Lord bought the same vision before me.

It was at this time that I looked around me once more and there I saw, again within my reach one of our dabs which is made of cork with a 12 or 14 foot staff up through the middle of it; This we used as a mark attached to our long lines.

Drawing this toward me, I placed my feet around the bottom and my arms around the top and felt fairly well supported in the water. Then I unlaced my boots and kicked them off.

I now had time to consider my position; I was out in the ocean, 10 miles from the nearest land, surrounded by a thick fog; I thought that the steamer which has sunk us had continued on its way, ignorant of the tragedy, and I felt alone in this ocean of sea. How long would I be able to hold out?

As I thought of my hopeless position I lifted up my heart to the Lord crying out aloud, "Oh God, I know that I am thy child, and I am not afraid to die; but if be possible, to bring me out of this!" How long I prayed I have no knowledge but after some time, as I looked towards the west, I saw the mast head lights of a steamer. Not realising that it was the same ship that had collided with us but thinking it was another steamer, I commenced shouting, "Help! Help! Help!"

After some little time I heard a voice directly behind me saying "Hold on old timer – we are coming!" The next moment I was taken aboard the ships lifeboat and, as I felt someone cutting away my clothes, I became unconscious.

I regained consciousness to find myself in the ships hospital being force to drink hot milk and coffee and being given a continual renewal of hot blankets. Another stretcher was wheeled into the sick bay and upon it lay Mr Mewton who had gone to sea with us for a pleasure trip. He was unconscious but still alive, and the second mate of the ship commenced artificial respiration at once.

This continued for about five hours, then one of the crew told me they would like to take me to another room; I knew the reason for this – Mr Mewton had gone beyond all human aid. You can imagine something of what I passed through as I passed through in the ship all night and well into the next day, wondering how, when and where I would get ashore and how I was going to face my brothers' widows and fatherless children, and my poor aged father. Continually I cried to God to see me through.

At midday, after being given a spare set of clothing, I was taken off the ship by a lifeboat from the Scilly Isles and into the same boat was lowered the body of Mr Mewton. It took us three hours to reach St Mary's harbour, and here I was interviewed by the Customs Officer, and had to go through the ordeal of giving a detailed account of all that had happened; But God's presence was very deep within me, and it was a strength and power outside of myself which was bearing me up.

My ordeal was not yet complete, for I was taken away by the Police Officer to the mortuary to identify Mr Mewton's body and from there to the inquest. But God was true to His promise, and was with me during this experience. It was now half-past four and the little steamer which plies between the Isles of Scilly and the mainland was due to leave for Penzance.

We steamed into the harbour at eight o'clock; there was a great crowd there to meet me, amongst them were many loved ones including, of course, my wife, Pastor and Mrs Matthews and a number of Church members were also there.

After reaching home my Doctor came and amongst the questions he asked me was, if I had taken in any sea water. I told him that I did not remember having taken a spoonful, and after examination he was amazed to find this was true, particularly taking into consideration the fact of my not being able to swim and being submerged under water so much – but I know it was God who was keeping me.

The following day was a trying ordeal for me when a number of my nephews and nieces visited me.

Many times during this experience the enemy had led me to the very brink and depths of despair but God, Praise His Name, kept me though it all; and He that has kept, I am confident, will keep, and it is to God that I give all of the glory for preserving me.

Ralph Richards (Sole survivor of the Porthleven fishing boat Energetic.)

The Ralph that left Porthleven on the fateful Friday evening was not the same person who returned on that Saturday night. One cannot endure such a traumatic experience and remain unchanged by the event.

Early on the Sunday morning Ralph spoke of the tragic event of the previous days to his brother-in-law and niece who vividly remembers her uncle asking for her prayers. One by one his nephews came and all through the day over and over again Ralph recounted the events of that fateful night to each in turn. A harrowing experience on top of the dreadful ordeal he had witnessed. Perhaps one of the most heartbreaking meetings was the visit of his father on the following Tuesday.

Ralph never spoke of this occasion. Ralph had lost his five brothers, his partners with whom he had spent each working day and many a night. His livelihood was gone as was his way of life.

In the following years the love and support of his remaining close family saw him through those dark lonely days. In this time of need he found strength in the help of his brother-in-law, Hendy (Matthews) who became his adviser, his confidant sharing his burdens and problems.


Porthleven
Fore Street Methodist Church

SUNDAY, JULY 25th, 1948
3.0 P.M.

In Memoriam

WILLIAM RICHARDS,
GILBERT RICHARDS,
JOHN HENRY RICHARDS,
THOMAS RICHARDS,
PERKINS RICHARDS,

who set sail in their boat "Energetic" with their Friend
WILLIAM LEROY MEWTON,
on the Evening of Friday, June 25th, but did not return.

In life united; in death undivided.

Order of Service

* * *

ORGAN: "I know that my Redeemer Liveth."

HYMN.

NOW I have found the ground wherein
Safely my soul's anchor can remain—
The wounds of Jesus for my sin
Before the world's foundation stain;
Whose mercy shall unshaken stay,
When heaven and earth are fled away.

Though waves and storms go o'er my
head,
Though strength, and health, and friends
be gone,
Though eyes be withered all and dead,
Though every comfort be withdrawn,
On this my steadfast soul relies;
Father, Thy mercy never dies!

Fixed on this ground will I remain,
Though my heart fail and flesh decay;
The anchor shuns my soul's sustain,
When earthly foundations melt away;
Mercy's full power I then shall prove,
Loved with an everlasting love.

SCRIPTURE: Luke V, 1-17; Mark IV, 35-41;
John XXI, 1-12; Rev. XXI, 1.

HYMN.

FLIERCE raged the tempest o'er the deep,
Watch did Thine anxious servants
keep,
But Thou wast wrapped in guiltless sleep.

Calm and still,
"Save, Lord; we perish!" was their cry.
'Oh, save us in our agony!
Thy word above the storm rose high,—
"Peace, be still!"

The wild winds hushed, the angry deep
Sank, like a little child, to sleep.
The sullen billows ceased to leap,
At Thy will.

So, when our life is clouded o'er,
And storm-winds drift us from the
shore,
Say, lest we sink to rise no more,
"Peace, be still!"

PRAYER: Lord's Prayer.

HYMN.

YESUS, Saviour pilot me
Over life's tempestuous sea;
Unknown waves before me roll,
Holding rock and treacherous shoal;
Chart and compass come from thee;
Jesus, Saviour, pilot me.

As a Mother still a Child,
Thou canst hush the ocean wild;
Boisterous waves obey Thy will;
When thou sayest to them "Be still";
Wonderous Sovereign of the sea,
Jesus, Saviour, pilot me.

When, at last, I reach the shore,
And the fearful breakers roar
"Twixt me and the peaceful rest,
Then, while leaning on Thy breast,
May I hear Thee say to me,
"Fear not, I will pilot Thee."

ADDRESS.

HYMN.

O LORD, be with us when we sail
Upon the lonely deep,
Our guard when on the silent deck
The midnight watch we keep.

The calm, the breeze, the gale, the storm,
That pass from land to land,
All are Thine, are held within
The hollow of Thine hand.

So when the fiercer storms arise
From Man's troubled will,
Be Thou, Lord, present in our hearts,
To whisper, peace be still!

Across this troubled tide of life
Thyself our pilot be,
Until we reach that better land,
The land that knows no sea.

ORGAN: "Crossing the Bar"

BENEDICTION.

"Sleep after toil; rest after stormy seas."

Printed by W. T. ROGERS & CONGREGATIONAL ST. METHODIST

A thousand people attended the memorial service which was held on the 25th July 1948 at the Porthleven Methodist Church.

The chapel was full, and fishermen from local ports joined those of Porthleven. Other fishing organisations were also represented. Local dignitaries joined the men and women of the village to pay their last respects and to show their sympathy to the bereaved families.

Special seats were set aside for the families. Their sorrowing father, William, was unable to attend.

This was again a very trying time for Ralph. The confusion of his thoughts and feeling at this difficult occasion. His loss of his brothers and the nagging question 'why me'. They had set off together on a routine night's fishing and yet Ralph was the only one to return, alone, in every sense of the word. After the service at his home, he was totally overwhelmed with grief and despair. Some years after their father's death the senior members of the family felt they would like a memorial to their father and brothers. Quietly and with dignity they arranged to purchase a banner for the Methodist Chapel where their family worshipped. On it is depicted a picture of the Lord Jesus lifting Peter above the waves.

Surely there can be no more fitting symbol of remembrance for "men who went down to the sea in ships" and who had helped to carry similar banners around the village each St. Peter's Tide. Life was never quite the same for Ralph and his family. The aftermath of the events of that Friday and Saturday left a deep scar. Nightmares, sleepless nights, and reliving the event were interspersed with extreme bouts of sadness and an obsession with the sea, although never ever contemplating going on another fishing trip.

Charges of negligence arising from the collision were heard by a United States Coast Guard Board of Inquiry in New York against Captain Fredereick Sundlof, Master of the Chrysanthy Star.

He was charged with excessive speed in fog and failure to supervise properly the crew of the vessel. He was alleged to have left the bridge in charge of an unlicensed seaman, thereby contributing to the collision with the Energetic. He was found guilty and lost his Master's Ticket for a period of time.

The years passed, life moved on and Ralph lived to be eighty. Almost half of his life was lived under the dreadful shadow of the tragic loss of his brothers. Even after all those years each moment was as vivid in his mind as when the accident happened.

Perhaps over fifty years later it could be said that for Ralph, it may have been easier to have died with the Energetic than to have lived with its loss and the inherent sadness that it brought.

These precious memories and treasured mementoes of the Richards family have been gathered together in order to ensure that the richness of their lives, and the enormity of their loss, will never be forgotten.

