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The Iolaire

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If you were to mention the name ‘Iolaire’ to most islanders in Lewis and Harris you would be met with a very sombre expression. But what was the Iolaire and almost one hundred years on why does its mere mention leave people feeling this way?

The Iolaire was an Admiralty yacht which was built in 1881 and named the ‘Amalthea’ but it was later named the ‘Iolaire’. The loss of the Iolaire in the early hours of New Year’s Day 1919 is the most tragic single occurrence to befall Lewis and Harris. The Iolaire was carrying sailors who had fought in the First World War back to the island of Lewis. She left the port of Kyle of Lochalsh, on the mainland, late on the evening of the 31 December 1918. **But, at 2:30am on New Year's Day, as the ship approached the port of Stornoway, a few yards offshore and a mile away from the safety of Stornoway Harbour, she hit the infamous rocks "The Beasts of Holm", and eventually sank.** In all 174 Lewismen and seven Harrismen were drowned at the Beasts of Holm.

The Iolaire features in many poems, song and literature relating to the island.

What makes the tragedy so severe was that Armistice had been declared just six weeks earlier and these sailors were coming home for the first time since the end of the war ready to start new lives and put the horrors of war behind them. To have survived four years of war and to be drowned within sight of their homeland adds to the tragedy. Lewis has lost over one thousand of its young in the war itself and this was another massive blow. There was scarcely a house in the island that was not affected by the loss. Horses and carts came from all over the island to collect their dead – many of which were washed up on the shores of Sandwich shore, on the outskirts of Stornoway. One third of those who were lost were claimed by the sea and families were not able to bury their dead.

The stories of the some of the survivors of the tragedy are especially poignant.

John F MacLeod of Port of Ness helped most of the survivors by securing a line from the sinking ship to the rocks. One sailor, Donald Morrison, also from Ness, spent the night clinging onto the mast of the ship. But what happened on the night? Many rumours went round the island in the months and years surrounding the tragedy that the crew had been drinking. The crew were on a new route and it is widely known that the route into Stornoway requires skill. Although they may have made a mistake it was never proved that they acted negligently.

The loss of the Iolaire left a lasting cloud over Lewis and Harris – a cloud which took many generations to lift. Children were left without fathers and some mothers lost more than one child when the ship sank. It is important that we remember this event which changed the history of our island.

Timeline

Frise

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Games

Activities

1. Research any songs and poems relating to the loss of the Iolaire.
2. Find out by asking family or local members of your community if your village or community suffered losses in the tragedy. Write a report.

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