

MARITIME CATASTROPHES, THEIR ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND DOCUMENTARY LEGACIES: WITH REFLECTIONS ON THE CENTENARY OF THE SHETLAND FISHERIES DISASTER OF 1881

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Those of us who work on the archaeology of shipwrecks are sometimes struck by the vividness of the insights that our excavations on the seabed can give us into lives that have otherwise escaped historical record. The 'time-capsule' of the wreck, with the ship's life stopped so abruptly at the moment of foundering, can yield details that are poignant reminders that our academic harvest, no less than that of "the caller herrin", represents "lives o' men". As archaeologists, we tend to batten professionally on other people's disasters. Indeed, only too often the completeness of the information that is available to us from a site reflects the comprehensiveness of the catastrophe that overwhelmed the people we seek to study.

On land, on discovering post-holes filled with charcoal, excavators who wish their reputation for professional objectivity to remain unimpugned find no difficulty in suppressing (even to themselves) any feeling of identification with those on whom the burning hut fell. At sea, it is less easy to avoid a degree of imaginative involvement with those who suffered the catastrophe we study. Perhaps it is also less advisable. Archaeologists working from small boats around the reefs and skerries that have been the sites of past disasters do well to keep their weather eyes lifted, and put their minds actively to thinking as seamen. Those who do not are hardly likely to remain 'dry academics' for long, and there has already been more than one case of an expedition inadvertently adding its vessel to the corpus of material for study by future generations of underwater archaeologists...

The basic realities of sensible small boat seamanship transcend time, and make a measure of personal identification with seamen of former days an inevitable and necessary part of this kind of work. Practical experience of boat-handling problems can yield insights that would be difficult to gain merely by studying maritime archaeological material in the museum or library. However, even when we can use craft closely analogous to those we wish to study (or actually reconstruct replicas)

we have to be very clear that this identification can never be complete. As academics afloat though we may be among the hornier handed of the scholarly brethern, we have no claim to the skills and judgement of those brought up in a tradition of professional seamanship. Certainly, we may learn salutary lessons when it comes on to blow while we are 'out by aist' off Bruray in a fourareen. Nonetheless it still takes an act of imagination to view ocean and weather in the perspective of the fishermen, whose perception of conditions has always involved the routine (though certainly not off-hand) offsetting of maritime dangers against the prosperity of the families who depended upon them.

Thus, as in so many aspects of archaeology, even when dealing with the relatively recent past we can not but be aware of the limitations of the mute testimony offered by artifacts when we are reduced to regarding these in isolation. This is not least so with things such as boats, whose structures bear messages that may be both subtle and complex to interpret. Any alternative sources that offer first-hand evidence on the communities that used them and on the attitudes and actual methods of their crews can be most enlightening.

Some literary sources give vivid pictures of certain aspects of seafaring communities. The Sagas for example abound in anecdotes that tell us much about the men who sailed the ships, and about exploits that they accomplished with them. However, one is likely to be disappointed if one turns to the Sagas seeking to supplement the picture gained from archaeology in order to understand in specific terms just how they rigged and handled their ships. Nuggets of information are certainly there, but to the Saga writers the portrayal of personality was understandably of greater interest than the systematic detailing of how the Vikings rigged and operated their various kinds of vessels. Although these subjects intrigue at least some of us in the 20th century, to their contemporary audience, they were the most mundane of matters.

Just as the catastrophic event often provides us with valuable physical evidence, so too does disaster lead to documentation. Thus while a routine trip back from Bergen would probably have been dismissed in a line, the wrecking of Rognvald lifted it out of the mundane and the whole voyage is described in some detail in Orkneyinga Saga. In the same way, 17th and 18th century Courts Martial on officers who lost their ships record technical details of ship

handling procedure more explicitly than accounts of voyages that proceeded according to plan.

Even a near disaster can provoke a written account, giving an informative glimpse of the way of life that was its context, and recording workaday practices that would not of themselves otherwise have entered the contemporary written record. Again, Rognvald provides a convenient example of this, with his incompetent incognito excursion into the Roost off Sumburgh Head. That account goes far to confirm that the Viking inhabitants of Dunrossness exploited the rich fishing where the eddies of the tide race mix the waters, by using much the same methods as the yole fishermen who have been their recent successors (Morrison, 1973).

The occasional yole is still to be seen off Sumburgh Head, working the edge of the Roost. Though nowadays it is more likely to be using an outboard than to be under oars, the special technique of fishing there (with lines drifting into the turbulence, while the boat keeps clear) continues the long-standing local tradition, and owes no more than the motor to the land of Yamaha.

Thus, even some of the more specialised tricks of the trade derived from the days of oar and sail have survived into the 1980s. However, this is among the men who fish from small boats immediately inshore, using the last of the yoles, or fourareens and their modern equivalents in size. The situation is very different when the mainstream of the Shetland fishing industry is considered. Here we are still in a world of high skills, but one in which the high technology of Decca and Sonar is now deeply established, and in which the seamanship has essentially been that of powered vessels (steam then diesel) for most of this century. As Goodlad (1971) documented, the whole pattern of the industry has undergone not one but several radical changes since the days that we think of as being the epitome of the type of traditional fishery most specifically characteristic of Shetland:— that of the sail fishermen working ‘da far Haaf’ in sixareens.

Although the stripped-out hulls of a few were still in use afloat as ‘flit boats’ (lighters) well after the second World War, the sixareen’s period as a major type of fishing boat is already so far behind us that those who could have told us from actual first-hand experience just how they were operated in their heyday have now passed on. Valuable

information is happily still being gathered in Shetland from people who knew the boats and the men who had sailed them in their latter days, but it is already almost a century since the sixareen went into decline.

The way that this type of vessel evolved in Shetland hands through the 18th and 19th centuries has been outlined by Henderson (1978) and Goodlad (op.cit.), among others. As Tom Henderson succinctly put it: when the pattern of the fishing moved offshore in the mid-18th century, accidents had become common among the small yoles; so there emerged “a craft larger, heavier, deeper, deliberately designed for the far haaf, the deep-sea fishing grounds of the open ocean ... a boat which is Shetland’s own ...” (p. 55).

They were however essentially boats for long-lining for whitefish, and they did not adapt well to drifting for herring. They could only carry ten or twelve nets, and the homeward trip in the open boat with its lively motion (and bailing going on with the shovel) tended to scour and scale the herrings, reducing their market value for the salt cure customary for them. Already by the 1870s the Shetlanders were showing interest in the type of herring fishing that could be carried out with much more extensive fleets of drift nets by larger decked boats, such as those from the Scottish East Coast. The Truck Commission report of 1872 emancipated the farmer-fisherman of Shetland financially, setting them free to go to any fishing they preferred, and the up-turn in the fortunes of the herring fisheries relative to the whitefish at that time drew many of them. The Crofter’s Holding Act of 1886 by doing much to guarantee their security of tenure on land, freed them even further from the social and economic pattern which had tended to tie them to the haaf fishing and the sixareen.

Another factor in the move to larger decked vessels was the loss of men and boats in the gales of 1881. Nearly two hundred and fifty men died in two incidents alone. One of these was in the autumn, and involved the fishermen of Eyemouth and Burnmouth. Forty-five boats were out when the gale struck on the 14th of October, and of the twenty-six that got back, many had lost men overboard. In all, one hundred and eighty-nine drowned that day. The desirability of greater safety margins was all too evident, so although the boats involved there were not sixareens, the message was clear. In the Shetland gale of the night of 13-14th July, ten sixareens and fifty-eight men had been lost.

This was not the first time that a sudden summer storm had brought a tragedy of major proportions to the sixareens: almost exactly half a century earlier, seventeen sixareens with around a hundred and ninety-five men perished in the gale of 16th July 1832. At that time, confidence in the suitability of the open sixareen for deep-sea fishing tens of miles offshore very understandably declined, but although there was then some move towards heavier and at least partially decked boats, the total 'operational envelope' did not then permit this to go very far. Certainly, the economic organisation of the fisheries prior to the 1872 and 1886 acts tended to constrain many fishermen to working with inexpensive boats that were light enough to beach. As long as this remained so, the sixareen did at least offer them (as Tom Henderson has put it: *op.cit.* p. 55) "one of the ablest open craft of her size ever designed by man", in skilled hands capable of surviving anything short of conditions that were actually catastrophic.

The sixareen has been described as the most economical fishing craft the Isles ever saw (Halcrow 1950). Building, equipment and running costs were small, and the fish was cured in the open by local labour. The point about beaching was also an important one in ensuring that sixareens continued to be used. It was not only that a light boat that would pull well was highly desirable when it was the common practice to row for miles up-wind to reach the offshore fishing 'meads'. Since the customary organisation of the 18th and 19th century Shetland fisheries involved sun- and wind-drying the catches, rather than wet salt-curing, this influenced the choice of the fishing stations.

Charles Sandison of Unst (1954) has emphasised that this was so important that where the choice lay between a secure anchorage and a good drying beach, the latter might be preferred even though the boats had to be hauled out for safety between each trip. Since the crew might well have to do this for themselves, everything that could be made removable was made so, and the boat builders used considerable skill in exploiting the potential of Scandinavian style clinker building for securing strength through resilience to keep the basic structure as light as possible (e.g. see Morrison 1978). The bare hull of a sixareen weighed no more than 0.8 ton, though in fishing trim she would displace around 3 tons. To add a deck would not only add weight, but change the character of the resilience around which the highly developed tradition of structural design was centred. When it was eventually tried, the result was dismissed roundly by Captain Halcrow

as “that impossible combination, a decked sixeern replete with oars and sail...” (1950, p. 83).

The Shetland sail fishermen thus evolved skills that allowed them to earn their living far offshore despite the limitations of their craft, offsetting the undoubted dangers of the sixareens’ small size and openness by exploiting their particular qualities as seaboats to the full. When the North Atlantic weather turned against them, long distances had to be run in heavy seas, with a tiring crew weakened by exposure. Then the approach to shore on Shetland’s iron-bound coastline brought its own perils, with tide strings, breaking cross-seas and half-hidden reefs complicating the entrance to most of the safe havens. To keep a family by working fishing grounds fifteen or thirty miles off, week in week out, in open craft just 18 to 22 foot on the keel (say 25 to 30 foot overall) demanded an especial blend of judgement with boldness. It was said that the sixareen was “a wise man’s weapon” (whereas some Shetlanders claimed that the big decked smacks from the south “could be run by an old woman”!).

These skills were learnt by example and practical experience. Boys joined the sixareens crews very young, and learnt by watching and listening to their elders. There were certainly no Manuals of Seamanship written particularly for them, like those that have come down to us from the contemporary Naval and Merchant services. And having learnt their craft, like most other professional seamen before them (including their Viking forebears...) they practiced it without ordinarily feeling any urge to detail their methods on paper. Once more therefore, if we seek the first hand testimony of a participant, we must turn to an account written under the stimulous of an extraordinary event.

The storm of 13-14th July, 1881, provoked just such an account, and besides giving a vivid impression of what it was like to be out on that particular night, the narrative offers a rare insight into the workaday attitudes and procedures of those who knew how to keep the seas in heavy weather in Shetland’s most characteristic kind of fishing craft. Of all the generations of men who fished from sixareens in the 18th and 19th centuries, only Charles Johnson of Toam, North Roe, seems to have reached print with his experiences. His account was published in Manson’s Shetland Almanac and Directory to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the catastrophe, and later figured in Captain Halcrow’s

book (op.cit.), but it deserves to be better known, so it seems fitting to draw it to wider attention now that we have reached the centenary of the event.

The version presented here has been edited with explanatory notes. Small changes of order have been made with the aim of clarifying aspects of the handling of the boat, but the original text may be inspected in the Almanac.

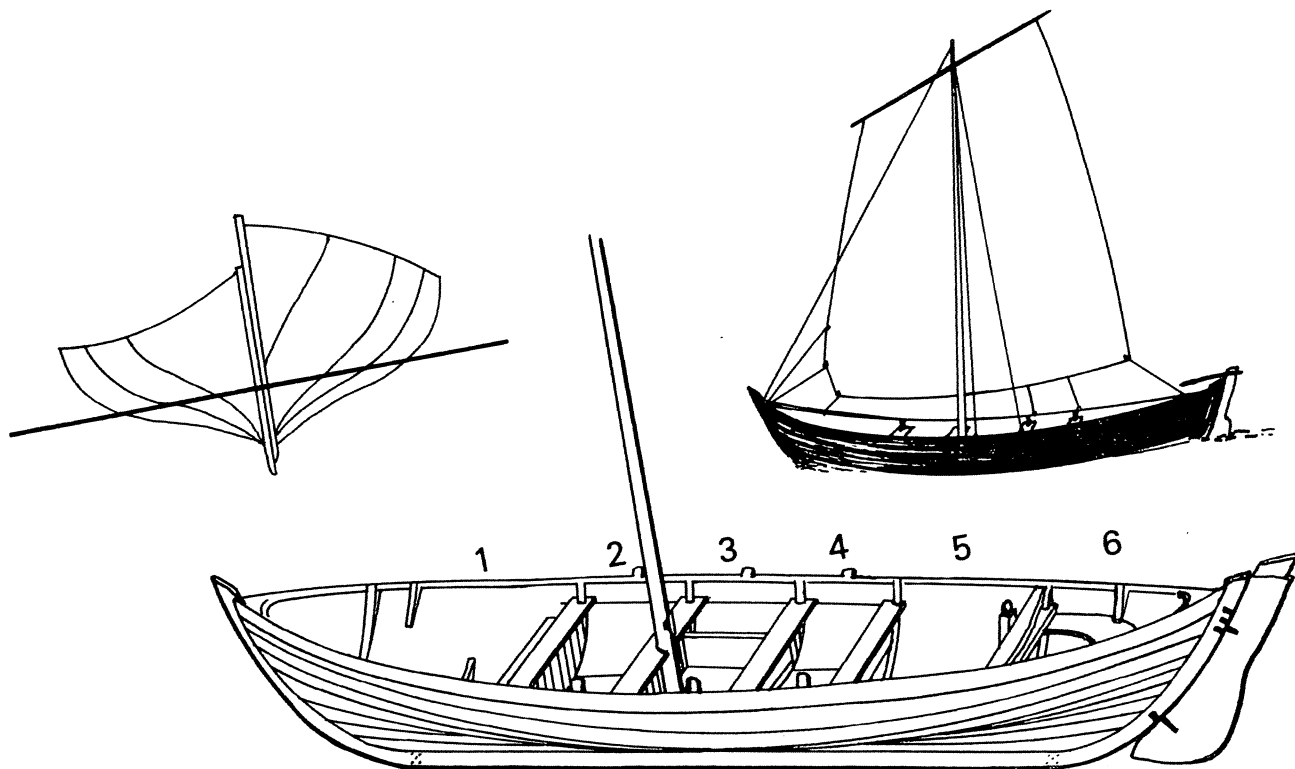
THE SIXAREEN

An understanding of the layout of the boat is necessary in order to appreciate the points that Johnson makes in his narrative. The sixareen in which he sailed was one of the larger ones, and was thus probably about 30 foot (9 metres) long overall. Charles and Duncan Sandison of Baltasound quote the following proportions as typical for a sixareen of that size and period (1954, p. 294):—

Overall length	30ft 0in;	Waterline	26ft 9in
Beam	8ft 1in;	Waterline Beam	7ft 1in
	Draft amidship	2ft 4in;	
Freeboard:—	forward 3ft 8in;	midships 1ft 10in;	aft 2ft 6in

Thus, though more substantial than the yoles used inshore, the beaching requirement and the desire for a craft that could be rowed for long distances kept the sixareen a very shallow draught boat in which to venture so far out into the Atlantic. Note that the freeboard amidships is little more than half a metre (1ft 10in = ca 55cm). This meant that not only the handling of the boat but the way that she was trimmed could be critical in heavy weather. Some stone ballast was taken to sea in the empty boat, but permanent ballast was not used since there was not the capacity for this plus a payload of fish. The stones were therefore dumped as the catch built up.

Weight for weight fish ballast had additional advantages over stone or iron, because of its lower density. Not only did it avoid the problem of localised stresses on the thin planks and lightweight structure of the boat, but the very bulk of the fish in the open boat could prevent her from taking in a great enough weight of water to swamp her if a heavy sea broke aboard or she was run gunwale under. Johnson's account brings out how vital the management of the cargo of fish could be:



IAN A. MORRISON

1: Fore-head
4: Owse-room

2: Fore-room
5: Shott

3: Mid-room
6: Cuddie or Shott-hole

deciding just what weight could (indeed, must) be carried in the sea and wind conditions that were building up; disposing it to best advantage for the particular point of sailing that their course demanded; and keeping it in place despite the motion of the boat and waves breaking over it.

In traditional terminology, the sixareen was divided into 'rooms', by the 'tafts' or thwarts set on its main 'baunds' (frames). Most of the ballast ordinarily went into the fore room, immediately ahead of the mast where the beam was greatest, but in the narrative that follows it will be found that the skipper considered it best to keep rather more weight aft in the 'shott' than young Charles Johnson expected. The fish were controlled in several ways. There were fixed gratings ('fiskabrods') beneath the tafts which prevented them from moving fore-and-aft, while not damming up water that came aboard. The water had to be free to distribute itself along the length of the boat, if the trim was not to be disastrously upset, and it had also to make its way promptly to those at the bailing stations. Moveable boards could also be rigged parallel with the keel, to prevent the cargo shifting sideways as the boat tacked. Gear and the largest fish (particularly skate and halibut, which can weigh 100kg in Shetland waters) were arranged like roof-shingles on top, to prevent breaking waves from disturbing the load.

Since the seaworthiness of this shallow undecked craft depended on its responsiveness to the waves, rather than on an ability to plough through them, the bow of the sixareen was kept light. The area ahead of the foremost thwart (known as the forehead, or head-room and bow space) was thus kept clear of fish and ballast. The provision locker and small kegs of drinking water were the only major items stowed permanently in that part of the boat. The crew used the space there to bed down in the sail if there was a chance to snatch some sleep. Any cooking was generally done in the next section aft, the wider fore-room proper (between the fore thwart and the mast thwart) using a little cauldron placed on a three-legged iron kettle that held the peat fire.

Immediately aft of the mast (or 'stong') was the mid-room, from which the lines were generally shot (or as Johnson prefers, 'shutt') and hauled, though the crew in the narrative also made use of the following room aft, the 'owse' or 'aust' room. When a sixareen was under sail, the mid-room was the station of the 'tows-man' and his helper,

handling the halliards and controlling from moment to moment the drawing power of the sail. As will become apparent from Johnson's account, their judgement in this could be as critical to the survival of the boat as the skipper's skill at the helm (though the overall strategy of what was attempted remained his responsibility). They kept watch ahead where the sail made a blind spot for the skipper, whilst he had to keep his eye on what was looming up astern. Nevertheless, their coordination had to be complete when running a sea.

The wooden pump was mounted on the bulkhead immediately ahead of the skipper's cuddie, but the main bailing station was next to the mid-room in the owse-room. This was sheathed across the top of the keelson, so as to give a clear swing right across the bottom of the hull for the big wooden bailing shovel, with which the ocean might be scooped rapidly back where it belonged...

Between the owse-room and the cuddie was the run, sometimes called the shott (just as the cuddie was also known as the shott-hole). It was here that most of the fish were stowed by Johnson's crew, to trim their sixareen by the stern for their run home.

CHARLES JOHNSON'S ACCOUNT

(Editorial notes are shown in brackets: cuts are indicated: ...)

We were fishing at Uyea, Northmavine. Our crew was seven – four older men and three youths – my first season as a man in an offshore boat. Three of the older men were our leading men. The other four did not interfere at any time.

(The operational need for very tight discipline if sixareens were to be sailed safely seems to have been reflected in highly structured relationships even within so small a crew: note below how little general discussion there was – even in the early stages when there was clearly time for it – and indeed how the older men sometimes did not bother to reply when they thought a question too obvious; how the skipper sought and received advice from a former skipper in the crew, but how the latter was careful to leave the decision making to the man who carried the ultimate responsibility; and how the skipper later on assumed his personal responsibility to the extent of putting the boat in immediate danger in order to resolve with his own eyes a conflict in the

look-outs reports that might have a crucial effect on his following decisions).

The day referred to (13th July 1881) was an early morning start...astir at five to get a help from the west tide. We were one of three boats who pulled west and off till we got the Ossa through the marks in the Heylor land. These land-marks with the compass led us out a NW. Using eight oars (i.e. every man rowing, the stroke pulling a pair of oars) we pulled nine hours in a smooth sea. We lost sight of the other two boats to the eastard: it was hazy. This would take us off shore about 30 miles on the Ronasvoe fishing ground known to us as the Heylor hills.

We shutt our six lines NW by N, which would reach close on six miles and run down on 96 fathoms water. (These long-lines were fitted with a 4-foot trace carrying a hook at every five fathoms; a 'kappi', a stone sinker attached to a sheepskin buoy, was used to hold down the far end of the fleet of 'baukts' of lines, which were baited with pieces of piltak or haddock as they were thrown. Further sinkers kept each line steady on the bottom and several of these would also be buoyed).

We had a feed, which took less than an hour, and commenced to haul. The tide runs mostly east, so we don't wait for a turn, and if there were fish there might be dogs (i.e. dogfish, which would damage their catch). We got fish at once – very large ling. We hauled three lines to our mid-buoy and sinker – we did not lift that – and had got 180 ling and a scatter of other fish, which filled the boat's shott, level with the toft (thwart).

They say the weather is fine and nothing to show otherways (barometers were not carried in so small boats, so they had to rely on visual observations alone). There is fish here; our hooked fish is not tampered with. We will shutt out these wet lines a NNE. My job at shutting was to cut up fish for bait.

(He remarks later that other crews would not have done this:– "Hauling in part and shutting out was a system some men wrought on when opportunity offered. They had their ideas, such as, if fish is taking at night they may not take in the morning, and midnight is not good for fish in any case – whether a good system or a bad one I am not able to say. It suited us on this occasion as we just had anof [sic: enough] of fish").

We had come well through with our first line when it came a bat of wind from N with a little wet. I said to the men shutting, "Is this a change?" They did not answer me. That passed away and the sea fell flat. Anyone could see it was a change, but no remarks was passed. These men were not careless about the weather: they would think "It's as good to be shutting as doing anything else till the coarse weather comes" (As ever, risk had to be balanced against the necessity of earning their families' living). They did not know when it would come nor where it would come from. The idea was, when these three lines was shutt, we would run down, take time and clean up the fish we had got and put the none-market fish and the refuse that was of use (as bait etc) in a place by itself, so as it could be thrown if need be (i.e. from the start they were assessing their catch as ballast). In hauling, again, we might get more than the boat could carry, or the weather might come coarse that we had to throw fish and the none-market fish would be the first.

We had come a short way through our second line when we heard and saw the weather coming. It struck us about on the bow, and being heavy aft (where they were stowing most of the fish), of course she payed off (i.e. swung round): the sea commenced to rain over us. The two men stopped shutting: me and another youth took their place, and shifting places is take and give a chance to put on oilskins; we started to haul back.

The skipper turned to a man who had been skipper and asked him what he had to say about this. He replied "Making for the land now we will come there in darkness". (Later, Charles Johnson remarks "The good man who mentioned the land and darkness did not mean that we were to stop where we were. His system when in difficulty with his [own] boat was, get under way. His statement meant a lot. Can the skipper face running to a lee shore? Will the idea not interfere with his work in managing the boat? If he could not face it then he meant to propose running to the westward, clear of the land. He did not expect the wind to last long; I was told by people ashore that the wind broke at 1 a.m., us at sea would not notice it..."). These men was cool, and spoke the matter over. We had the two places, the South Wick Uyea and Ronasvoe; the next port Hamnavoe Eshaness and around Eshaness to the Minn. They decided to try back as we had come; which of the two places, the South Wick or Ronasvoe, was not mentioned: it appears that was left to the skipper.

The weather being fine, we were working from the owse-room – a place reserved for bailing water, the mid-room being the working-room proper. We were thus not prepared for bailing, and the breakers was threatening us all around. We could not further manage the boat with oars, and could not haul our lines. (To haul, as one man brought the line in over the side and another took the fish off the hooks, two or more would ‘ando’ to the line i.e. make the necessary slack by rowing the sixareen up the line, against the pressure of wind and tide. This was no longer practicable). We were being blown out of that direction. We had come now to our fished lines, and lifted our mid-buoy and sinker; the fish then floated our lines to the surface: we saw the fish as far as we could see. Our men did not want any more fish: they were satisfied with the boat’s weight and trim, so the lines were cut. (He adds later “I for one was glad when the lines were cut and the boat got her freedom. Put her to do what’s right and then she will do it. It’s no use putting her to what’s seen is too much till the last chance...”).

We could not give the boat a fair chance without a bit of sail (the hull form of the sixareens was not adapted to lying to a sea anchor); when the lines was cut she was put before the wind and we prepared for bailing water. The skipper told us it was 9.30 p.m., and the wind was N by E. When he was ready aft we put up the mast and she commenced her race. (The mast was normally kept down when rowing and working lines, to minimise windage and reduce rolling). We close-reefed the sail, put the tack forat, and two men took the halyards.

The sail was not meant for speed. It’s to set to take her away from the seas, and they will be better able to manage her among the seas having the sail to set. (The big lugsail of the sixareen gave a great deal of lift when running, as well as driving power, and with its set under the constant control of the men on the halliards, it allowed the crew to make the most of the sea-keeping qualities of the light-weight hull, with its marked sheer and fine lines. They could lift the boat forward with surprising acceleration at one moment, then as suddenly relieve the pressure if she was over-pressed).

We then bailed the water out; there was sap in her, not a lot: she had only been taking small wash and sprays. We were lucky we got a chance to get underway and none of that seas to break over us. She goes away all right: she’s foaming at the bows under the bare mast, and when she gets a bit of sail she’s very sore pressed.

To my thinking she's too deep in the water; she could not take more fish aft in any case; but I passed no remark, and to begin with they said the boat was in good trim. (Johnson shows later that he was surprised at the trim that the more experienced men had chosen: "The market fish was one ton, and reckoning on the other [none-market fish] we would have about one ton six hundredweight. I am saying this just to show the weight we had aft. This trimmed through the boat was trifling, but all being aft it put her stern down. I came to find out that that was meant to keep her stern down and not lift too much when she was pressed with the sail". The extent of the loading is brought out when it is remembered that the weight of the bare hull of the sixareen was likely to be less than that of the fish).

The skipper, when we were getting under way, took notice of the wind with the compass – the wind had to be his guide. They did not expect the wind to shift after the first bat. There would be wild steering in any case when the water was going over the boat and flooding the glass of the compass, and no suitable place for it in front of the man steering. In still weather they were all right. In this case steering by compass could not be done.

She was not taking much water – just sprays and wash anof to keep the shovel going in the owse-room. I noticed he run the seas in the weakest parts, what we call the tails, sometimes the first tail, but he often got along to the last tail...being on an easterly tack... Only once did I notice him having to run a sea in the centre. This sea rose very high astern. They pressed her with the sail when the surge came around her, and although the sail was laid down she run in it for a bit – like a field of snow – and took water over both sides. It was not good to look at, but it was only a look. She could not have stood much of that. She took the water from the mast aft to the owse-room, so it came along to the mid- and owse-room, and was not a lot but we were standing on the boddom to the boot-tops in the owse-room. The water could not get aft through the fish; the fish dammed it forat. The boat being heaviest aft, the water all came from forat to the owse-room, so for bailing the shovel could do.

The three men who were managing the boat (i.e. the skipper at the helm and the two halliard men) did not pass any remarks to us nor to one another; they appeared to be quite contented and fairly understood what they were doing. I had been brought up with boating

since I was a child, but this of course was a bit extra... we four who had nothing to do with managing the boat thought we were getting east, as we had to get east, about five miles for South Wick and a much shorter distance for Ronas Voe. Going back the opposite course to that we went would be fatal: we would come down on the Okern Heads. In fact, missing any of these two ports might be fatal...

It would be from about 11 p.m. till it might have been 12, that it was some darker, but not too dark: we could see our surroundings during this time. She took more water, not breaking seas. There was a heavy westerly japp knocking up against her, not too bad, just what we usually call 'lucky lumps', but with that and the sprays the shovel had to be kept going. The breaking seas kept on the same, no better.

After what I thought was passing 12, it was more lighter – we could see much further and thought we would see the low land first. These men did not say when we might see land or what land we might see first.

The skipper, a man of good knowledge, perhaps never was trying for the South Wick, and thought it needless to do so – South Wick is to the westward of the Isle of Uyea. Us noticing how he was doing, and sometimes getting along a bit almost with a beam wind, we thought we were getting east, and expected to see the Isle (of Uyea) first. It was getting lighter, and we could have seen land a good way off, so we looked on the water mostly ahead, and by and by we seen land and report the Isle; it bore forat on the bow to leeward and he stood on it.

To the east'ard of the Isle would be no use; but as luck would have it we seen at once that it was Ossa (i.e. not the Isle of Uyea afterall), and told him. He came back as he was before the wind; then he run a sea and came up with her till the wind was almost abeam. This I did not understand, as we were in a fair way for Ronas Voe (provided it was indeed the Ossa this time). Without any remarks being passed, I came to see that we told him it was the Isle, and now we tell him it's the Ossa – he's come up to try to make sure. (To run in on the wrong part of the lee shore might well prove fatal. With the look-outs changing their minds, the skipper feels he must see for himself, but he cannot leave the helm, and to get the sail out of his own line of sight he has to take a calculated risk, swinging the boat broadside to wind and waves).

He had just well got up when a sea made, as usual in such cases. They gave her the sail, or more sail. He did not run that sea, it was too close on us; he just kept her going; the last tail struck her from the mast and aft. She lay down to this – that's the sail. She had no high side to receive the big knock. It's the only time she's laying down to it since we started. She was submerged where the sea came; I lost sight of the man in the owse-room and the skipper, and as it passed over her he rather kept her away, and the sail was eased. There was a lot of water in the owse-room, and some in the mid-room where the men sat at the sail. The shott could not take water, it was full of fish. The hole-of-the-shott (i.e. the cuddy) where the skipper sat was full: it's a small place. The water from there settles down, runs under the fish and comes in the owse-room.

We had a boddom-board, a little boom, and our mid-buoy on top of the fish; it was washed off. We thought we did not lose any fish. We had a shifting board that ships fore-and-aft the shott and forms a bulks-head; it was always shipped in when we started to haul lines. It is required and its safest in every case when there's fish in the shott, especially when tacking. In this case it would help to stop the water from disturbing the fish and getting underneath the top ones. They were big heavy ling lying fore-and-aft. (i.e. the board held the lower part of the fish cargo stable as the water from the shott hole ran through to the owse-room; thus the upper layers of large ling, laid carefully to keep out the breaking waves, were not undermined). When she was clear of this sea there was not water in her to be excited about: the shovel did it.

I said this last sea was too close on us to be run. Yes – coming from a beam wind to nearly dead before, there's delay in that. In trying to run, the sea would break over the stern and go forat over. Keeping her going there's a chance of getting clear. In this case we got clear to half the boat's length. It's much lighter now and we have had no reason to complain of the darkness. It's not been all times alike, but never what we called darkness...

The last sea I have described appeared to be the last of the breaking seas. We got out of them and saw Ronas Voe more clear. It's high land, so we were still a good way off. There was a change in the sea, but very big rollers. I did not notice the wind any less. (...“I was told by people ashore that the wind broke at 1 a.m., us at sea would not notice it”...). I

went forat under the sail and had a look over the bows, and she was like running over a precipice; but it would settle away underneath her and another one rise in front. I seen we were clear of the breaking seas. I thought that odd, as we were still not in line with the Heads, and they had still to keep the sail low and ease as she fell forat over the sea.

I felt relieved when I seen we were not likely to take any more water. Although we had no reason to complain, any water in the boat is enough. Our men said they were satisfied with the boat's weight. What about taking 12 or 17 cwts of water? (20 cwt = 1 ton). Water in a boat is weight and worse than weight. I would like some people to understand what water in a boat means. These open boats had no bulksheads across them – having that would not work, I suppose. What they had was open grating between rooms or compartments, so that water could pass almost at will from aft to forat or vice-versa. Say a boat had an empty shott and she ships a sea and partly fills the shott and owse-room – she lifts after well, it all seeks forat to the lee bow. Say this happens with a shott half full of fish – it's not so easy bailing water mixed with fish. Then every time the boat rolls the water rolls with her, so in a heavy sea, when up to the boot-tops at the knee, knowing that's in the owse-room and even with only a little in the mid-room, that was as much as I wanted to see, yet she would not be quarter-full.

The skipper kept on for the east side of Ronas Voe in case he might have to run the sea. The sea was very bad on both sides of the entrance; the west side was the worst: it is the most rocky side. When we got inside the Heads he drew into the centre of the entrance and headed on towards the Blade of Heylor (a sandy point projecting from the west side of Ronasvoe). We seen there was a lot of boats there; we came in-about and tied up; we got out; the skipper having a watch told us it was 1.30 a.m. – four hours running in. We were nothing the worse; we had not been afloat twenty-four hours, we had not completed a night's none-rest. True, we had pulled off shore the day before, but in our line that was just an ordinary day's work.

About the distance off shore, all that I am sure about is the time. I would think she made over seven miles an hour of a streight course; I have not thought she made eight. She had no stoppage, only wild steering and foaming almost all the time, and sometimes too sorely pressed... I should have said that the seas out-by was not long seas like what I have seen in other waters; they were short, so we were better

able to get about them. They were very high, and by their noise I thought they were strong. I for one thought it was as bad or the worst we could come through and live, but I had worse to come through, yes, and in an open boat.

(Charles Johnson goes on to analyse why some of the other boats were lost, and as a survivor of that night it is notable that his conclusion in each case is that it is less likely that the men failed than that their sixareens were simply overwhelmed when the dangers of the coastline under their lee forced them to attempt manoeuvres that proved beyond the capacity of open boats. He follows out their probable course in detail, but only his conclusions will be outlined here).

Of a Ronasvoe boat that was lost he writes:—

...he never would put his boat into what he knew she would not stand till the last effort... however, he would see his position. Being in running trim, coming up further than a beam wind would be no use, the boat would not work above that; so to try his last chance – if he gets a chance to do this – would be to set everything light and alter his boat's trim. When that's done...the weather is too much for her:... seas much too heavy for an open boat; she's close reefed, and when he doadges to get to weather of a sea she goes by the broadside...The people ashore blamed the night and darkness...I cannot see the daylight would have saved them. As it was this good man knew perfectly well where he was making for; did his part well the same as those that got in; brought his boat within a stone-throw of his port; but it had not to be.

The Gloup boat that came down our way, her wreck came ashore. There was evidence that she was cast away at sea, not on shore. I have thought a lot about her, and find he would be making for the mouth of Yellsound to the east'ard of the Ramna Stacks...I was told by people ashore that what they saw with the last daylight was it breaking in one sea for the Isle of Uyea to the Ramna Stacks... Yes, he had her at the wind: the bowling was hauled down... He would be shorter round the Isle than the Stacks if she could do it; it would be the last effort keeping her on the same westerly tack, but she could not do it.

But I think by what I have, that she was worked alright, as by what I saw I was of the opinion that she had been struck forat on the bow by a sea. The top of her stem and the gunwale after past the tack were knocked off. This being the case mast and sail would go over the side...It would be then that this good man cut the weather shrouds and

made himself fast in the boat...the shrouds was longer cut than he could reach had they been standing. When she was full of water she would be landed with a sea half-way on a aff-lying rock such as the Cloe...When half on she would be left dry and break in two; the after half, where the body was, would drop to the lee side of the rock. It had not been otherways in contact with the other rocks that could show, and had not been tossing about. If so the body was likely to be hanging over outside. It was just lying in a reclining position in the owse-room, where the shrouds is set on...

If I am right in this good man making for Yellsound I think he did a very wise thing...although this one did not get through, others might and was likely to be all right...So what I think is that this man did not misbehave in any way, but played his part well like others, but just like others, it had not to be.

(That night had seen the loss of ten boats with fifty-eight men. Nevertheless, the life of the fishing community had to go on. Thus even before noon, though 'it was still not fairly settled in the sea outside...', all the sixareens that had found shelter in Ronas Voe were at sea again, heading for home or, like Johnson's crew, to their fishing station to clean their catch).

He remarks: "We have experienced worse, heard and read of as bad and worse, but this summer night of 1881 sticks to me more than any of the other happenings, why I don't know..."

We must be grateful that it did. The fact that the disaster occurred is still widely remembered in Shetland in 1981. However, without the insights offered by these first-hand recollections that the catastrophe led him to set down so vividly, our understanding of the lives, as well as the deaths, of those seamen of a century ago would certainly be shallower.

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