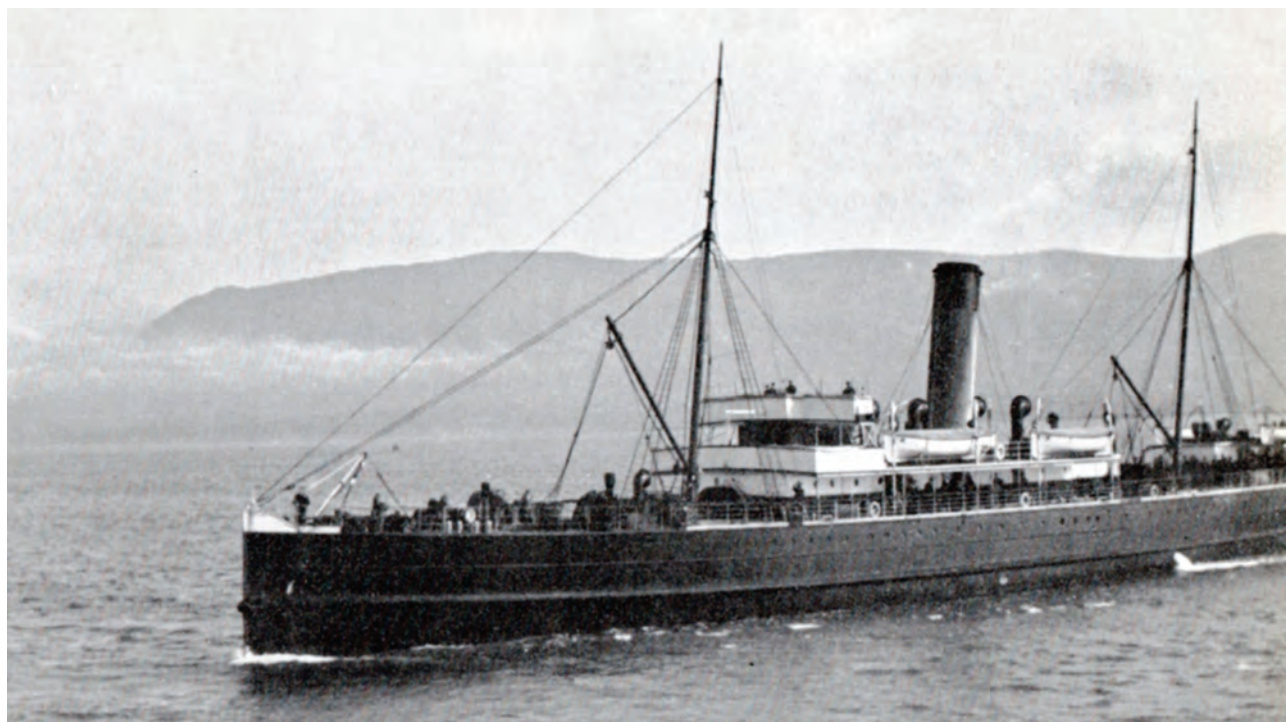


THE GREENORE BOATING TRAGEDY

BY GEORGE BEATTIE

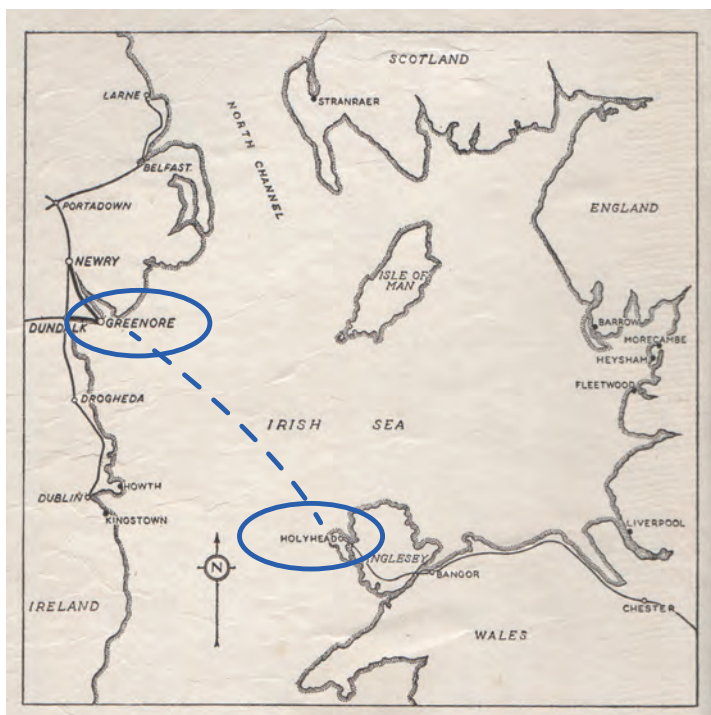


Morning mists on the Mourne Mountains as the S.S. 'Connemara' arrives at Greenore

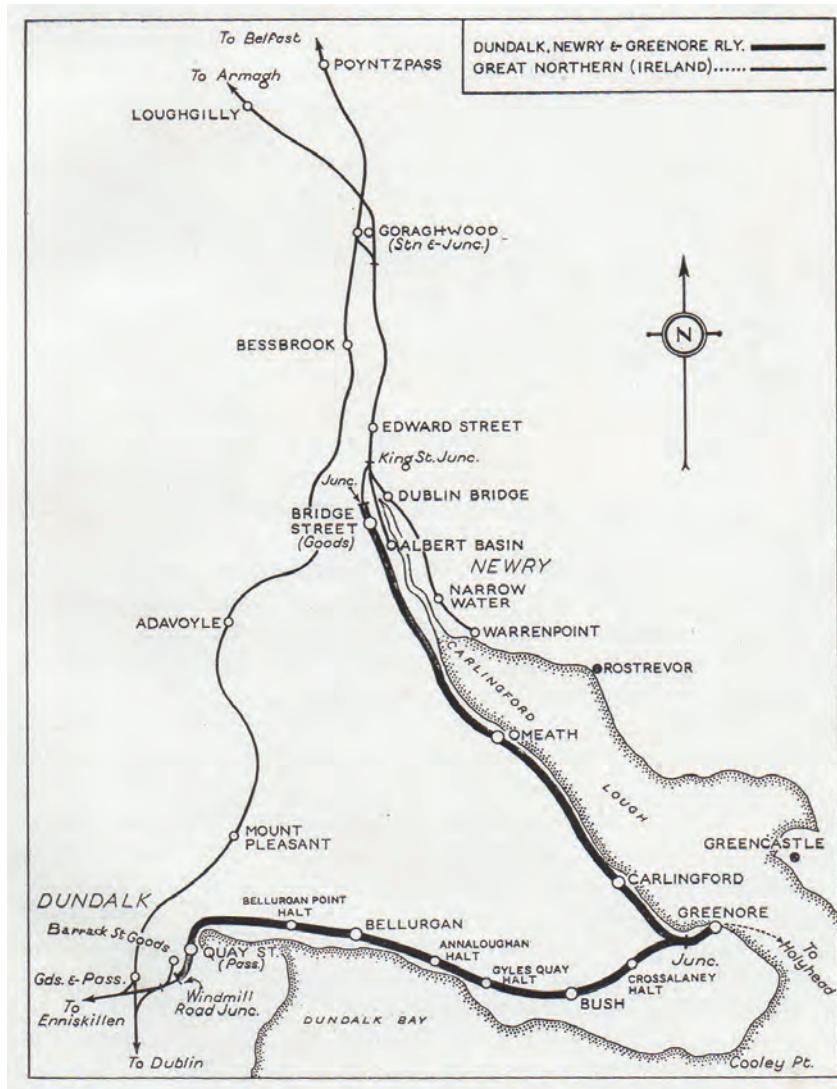
I was born in Greenore in 1932 and lived there all my young life. For the past ten years or so I have been very much involved in things in Greenore and feel very much at home again. I am especially involved in the Greenore Maritime and Railway Group. I am also a member of the Newry - Portadown branch of the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland.

The origins of Greenore, as a port, go back more than a hundred and fifty years, to the mid-1860s. Back then a railway company, known as the *Irish North Western Railway* traded between Sligo, Enniskillen and Dundalk. This company was ambitious and became involved in shipping passengers and cargo out of Dundalk Port to Holyhead in Wales. However, the fact that Dundalk was a tidal port was a limiting factor, for there were times at low water when the entrance to Dundalk Port was not navigable.

On the other side of the Irish Sea, *The London North Western Railway (L.N.W.R.)* operated passenger and freight services from Euston Station, London, up to the north-west of England as far as Holyhead, where they connected with a ferry between Holyhead and Dublin. The *L.N.W.R.* was one of the major rail companies in England at the time. Their coat of arms showed the seated Britannia holding a trident with a lion at her feet. One of their main sources of revenue was the lucrative Irish mail-trade and any method of speeding the mail was seen as of great importance.



The Irish Sea - Greenore to Holyhead



General plan of the D.N.& G.R. and its connecting lines

In the 1860's the *North Western* in Ireland and the *L.N.W.R.* in England came together to explore the creation of a new faster route from Ireland to London via Holyhead. One difficulty was that while Holyhead was accessible at all times, Dundalk port was not. So to examine the feasibility of creating a deep-water port in the area, soundings were taken at various points along the Lough coast including Greenore Point and at Giles' Quay. The site at Greenore Point was selected. Back then Greenore as a village didn't exist.

Ambitious plans were drawn up about the creation of a port at Greenore. For the port to be successful, it would necessitate the building of rail links to connect with the main line at Newry and Dundalk, as well as the construction of the harbor and the railway station. The plans included a hotel, houses for officers and cottages for 'subordinate staff'. After much debate, eventually in late 1860s work began. However, before the work was completed, the Irish company failed and it was left to the *L.N.W.R.* to complete the project.

Work on the various elements of the plan proceeded

slowly at times and various legal disputes had to be settled or overcome. Bridges and cuttings, viaducts and intermediate stations had to be constructed on the rail links particularly on the Dundalk branch and work on widening the approaches to the port had to be undertaken. But, eventually, in March 1873 the Board of Trade Inspector gave his assent to the opening of the Dundalk link. It was August 1876 before the Newry – Greenore link was opened, completing the project. This line was known as the Dundalk, Newry & Greenore Railway.

The Greenore – Holyhead service had a number of advantages over several rival Irish ports. Not least was that the fact that the distance from Greenore to Holyhead was just 75 miles, as opposed to twice the distance from Belfast to Liverpool (158 miles) and, as a deep-water port, Greenore was not dependent on tides. When on August 1st 1876, the new service was fully inaugurated, with the new rail links in place, it was possible to leave Belfast at 5pm on the *Greenore Express*, sail from Greenore at 8pm, arrive in Holyhead around midnight, board the 'sleeper' for London and arrive at Euston at 7am. The *L.N.W.R.* could then justly claim that they provided the fastest link between Ireland and London.

Apart from its passenger services the company became greatly involved in transporting freight and livestock and cattle sold at fairs such as Poyntzpass where there was convenient access to the railway. Cattle were often taken directly from the fair by rail to Greenore for immediate shipment on to England. This was a lucrative trade and in the years leading up to World War II, over 100,000 cattle were shipped annually from Greenore to Holyhead.



Greenore Hotel

The ‘Connemara’ – ‘Retriever’ disaster; Friday 3rd November 1916.

The sequence of events leading up to the tragedy of Friday 3rd November, 1916, is straightforward enough. The two steam-ships involved in the tragedy were the *Connemara* and the *Retriever*. The *Connemara* was owned by the L.N.W.R. and sailed from Greenore to Holyhead at 8 pm daily. The *Retriever* was a Newry-owned collier and made the trip across the Irish Sea two or three times a week.

The weather was very bad – described as a fierce gale – and some people felt that the sailing would be postponed. However Captain G.H. Doeg of the *Connemara*, a very experienced seaman, deemed it safe to sail. So at just five minutes past eight, the *Connemara* set out from Greenore with passengers, general cargo, as well as a considerable number of cattle. As well as the men, women and children passengers there were three ‘cattlemen’ who were responsible for the livestock and eleven soldiers returning to England or en route back to ‘the front’. In all there were 86 persons aboard the *Connemara*.

From Greenore port, shipping had to cross Carlingford Lough before turning right and passing through a narrow channel – known as ‘the cut’ – out towards the Irish Sea. The night was extremely dark, visibility was very poor and it was while the *Connemara* was in the ‘cut’ that the collision with the incoming *Retriever* occurred. Only one ship was allowed to enter ‘the cut’ at a time and the Haulbowline lighthouse keeper, seeing what was unfolding, set rockets off to warn the ships of the danger. However the warning was to no avail and the coal boat hit the passenger ship right in the middle.

The *Retriever* with a crew of nine, had sailed from Garston on the Mersey early that morning with a cargo of coal from the Lancashire Coalfield and the captain and crew were, no doubt, glad to have gained the relative shelter of Carlingford Lough, and, after what was said to have been a very difficult crossing, they were looking forward to reaching their home port of Newry.

In the collision in which the *Retriever* struck the *Connemara* in the middle, both ships were very seriously damaged and the in-rushing sea caused the boilers on both to explode. The result was that both ships sank within a few minutes.

In all, of the 95 people aboard the two ships, only one person, James Boyle from Warrenpoint, a crew-man on the *Retriever*, survived. A number of the cattle aboard the *Connemara* actually managed to reach the shore.

In his evidence, James Boyle, said that the *Connemara* sank within about seven minutes, and the *Retriever* within about fifteen minutes of the collision. As the only survivor, he was the only person who could give a first-hand account. It was believed that others may have reached the shore only to be battered against the rocks

or die of exposure. Bodies were washed up on the coast between Cranfield and Kilkeel and at daybreak the next morning the grim task of recovering the bodies began.

In keeping with the practice at the time, ‘*The Newry Reporter*’ gave gruesome and harrowing accounts of the disaster and its aftermath:-



The McArdle Family with Angela, left on back row.

7th November 1916 “Identifying the bodies – Names of some of the victims.

“The relatives of many of the people who lost their lives in the disaster visited Cranfield on Sunday and identified the remains. Representatives of the London and North West Railway Company also attended and identified several members of the crew. In some instances however the remains of the passengers and others were so shockingly mutilated that identification was impossible and it is probable that some of the bodies will, as a consequence, have to be buried in nameless graves. The bodies of eight members of the crew of The Retriever were all identified on Sunday.

.... Many of the bodies were unrecognizable owing to the manner in which they had been mutilated by the waves and the heavy boulders. It is quite possible that some of those on board succeeded in swimming close to the shore and were then taken up by the heavy waves and thrown against the stones which nature had piled up in enormous shapeless masses on the beach. In some cases the injuries were beyond description. There were men whose heads had been wrenched from their bodies; women whose arms and legs were missing; and poor little helpless children whose features had been horribly bruised. Some of the bodies were altogether devoid of clothing. Amongst the passengers on the Connemara were seventeen young women who were travelling to Liverpool and then to Canada where they had intended entering domestic service or doing farmwork.”

9th November 1916 Funerals of victims at Kilkeel

“Kilkeel was yesterday a town of mourning on the occasion of the funeral of the six unidentified victims of

the shipping disaster. The funeral took place from the improvised morgue at Mr. James Nicholson's potato store and it seemed as though the whole countryside had turned out to pay their last tribute of respect to the memory of the departed. As the procession entered Kilkeel it was joined by practically all the townspeople: all businesses were suspended and all houses were closed and all blinds drawn. The cortege was representative of all creeds and classes and was the largest ever witnessed in Kilkeel. The place of interment was the old churchyard situated in Newcastle Street, Kilkeel and as the six coffins were reverently borne therein, from their respective hearses, every head in the dense crowd was uncovered. The Reverend E.C. Hayes, Reverend R.A. Deane, Rector, representatives from London and North West Railway Company and a superintendent from Greenore attended. Also a Mr. Carroll from Greenore"

An enquiry was held into the circumstances leading to the collision. It was found 'that the 'Retriever' had entered the Lough without lights, as neither the lamp-man nor any member of the crew was able to go on deck to relight them when they were extinguished by the mountainous seas.'

A local connection :

The deaths of each of the ninety-four casualties of the disaster was a terrible tragedy for each of the families involved. Indeed, in some cases more than one family member was lost. Typical of the grief was that which was experienced at the death of one of the seventeen young women bound for Canada who has a Poyntzpass connection. 18-year-old Mary Angela McArdle, Mullaghduff, Cullyhanna, was the aunt of Mrs Anne Kelly of Brannock Meadows, Poyntzpass.

On the morning of November 3rd, she had set out from her home with her father James, on what was intended to be the first stage of her journey to an exciting new life in Canada. They travelled from Mulladuff in the family's horse and cart and Angela and her father probably shared mixed feelings about her leaving home and going so far away. That evening they said their, no doubt tearful, goodbyes at Edward Street Station in Newry as Angela boarded the train for Greenore port. Probably because of the storm, James decided to stay overnight in Newry and he was there when the dreadful news of the disaster reached the town later that night. The next morning he was faced with the task of searching for his daughter in the hope that somehow she had survived and later the grim task of identifying Angela's body. Angela was found on the shore with a young child in her arms. It was surmised that she had actually made it to shore with the child, where, sadly, they had died of exhaustion and exposure. What a sad journey it must have been for James back to Mullaghduff bearing the grim news and the remains of

his beloved daughter in a coffin in the cart in which, a few hours earlier they had travelled so full of hope. It is difficult to imagine the horror of that journey home and how he broke the news to the family when he arrived in Mullaghduff.

No doubt there were similar sad homecomings all over parts of Armagh, Down, Monaghan, Louth and far beyond.



The McArdle Family headstone in Cullyhanna

The tragedy of November 1916 marked the beginning of difficulties for the railway and Greenore as a port of importance, for a combination of adverse factors prevented the post-war development of traffic via Greenore. The 'war of Independence' in Ireland, followed by partition and a period of civil war between pro- and anti-treaty groups led to massive disruption. The anti-treaty group, known as the 'irregulars' had a strong base in the Cooley Peninsula and regarded the D.N. & G. Railway, the main means of communication in the area, as a legitimate target. Trains were hijacked and there were regular attacks on bridges and the Ballymascanlon viaduct. It was only by 1923 that some semblance of normality returned but the problem of the border still remained as four and a half miles of the D.N. & G. track was in Northern Ireland. Customs officers were employed at Dublin Bridge Station in Newry and at Greenore, where facilities had to be provided for them.

From 1923 onwards the D.N. & G was progressively in decline with the railway and port operating at an annual loss. The loss of £12,000 in 1921 had risen to £28,000 in 1928 and grew progressively each year thereafter. Following the Second World War, cattle and freight trade through the port declined, it became increasingly inevitable that the operation could no longer pay its way and following a meeting of the Commission in June 1950, the Chairman, Mr John Elliott announced that the railway would cease to operate from December 31st 1951.