

# NEWSLETTER

Issue No. 106 Autumn 2016



## NEWS

### Talks programme for coming Winter and Spring

Oct. 12: *Tom Kettle - scholar, politician and soldier*  
Speaker: Paddy Ryan

Nov. 9: *From the RTE archives*  
Speaker and further information on topic to be advised.

Dec. 14 *More Malahide Memoirs of Win McLeod*  
Mary McNamara presents with music and images.

Jan.11: *Selection of Old Images of Malahide and district*  
Brian Dooley presents a further pick from the Society's collection.

Feb. 8: *Georgian Houses of Counties Louth and Meath*  
Speaker: George Williams, Antique Dealer

Mar.8: *The Two St. Marnock Churches*  
Speaker: Garry Ahern

Apr.12: *William Dargan, Irish Railway Pioneer*  
Speaker: Fergus Mulligan

May 10: *Malahide's Early Water Supply*  
Speaker: Declan Brady

### Heritage Week 2016

Heritage Week continues to grow in popularity with additional and more varied attractions locally and nationally.

Thanks to the many members who volunteered their time our museum was open afternoons throughout the month and during Heritage Week when we had 325 visitors. 2,180 visited in the year to end of August. In August we had 852 visitors.

The committee is working to enhance the visitor experience by bringing the second room into use.

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All talks take place on the second Wednesday of the month at 8 PM in the Presbyterian Church Hall on Dublin Road. Admission €4. Visitors are most welcome. Free parking is available across the road in the Bridge Field public car park.

Membership of the society costs just €15 per annum.

**Email contact:**  
[malahidehistoricalsociety@gmail.com](mailto:malahidehistoricalsociety@gmail.com)

### Articles/contributions sought.

Do you have a piece of local interest in the 300 to 5,000 words range that might be suitable for inclusion in future issues? We would like to hear from you.

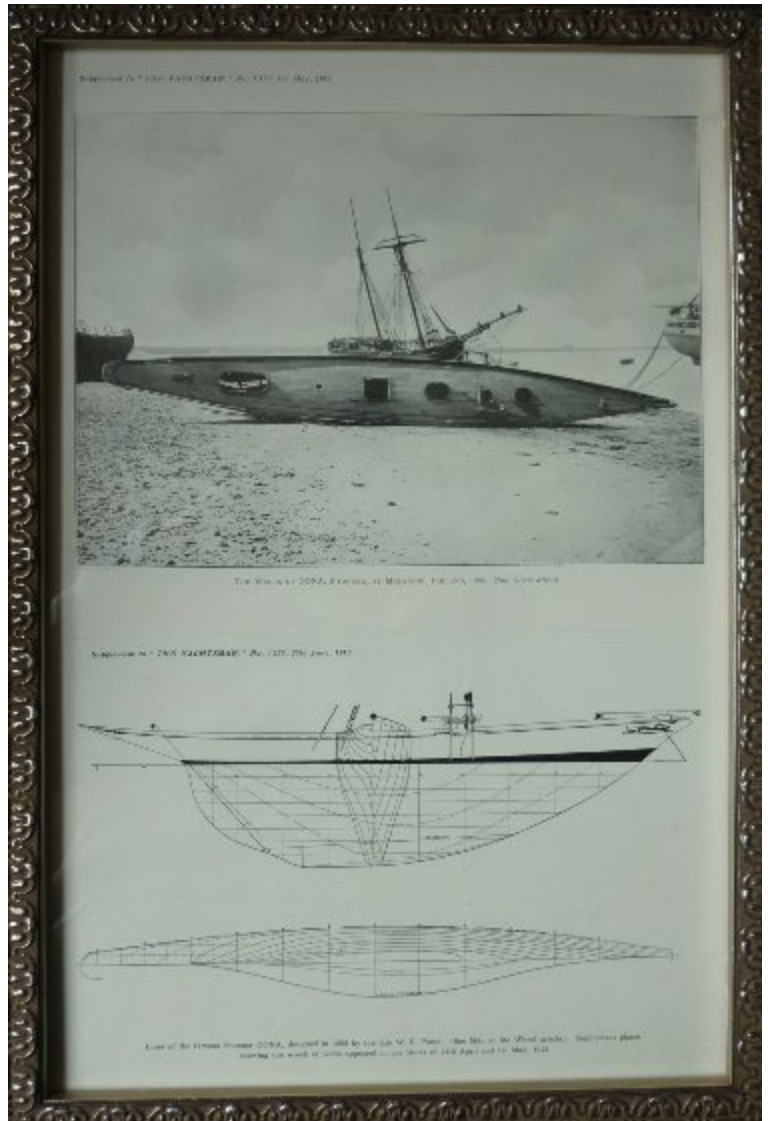
# The *Oona* Tragedy

At a recent birthday party in Malahide a Cork guest brought this print as a gift.

Little was known about the 1886 tragedy in which all five crew were lost off our local beaches.

However, this good quality photo provoked a desire to learn much more. The print is from a 1913 edition of *The Yachtsman* magazine but all efforts to access this magazine on-line have so far proved unsuccessful. However, the event was covered extensively in newspapers both in Ireland and England and Scotland in 1886 and some of these reports are reproduced in the following pages.

Roger Greene



## Setting the Scene

### *The Irish Times*

Thursday, May 13, 1886

#### GALE IN THE CHANNEL

(From our correspondent.)  
Kingstown, Wednesday.

The weather here today was terrible: – a full gale from S.E. with a heavy sea on. The mail-steamer *Ulster* arrived at 7:10, but owing to the storm she could not get alongside until 7.40. It was a fearful night at sea, but the good ship did her work, and was brought well alongside after a terrible conflict with the sea and storm. The steamer *Leinster* arrived this evening at 5.8 in whole gale of wind.

THE STORM

FALL OF SNOW

SHIPPING CASUALTIES

LOSS OF A BELFAST YACHT, WITH ALL HANDS

A heavy gale from the north-east, accompanied by snow and an incessant downpour of rain, has prevailed in Belfast and the vicinity from an early hour yesterday morning. Since Monday rain has fallen almost continuously, and the barometer has been going steadily back, but on Tuesday night a rapid fall indicated the approach of a storm. About three o'clock the wind, which had been blowing strongly from the north-east increased to a gale, while torrents of rain, mingled with large flakes of snow, fell during the whole day. The cold, too, was intense and piercing, affecting people with double severity after the spell of genial, sunshiny weather with which up to a few days ago we had been favoured. The cold and the gale and the rain combined made street travelling exceedingly unpleasant, and caused a temporary cessation of most kinds of outdoor industry. Nevertheless, with the exception of a few slates and chimney pots, which were disturbed from their fastenings by the violence of the gale, there was little material damage done to buildings in town. A very heavy sea ran in the Lough, and numbers of wind bound vessels were anchored in the sheltered parts of it. In the open channel, near the Irish coast, a terrible sea is reported to be running. The cross channel steamers were not much affected in the time of their arrival yesterday morning by the gale, having accomplished the greater part of the trip before it began to blow heavily, and having the wind astern into the bargain. The Bangor steamers, on account of the unfavourable weather, did not make their usual trips yesterday. As evening advanced the storm increased in fury, the rain became more torrent like, while the snow which mingled with it fell so thickly as to form a covering on the adjacent hills.

The Press Association telegraphed at a late hour this morning:- A fatal yachting accident took place yesterday near Malahide, off the coast of Dublin. The yacht *Una* (stet) capsized and two gentlemen and three sailors were drowned. The yacht was brought into Malahide yesterday evening. No further details have yet been received.

***The Irish Times***

Thursday, May 13, 1886

(From our correspondent)  
Belfast, Wednesday

The painful news has reached here that the yacht *Oona*, has been capsized off Malahide, and that all on board are lost. Mr J.F. Plunkett, of Belfast, who is part owner of the yacht, and Mr Paton, who designed the yacht, and three sailors were on board. The yacht left Southampton on Tuesday. Mr Plunkett's brother resides at Belfast, and Mr J.F. Plunkett was well known in this town.

***The Irish Times***

Thursday, May 13, 1886

LOSS OF A YACHT AT MALAHIDE

(From our correspondent)  
Malahide, Wednesday.

The Yacht *Oona*, 5 tons, of R.U.Y. Club, drove ashore this afternoon and broke up on Malahide Bar. All hands were lost. One only was picked up quite dead in a circular life buoy. No boat could live in the sea on the bar, and the casualty occurred at dead low water. The yacht's remains have since been washed ashore

riding to "sea anchor" formed of spars and sails. The Oona is said to have been built for the original owner of the ill-fated Olga.

## Detailed report

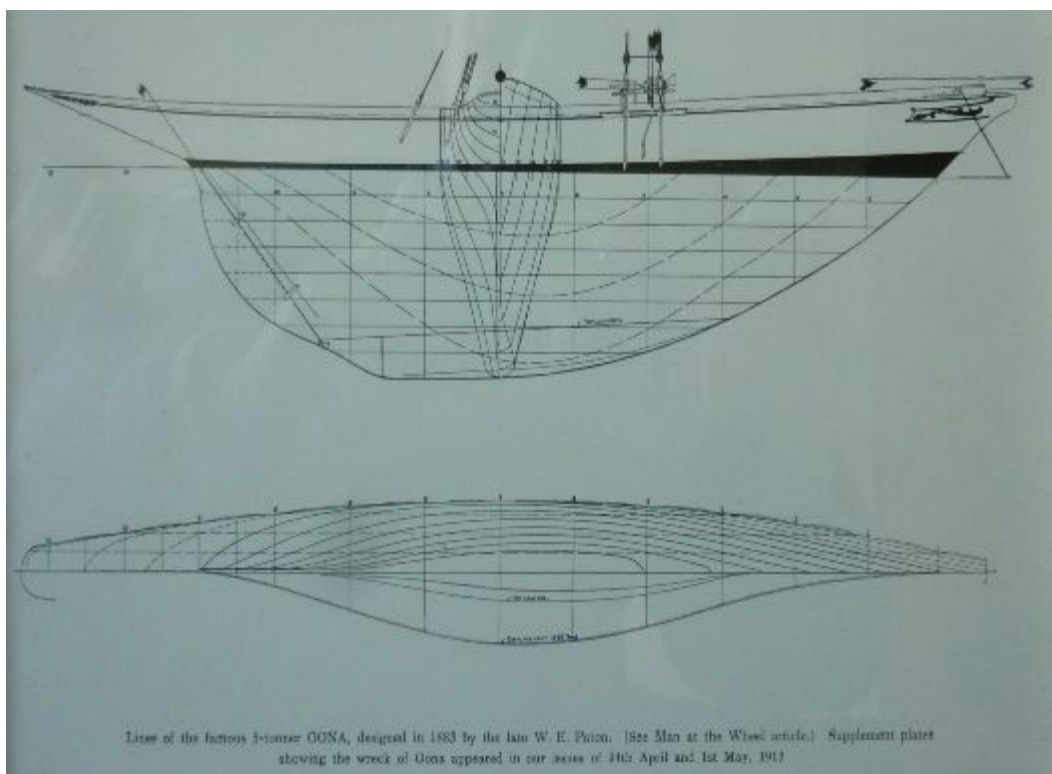
*The Irish Times*,  
Friday, May 14, 1886

### THE WRECK OF A YACHT AT MALAHIDE

(FROM OUR REPORTER.)  
MALAHIDE, THURSDAY.

The fierce gale which blew over Dublin and its district for the last few days did not fail to provide plenty of spoil for the sea from the ships which float upon its waters. Our eastern coast was especially the scene of much destruction, no less than five wrecks occurring within twenty miles or so on either side of Dublin. Of these, however, only one was attended with fatal consequences, and that was in the case of the yacht *Oona*, 5 tons burden, which was wrecked at Malahide, and in the disaster the five men who were on board perished. the *Oona* was the joint property of Mr J. F. Plunkett, of Belfast, a gentleman very well known in aquatic circles as an enthusiastic yachtsman of a most fearless character, and Mr James A. Birrell, of Glasgow. Mr Plunkett was also the owner of the *Olga*, the 5-tonner which has almost become famous for its misfortunes. When that vessel was lost, Mr Plunkett, who belonged to the firm of Messrs Plunkett and Co., of Corporation Street, Belfast, resolved that he would have a yacht built upon lines similar to the *Olga*, but so improved that it would be capable of exceeding in speed any vessels of its class. This, it was believed by Mr Paton, the designer, who also designed the *Olga*, would be accomplished by the *Oona*, which was constructed upon remarkably fine lines forward, while with a beam of 5 feet 5 inches, it had a draft of no less than nine feet, so that instead of plunging over any seas she might meet she would go clean through them and thereby attain an amount of speed which is almost incredible.

Mr. Plunkett, when going to Southampton to bring over the yacht expressed most confidently the hope that he would by her means carry off the Queen's Prize at the Cowes Regatta, saying that he had no doubt that owing to the handicap he would receive over the larger vessels that he would be enabled to obtain such a start as would enable him to keep ahead of all his competitors. But man proposes, and in this case



The slender lines of the yacht as published in the *Yachtsman* magazine in 1913.

his intentions were disposed of by a Power mightier than he. Mr Paton was a naval architect of great promise, a native of Glasgow, who recently entered upon his profession in London. The yacht was built at Southampton, and was only eight days old when she was brought out, and headed up the St. George's Channel for Belfast Lough under the charge of Captain Porter—a most intrepid seaman—and two men, Messrs Paton and Plunkett also being on board.

She had been out on a trial trip a few days previously, and notwithstanding that the weather was very unfavourable, it being squally to an extreme degree, she behaved in such a manner as to give every satisfaction to all concerned. She was, in fact, as was observed by a nephew of Mr Plunkett's at the inquest, "as seaworthy as money could make her." On Tuesday, the 4th May, the ill-fated craft left Southampton, and put in for a few hours to Gosport. After leaving that port nothing is known of her movements until Wednesday morning, and the struggle of the crew to save the unfortunate boat after the gale sprang up can only be conjectured. All that can be learned from responsible sources is that about 11 o'clock on Wednesday morning a small yacht was observed by the look-out man at Portrairie Coastguard Station—about two miles to the north of Malahide—labouring heavily in the sea, which was lashed into almost inconceivable fury by the fierce north-easterly wind which, during all the previous day and its successor, blew without intermission, and rendered the Eastern portion of the Irish coast particularly dangerous for any vessel which was unable to call to its aid in keeping clear of the lee shore the power of steam. The vessel appeared to be about a mile from the shore, from which those on board appeared to be endeavouring to beat off under close reefed mainsail, and soon after it was observed to disappear. Having no lifeboat at Portrairie (stet) the Coastguards were unable to render any assistance, as the unfortunate craft was too far off to admit of the rocket apparatus being brought into play. Information was at once sent to Malahide, towards which place the boat seemed to be drifting; but, unfortunately, owing to the want of telegraphic communication and the difficulty of obtaining any vehicle the messenger had to proceed on foot. The bearer of the intelligence, however, ran as quickly as possible, and managed to reach his destination within an hour of the time of his dispatch. A telegram was also forwarded by Captain Johnson, the Coastguard superintendent of the district, to the officers at Howth directing them to keep a sharp look out for the yacht. He also wired to the Mercantile Marine Office in Dublin asking them to send out a tug boat if possible, and it is to the credit of the master of one tug that notwithstanding the fearful weather that so prevailed, he expressed his willingness to go in search of the vessel if he could get any information as to its probable whereabouts. As soon as the news reached Malahide a number of the men from the Coastguard Station, under the command of Mr Stanley, the superintendent, proceeded to the mouth of the Malahide Estuary, or as it is locally known 'the inlet', carrying with them life lines and the rocket apparatus, to watch for the yacht, knowing that it was there they would first be able to sight her. Shortly after they had reached the head of the inlet the body of a young man who had around him a life-buoy bearing the inscription 'R.U.Y.C. *Oona*,' was washed ashore, and a couple of hours afterwards the hull of the yacht was seen amongst the breakers a short distance off, a quantity of spars and other wreckage having in the meantime been carried up by the waves. The hull was thrown on the rocks at Ryan's Castle\*, where by great exertions it was secured and on examination it became apparent that those on board had cut away the mast, and used it to form a 'sea-anchor,' with the aid of which they drifted 'head-on' until they struck on the bar in Malahide, when all hands were carried overboard, and the theory founded on the fact that the 'horse' or iron rail upon which boom stay travels was broken, is that the lad whose body was washed ashore, being the youngest member of the crew, was sent to steer while the others endeavoured to work the boat, and that they were carried overboard by the 'jibing' of the boom after the breaking of the rail, the jibing also carrying away the mast, which, hanging overboard, gave the appearance of a sea anchor. The lad, whose name was Frederick West, is supposed to have fixed the life-buoy—the only one on board—around his body, and committed himself to the mercy of the waves. It is believed that had the yacht drifted a little further to the southward she would have been quite safe, for the lifeboat from Howth could then have gone to her assistance. At the time she struck it was dead low water on the bar, so that even were the sea not so bad it would have been impossible to render any assistance from Malahide. It is conjectured that



the occupants of the yacht, owing to the heavy weather, when seeking for shelter and trying for Dublin Bay, mistook the Hill of Howth for Bray Head, and Lambay for Howth, and when running for Malahide inlet believed they were going for the bay, but astonishment is expressed by nautical men that, having regard to the fact that the glass was going down steadily for three days previously, and that a strong easterly wind was blowing, they did not previously seek shelter.

Our Glasgow correspondent telegraphs as follows:—

## GLASGOW, THURSDAY

The yacht *Oona*, of the Royal Ulster Yacht Club, which has been lost on the Dublin coast, was jointly owned by Mr James A Birrell (of Messrs Wingate, Birrell and Co., Marine Insurance Brokers, Salvage Agents, and agents for the British and Foreign Marine Insurance Co. (Limited), 4 Royal Exchange buildings, Glasgow), and [??? Paton who practised in London as a naval architect. In training for his profession he had served in the drawing-office of Messrs A. and J, Inglis\*, at Pointhouse Shipbuilding Yard on the River Clyde, studying afterwards at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, and then entering the employment of Sir Wm. Armstrong at Newcastle. A widowed mother and two sisters, with whom he resided at South Kensington, are left to mourn the early decease of Mr Paton, who was only 22 years of age. Mr Plunkett, of Belfast part owner of the ill-fated yacht, and who also went down with her, was widely known as an enthusiastic yachtsman.

\* Editor's note: **Harland and Wolff bought controlling shares in the company in 1919 but the yard remained independent. After Harland and Wolff, who also owned a larger yard on the opposite bank of the river at Govan, opted to consolidate its operations in Belfast, the yard closed in 1962 and is now the site of the Riverside Museum. Famous ships built by the Inglis firm include the paddle steamer *Waverley*, now the world's last seagoing paddle steamer. She is a familiar sight on the west coast of Scotland and has visited Dublin in recent times.**

\*Presumably Robswall Castle

## The Inquest

MALAHIDE, THURSDAY.

To-day Dr. Davys, one of the County Coroners for Dublin, held an inquest here on the body of a young man, whose name is believed to be Frederick West, a native of Southampton, which was washed ashore from the wreck of the yacht *Oona*, which was wrecked at Malahide yesterday under circumstances already reported.

The body having been viewed by the jury, Mr Sidney Plunkett, of Belfast, deposed that he was the nephew of Mr Plunkett, one of the proprietors of the yacht *Oona*, 5 tons, yacht measurement. She left Southampton on Tuesday 4th May, with the owner and designer and three hands on board. He did not know that there was one Frederick West on board, but from a telegram he had received he believed that the deceased was the boy. The yacht left Southampton to be brought to Belfast Lough. So far as money could make her, he believed the yacht was seaworthy in every respect. The yacht was well manned when she left Southampton. After leaving Southampton the yacht put into Gosport for a couple of hours. He could not say that there was anything beyond the inclemency of the weather that caused the loss of the yacht, which was only about eight days old. He believed that all on board were good seamen. A good report of the conduct of the yacht was given after the trial trip.

The Coroner said that he had been informed by Captain Johnson, the naval commander of the district, that the *Oona* had been sighted by the coastguard officer at Portrane, and she then appeared to be in trouble. They had no lifeboat there, and a telegram was sent to Baldoyle to have the boat in readiness, but before Capt. Johnson could do anything she broke up.

Mr Alfred Stanley, chief officer of Coastguard, Malahide, deposed that about 12 o'clock noon yesterday he heard from the station officer of Portrane Coastguard that they saw a vessel apparently in distress at some distance to the southward of Malahide inlet. From the time it took the hull to drift in he thought the yacht must have been a mile and a half out. The message was brought by a man on foot, who ran along the strand from Portrane. Witness brought his men along the coast with life-lines, knowing that would be the only means of rendering assistance. They had to go about half a mile before they reached that portion of the coast where it would be possible to see the yacht if she was visible, but they could see nothing of her, nor did they until three and a half hours afterwards, when they saw what remained of her in the surf about a hundred yards from the rocks, a mile or so to the south. The hull of the vessel was then coming in, broadside on. She was smashed up and dismasted. The body of the deceased was washed in about two hours previous to that. They had endeavoured by adopting the measures laid down in their rules for restoring life to restore animation in the body, but did not continue them long, because witness was confident that the boy had been dead for a couple of hours. Captain Johnstone, the inspector commanding, had informed him that he had telegraphed to Baldoyle for the lifeboat, and he also telegraphed to Dublin for a tug. None of the Malahide men saw the yacht coming, for they could not see at all to the southward of Malahide inlet. From the place where they were building the new station however, they would have a full view of the whole seaboard. From the appearance of the stump of the mast he was inclined to believe that the mast had not been carried away by the sea, but had been cut away by those on board.

Joseph Russell gave evidence as to the finding of the body, around which was a life buoy. During the day he had not seen any vessel in distress, although he had been on the look-out all day. The word '*Oona*' was on the life buoy. Thomas Flynn gave corroborative evidence.

Dr. R. Stanistreet deposed that he had made a post-mortem examination on the deceased, who seemed to be about 18 years of age. He believed that death was the result of drowning.

The Coroner—Can you tell me, Mr Stanley, how long have the plans been out for the new coastguard station?

Mr Stanley—I cannot, sir.

The Coroner (to Mr Stanistreet)—How long is it since the ground was taken? Dr. Stanistreet—it was inspected for the purpose when Captain Tuke was chief officer.

The Coroner—How long is that ago?

Mr Stanley—To the best of my recollection it is about six years ago. The Coroner thought it was extraordinary that it was not completed long ago, and he believed they would not be assembled on that melancholy duty that day if the station was in the position where it was resolved some years ago to erect it.

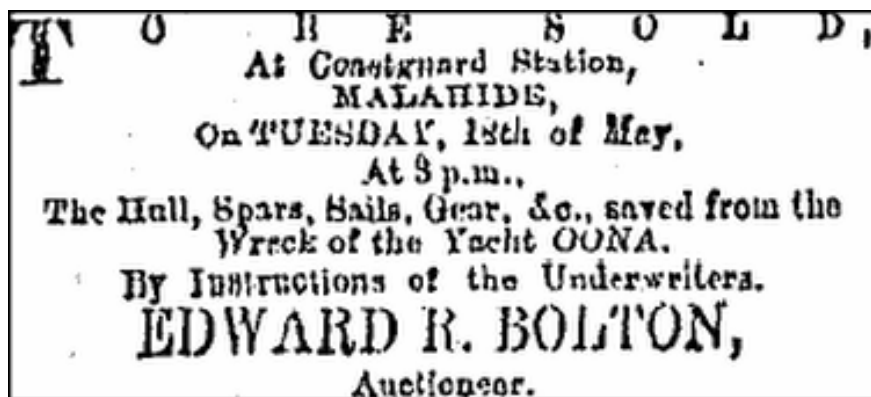
**(Editor's note: The Malahide Coastguard Station was a terrace facing The Green. See account of Robswall Coastguard Station on page 12)**

The Jury returned a verdict of accidental drowning through the loss of the *Oona* yacht, and added a rider to the effect that they regretted that the new coastguard station was not long since completed, when the coastguard officers would have been able to obtain such a view of the seaboard as would have enabled them to see the distress of the yacht and render it assistance.

Mr Stanley said he wished to draw attention of the Coroner to the brave way in which the men, Flynn and Russell, went into the surf to recover the body.

The Coroner said he believed Mr Plunkett's relatives would take care of that. He had no power to make a grant.

Up to the present no sign has been discovered of the bodies of any of the other occupants of the yacht, nor has any wreckage been washed ashore. The body of a man, however, was washed ashore at Skerries, but from the information already received, Mr Plunkett has no reason to believe that he was one of those on board the *Oona*.



*The Hampshire Advertiser* May 22, 1886 p 6

#### THE CATASTROPHE TO THE YACHT *Oona*

##### ADDITIONAL DETAILS.

The *Northern Whig*, of Monday, had the following with reference to the yacht *Oona* : " On Saturday we gave an extract from a letter received from Captain Jones, of the schooner *Prospect*, which vessel was lying, on Wednesday forenoon, under the lee of Lambay Island, and those on board had witnessed for some time the doings of those on the ill-fated yacht. Captain Jones was written to for further details, The *Prospect* is at present at the North Wall, Dublin, and from him there was received on Saturday, by Mr, John Atkinson, Corporation-street, a communication containing the following : On the forenoon of Wednesday I observed a small yacht, painted white, running to the north-west, about two mile south-west of Lambay Island. She had a small mainsail or trysail set, with reefed foresail. Those on board her appeared to be strangers, as they did not haul up in time to keep the land, but they tried hard to beat up to where we were lying (to the lee of Lambay Island), and for some time I fully expected they would work up to this shelter. They hauled foresail down, stayed, and stood in the direction of Howth. Of course they could not get in there, as the tide was out, but if they had known they would have got shelter to leeward of Irelands Eye, a small island near Howth, but she again stayed, evidently trying to get near us again, but was then losing ground. They had to haul the foresail down every time they stayed her, and I saw the men running forward to do so. The first time I quite distinctly saw three or four of them, as she was not more than two cables from us. She had topmast housed, and a little flag flying. Before she went round the first time she was gaining ground, but was always losing after that, and I soon lost sight of her. The last I saw of her she had foresail down, and appeared to be head to wind, as if she had anchor down, but the weather was so thick and dirty that I could not be sure as to her movements, and glasses were no use. She spoke a schooner on Tuesday night which was running back for Dublin, which port the schooner had left on Monday, but the captain could not hear or understand what they wanted. The yacht showed a globe lamp, and came after the schooner for some time. The captain of the schooner shortened sail to let the yacht come up with him, but the latter altered her course again, and the schooner saw no more of her. Another schooner



put into Kingstown yesterday. I have just seen the master of her, and he was in the company with the yacht coming round Land's End, but he has lost nearly all his canvas and his jib boom." The paper, after describing the build of the *Oona*, says:—"From what is known of the *Oona* it is thought by practical yachtsmen that her skipper, finding her straining and opening up under him at sea, ran her to the nearest shelter to save life, and, if possible, to prevent her foundering outside. But she struck on the bar, and, falling over at once, all hands were washed off her; the slight hull, detached from its heavy lead keel, washed ashore afterwards.

*The ??*, May ??, 1886, p.?

### THE LOSS OF THE YACHT *Oona*

The yacht *Oona*, which was swamped in Dublin Bay, was an extreme type of the deep, narrow class of 5-tonner, built to cheat measurement, and in certain conditions of weather would have proved a very fast boat. But her fate, and the sad loss of life in consequence, should be a warning to racing yachtsmen and amateur designers of such craft, that lightness of build may be carried too far when the result is a vessel unable to bear the strain of heavy weather at sea, and yet too deep to seek the shelter of small bar harbours. From what is known of the *Oona*, it is thought by practical yachtsmen that her skipper, finding her straining and opening up under him at sea, ran her for the nearest shelter to save life, and, if possible, prevent foundering outside. But she struck on the bar, and falling over at once, all hands were washed off her; the light hull, becoming detached from its heavy keel, washed ashore afterwards. Though only five tons racing measurement, the *Oona* had 9 tons of lead on her keel, with a draught of 9ft. of water. She was about 50ft. long over all, with at most 6ft. beam, her planks being less than an inch thick, and timbers to match. Her mast was over 8in. in diameter, or about as large as the old 20-ton *Vanessa's* mast and she had the same hoist, viz, 60ft. As long as everything holds good, such a vessel is really uncapsizable in deep water; but the leverage of her heavy spars acting against the lead weight under her, requires something more than a skin of three-quarter plank and the timbers and fastening of a 20ft. fishing boat, to enable her to meet really bad weather.



THE WRECK OF OONA, 5-TONNER, AT MALAHIDE, IRELAND, 1886 (2nd illustration)

**The salvaged wreck was brought on to the foreshore at the bottom of St. James Terrace.**

**The vessel had an unusually narrow beam for such a large yacht (approx. 40' in length) and drew 9'.**

**Daylight can be seen through the aft or left hand hatch indicating that she was badly holed on the bottom in this area and some sprung planks can be observed protruding towards the sand.**

## THE LOSS OF THE YACHT *Oona*

...With regard to the circumstances of the loss of the *Oona*, the opinion formed by the best authorities on the subject is that the mast of the cutter went by the board, owing to the chain cable having parted. The hands on deck were, probably, carried over with the mast and spars, but the boy, whose body was found with the lifebelt around him, not being on deck, had time to take some steps with a view to save his life. The *Oona* was splendidly built, and here capsizing was not due to any defect in this way. On this subject Mr. James A. M. Heyn, writes to the *Field* last Saturday, as follows. The natural conclusion to come to seems to be that the *Oona* having made landfall got embayed, and, owing to the fearful sea and heavy gale was unable to get an offing, and so, through stress of weather was blown ashore. The heavy lead keel would become embedded in the sand, and the sea would soon detach the hull which came ashore, leaving behind the parts to which the keel was bolted. A gentleman of experience in ship and yacht building examined the hull after it came ashore, and could find no appearance of straining or other defects—just what might be expected of a boat built by Fay without regard to cost, and designed by Mr. Paton, the naval architect, so well known in yachting circles. My object in writing to you is to correct what possibly be inferred from a notice in your last issue that the *Oona* had been designed by an amateur, and was unable to withstand any heavy weather on account of the lightness or faultiness of her construction.



**Royal Ulster Yacht Club (R.U.Y.C.) At Bangor, Co. Down about 1900  
where Mr. Plunkett was a member.**

## THE DISASTER AT MALAHIDE

Dublin, 11th of May 1886.

To the Editor of the *Irish Times*

Sir, Kindly permit me to offer a few words in correction of a completely erroneous impression which will naturally arise out of the rider which was added to the finding of the coroner's jury at the inquest held yesterday at Malahide on the body Frederick West, late of the ill-fated yacht Oona.

The Coroner is reported to have remarked that he believed they would not have been assembled on their melancholy duty of that day had the coastguard station (at present in course of erection) been in the position where it was resolved to erect it some years ago.

As a matter of fact, the new Malahide coastguard station, now rapidly approaching completion, is being erected on a site which, for many reasons, is an extremely undesirable one.

Had it been completed and the men being living in it it is certainly possible that the Oona might have been sighted from that station at about the same time as she was seen from Portrane.

But had this been so, it would have been utterly impossible to render the slightest assistance to the distressed vessel under the existing conditions of tide, wind and sea. No boat could have been launched in the vicinity of the station; and even had there been a lifeboat at Malahide itself, there was not sufficient water for it to have crossed the bar, nor would it have been possible had there been, for the boat to have got out without the assistance of a tug, which in the first place is not obtainable at Malahide, and in the second, would, of course, require even more water to float her than the lifeboat herself.

It is not an oncoming thing for the coroner's juries to evince a desire in their finding to attribute blame to someone where none really attaches, and this is notably so in the cases which do not lie within the range of their understanding.

Indeed, I remember one instance where a boy on board one of her Majesty's training brigs fell somehow through the so-called "lubber's hole" out of the main-top and was killed. The coroner's jury added a rider to their verdict to the effect that "the said hole was very dangerous, and had better be closed up," the absurdity of which will be at once apparent to any sailor.

After all, there are such things as disasters which, under the will of the Supreme Being, are beyond the control of men, and this loss of the Oona with all hands was one of them.

Have there been a thousand coastguard men and twenty lifeboats at the point at which the remains of the ill-fated vessel eventually drove ashore (after having broken up on the bar where she must have first struck, a mile away from it), no assistance whatever could possibly have been rendered to those on board.

All that could be done was done when Commander Johnson, of the coastguard, telegraphed to Howth: "Keep lookout for vessel in distress drifting your way, and warn lifeboat crew to hold themselves in readiness. "

Had the yacht drifted clear of the Malahide bar and towards Howth the lives might have been saved, although it is even open to doubt whether the Howth lifeboat could have got up against the wind and terrible sea which was running at the time without the assistance of a tug, for which, it will be remembered, he also telegraphed to Dublin, the nearest place where one was obtainable.

I will merely add what I happen to know is a fact in connection with the new coastguard station in course of erection about 2 miles from Malahide—viz, that the original plans for the buildings included a boathouse and slipway, but that these were subsequently abandoned, in consequence of its having been found that on account of the nature of the coast there it would have been rarely, if ever, possible to launch a boat at any time of tide, and certainly never with the wind blowing, even moderately, on shore.

# The Malahide Coastguard Presence

With the building of the railway viaduct the Swords coastguards were relocated to Malahide. Here they occupied a terrace of purpose built two storey houses facing the Green. They had a boathouse and ball alley at the corner of the Green and St James Terrace and a flagstaff by the water's edge on the Green for signalling and hoisting storm warnings. The terrace was demolished around the year 2000. The principal officer, usually a naval lieutenant, occupied the last house on St. James Terrace.



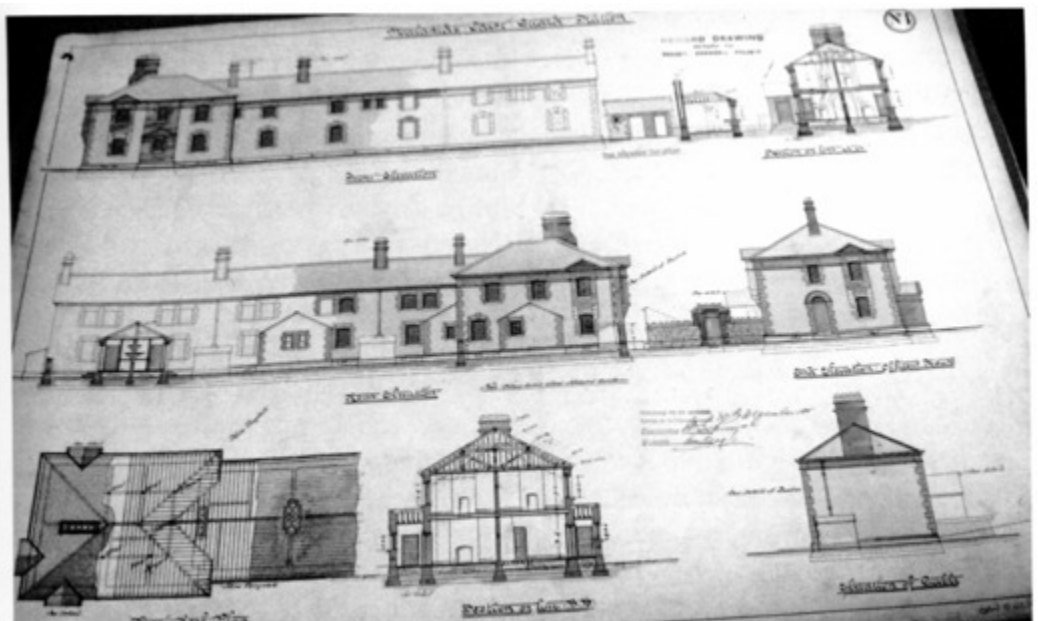
This terrace of coastguard houses faced the Green until demolished in the late 1990s to make way for the apartments at the bottom of Townyard Lane.

Under the Coastguard Act of 1856 their duties included protecting the revenue, suppression of smuggling and affording assistance to ships in distress or wrecked and other coastal duties such as signalling, flying storm warnings on the flagstaff and providing a Fitzroy mercury storm warning barometer on public view. On the wall where No. 19A The Green now stands the special barometer was set for public viewing. In time this location was considered not ideal given the lack of a clear view of the coast, the distance to the open sea and a bar which could be dangerous in bad weather.

The following is taken, by kind permission, from Garry Ahern's comprehensive history, "Portmarnock" available in Malahide library.

## Construction of Coastguard Station at Robswall

In the early 1880s, it was decided to build a new coastguard station at Robswall and this eventually replaced the station in Malahide. A lease was obtained from Lord Talbot for a site, between Monks' Meadow and High Rock. The one-acre site was leased for ninety-nine years at ten pounds annually. The chosen site had a more commanding view of the approaches to the harbour of Malahide than the old station, providing clear views of the waters between Lambay Island, Ireland's Eye and the mainland. Other nearby stations were at Donabate, Lambay Island, Baldoyle and Howth. Plans for the station envisaged an impressive two-storey construction, with red brickwork on chimneys, eaves, corners, and around windows and doorways. On 20 May, 1885, the foundation-stone was laid and in October 1886, the new station was opened.



Architect's Drawings of new Robswall Coastguard Station (courtesy NAI : OPW 5HC/4/533).

The Office of Public Works plans provided for a rectangular complex of buildings, constructed end-on to the shore and running in a (roughly) east-west orientation. A yard area divided the two flanks of this rectangle. The living accommodation and watch-office were in the northern part while the southern flank held the boat-house, work-shops, store-rooms and toilets. The boat-house was located on the south-east corner, with entrance-doors facing across the roadway, towards the shore. Directly opposite was a one-hundred-and-fifty-foot-long boat-slip, on which wooden skids were fitted. The slipway incorporated the outflow of the main sewer serving the station, part of the stone work of which remains visible. Approximately fifty feet south of the boat-slip and parallel to it, a wall was to be built, using rubble and concrete and providing shelter to the boat-slip. The water supply came from a well sunk at the rear of the boat-house. Near this was the flagpole, an important feature, from which signal-flags were flown to convey weather alerts or other messages to mariners.

### **Opening of the Coastguard Station at Robswall**

The officers moved into Robswall station on 4 October, 1886. The opening of the station was quite an event locally, bringing half-a-dozen new families to the townland and parish. Three days later, to celebrate the opening, a 'festive' was held in the station. For Rev Robert Walshe, Rector of Malahide, a historian, who seems to have attended, this was a noteworthy occasion, worthy of being recorded. The Chief Officer of the new station was Alfred Stanley. The new station had a watch-room office and a chief officer's house, along with accommodation for the other officers and their families.

Coastguard stations around the country varied considerably in architectural style and appearance. In some locations existing structures, suitably adapted, were used. From 1850 onwards a program of building new stations commenced. The plans drawn up for the station at Robswall exemplify the envisaged permanence of the stations and the resources being devoted to the service at that point. The station was a well-constructed, modern, building which might have endured for a very long time had history had not intervened. In 1901 persons living there these totalled thirty in a townland total of just fifty-two.

The coastguard families thus made up a significant proportion of the local community. This was especially so within the Church of Ireland community, to which most of the officers belonged. Even before the opening of the Robswall station, a number of children of coastguard officers were attending Portmarnock National School at Burrow. In 1877-1888, of eleven Protestant children attending that school several bore names such as 'Colvin' and 'Craig', which occur amongst coastguard staff based at Portmarnock Point, Malahide, and later, Robswall.

### **Attacks on Coastguard Stations**

In the 1917-1921 period, as the War of Independence escalated, the coastguard was perceived as an arm of the military establishment and targeted for attacks. As a result, coastguard officers were instructed not to fraternise with locals and civilians were precluded from entering stations. Steel shutters were fitted to the windows of most stations and other defensive measures were also taken. In the early summer of 1921 coastguard stations were being attacked and burned out, country-wide, on an almost a daily basis. This was to eventually include stations on the north Dublin coast. In May 1920, Robswall was attacked. One newspaper report put the number of the raiding-party at between fifty and one-hundred men, a figure that was much exaggerated. The same report went on to say that the officers' families were evicted, the station set on fire, the flag-staff cut down and that nine bicycles were taken away. Most, if not all, of the bicycles are likely to have been official issue and used in patrolling. The actual number of the raiding-party, drawn from the Finglas, Santry and Kinsealy areas, was probably less than forty. They were armed with rifles, shotguns and revolvers. Contrary to expectations, the coastguard station held no firearms. The Malahide writer, Brian Inglis, later described seeing the smoke rising next day from the ruins of the coastguard buildings, as he looked across the estuary. He was at the Island Golf Course, where he had been brought by his grandmother. (Unperturbed by the tumult of events occurring all around, she and her friends played their eighteen holes while he, aged five, was left to amuse himself with a cut-down club.)



On the same night stations at Loughshinney, Rush, Skerries and Rogerstown were also attacked. By August, 1922, all one-hundred and nine Coastguard Stations in the new Free State had been abandoned. The officers and their families were evacuated to Britain. The sites and remaining buildings were then taken over by the new Irish government and most were later sold off to private owners. The coast road nowadays runs through part of the former coastguard station site. A section of the remaining boundary wall can be seen on the seaward side of the roadway there. Some of the original wall also remains as part of the boundaries of the sites of a pair of two-storey houses which adjoin Robswall Regional Park. Possibly some years after the building of the coastguard station and on a site quite adjacent to it, Lord Talbot had two semi-detached workmen's cottages erected. Immediately beside the cottages, running uphill from the coast road, a lane gave access to fields and a cottage near Paddy's Hill.

## Other local shipwrecks

There were many sailing ship strandings up and down the coast but relatively few were reported in the press. There was a strong coal trade between Whitehaven and Malahide supplying the local gas works and also the coal merchants, Flower & McDonalds in Malahide, Swords and further inland. Salt was another commodity imported in some quantity.

On consulting some on-line data bases of shipwrecks references were found to several vessels named *Mary Ann*. In 1816 a *Mary Ann* came ashore north of Howth and in 1861 the *Mary Ann*, a Belfast brig came ashore at the estuary entrance. She was possibly salvaged. In 1881 a brig of that name, 153 tons and carrying coal to Dublin was lost. One database says she stranded 1 mile north of Malahide and another on a sandbank at Corballis. One mentions that she was of Canadian register. Despite the date discrepancy the 1881 wreck may well be that recalled by a Corballis resident in a handwritten note:-

*About 1870 a coal boat (sail) bringing coal to Malahide from Whitehaven went aground on the strand opposite the 9<sup>th</sup> Green, (Island Golf Club) the coal was taken off by local people with horse and cart at low water. It was never refloated, and it became a complete wreck and washed in close to the bank by high tides. It remained there for years. About 1920 an exceptionally high tide, accompanied with gale force N.E. winds refloated the hulk and carried it up the beach to a point opposite half way between the Andes and Hilltop (5<sup>th</sup> green) close to bank. In 8 to 10 years it got completely covered by blowing sand and now lies buried under the outer ridge along the beach. It is doubtful if it will ever be seen again.*

*It was built with great baulks of oak timber, 12" by 12", fastened together by long spikes of iron and big bolts. I only remember the bottom portion. The upper structure had disappeared before my time, and its name The MARY ANNE.*

On 9th January 1836 the Jamaica Packet came ashore near Malahide and was swamped. She was en route from Whitehaven to Dublin. The master was Symons. The crew were saved. In 1887/1888 another Jamaica Packet went ashore on Velvet strand (Portmarnock) and all aboard perished, Fingal County Council removed large sections of a wreck from Velvet Strand in 1987, possibly from this vessel.

**This vessel was blown ashore off Low Rock on 16 January, 1942 but was successfully refloated.**





# ON DISPLAY AT MUSEUM



Above: Part of the small 1916 commemorative exhibition in our museum.

Right: A large and elaborate 'illuminated address' from parishioners to curate Father Jones on his departure from Malahide on promotion about 1925.

Below: War time memorabilia.



Do you have any interesting objects or old photographs to donate?

We would be delighted to hear from you at:  
[malahidehistoricalsociety@gmail.com](mailto:malahidehistoricalsociety@gmail.com)



Below: Country lads will remember making a catapult or gabhlóg from the fork of an ash plant and using strips of rubber cut from a motor inner tube and leather from the tongue of a shoe. Not very accurate but great fun!



# Images from the Society's extensive collection



Left:

Sea Road and surrounding fields

c.1960.

Below:

Silver Strand, Portmarnock when we had real Summers!

C. 1960s

