

The loss of the Lily Reiach BCK11

The Lily Reiach was built by the Smith Dock Co. Ltd. North Shields Middlesborough. A steam drifter she weighed in at 88 tons, her length was 82.5 feet and she was built in 1908. She was first registered as BCK 11 and headed north to begin her life as a fishing vessel.

As it turned out Robert Grant a Portknockie man was one of her first and her last skipper, a young man who was young to be a skipper but obviously knew his trade and was astute enough to become a qualified skipper at a young age.

He had married Barbara Ann Robertson in 1914 and the young family settled down in their house to spend the rest of their lives together. By May of 1914 the newly weds were celebrating the news that Barbara was expecting her first child. Nothing could dull the happiness of the young couple.

Then the Kaiser stepped in and the conflict that started out as a European war soon became known as the First World War or the war to end all wars.

Every young man was urged to join the army, navy or the newly formed Royal Flying Corps. Recruits flooded into recruiting offices, boys from the glens of the Highlands who had never set foot outside their village, raw young men, strong, patriotic and ready to die for their country. So it was with the fishing fleet, with the onset of the war their market had collapsed, the herring which they caught in abundance was usually bound for the European market – even in those days! But that had been virtually destroyed overnight when war broke out. It suited the Admiralty as they could now lay their hands on the most skilled men who had been at sea since they were young boys. Used to the hardship and skilled in handling their small boats in all weathers.

As the pressure rose on the Royal Navy who operated in half a dozen different seas, they needed protection from the mines the enemy were sowing like seed in the narrow seas around Europe and the Mediterranean, the newly launched submarines who spent their lives under the water either sowing mine fields or torpedoing ships.

Troops were being moved to where they were needed, the fronts grew ever larger as the war progressed and the Merchant marine and the warships were required to ferry troops to the battlefields.

It was not long before the *Lily Reiach* was requisitioned by the Admiralty to assist the Royal Navy. Like so many others she was sent to assist the fleet. The Steam Drifters acted as submarine net tenders, rescue boats and any other task the fleet had for the workhorses. They retained their own crews with the skipper of the boat being given a temporary naval ranking to show his position on the boat.

Robert Grant was a father by this time, his daughter Mary Ann Robertson had been born on 3rd January 1915 and was with her mother on the North east coast of Scotland.

The *Lily Reiach* was then posted to assist the fleet bottled up in the Adriatic Sea in early 1916 off the Albanian coast at Durazzo where a land battle was in progress for the strategic port. As she passed through the Mediterranean she passed many a fishing boat from the ports of Britain, one of his contemporaries remembered when he passed the Lily Reiach on his boat in the Mediterranean, each heading for their own operational area. The other man was Alexander Mair 'Brother' who also had the nickname of 'Alenger'. The two men came from the same village, Portknockie, and shouted their greetings to each other and doffed their caps to each other as the boats passed on reciprocal courses. That was the last time anyone from his village would see Robert Grant alive.

On the 8th February 1916 the *Lily Reiach* is alleged to have snared a German U Boat in her nets, the submarine broke free and escaped. It must have been pandemonium in the area as the various fleets involved strove to establish themselves.

The Steam Drifters scurried back and forth between the battling fleets and many a sailor from both sides had the Buckie registered fishing boat to thank for their lives. The Drifters rescued thousands of men from the sea as well as carrying out their extremely hazardous duties in the mine infested waters.

These included the time on 8th January 1916 when along with five other drifters the Lily Reiach rescued survivors from the Italian armed merchant cruiser '*Citta di Palermo*' which was mined 6 miles NE of Brindisi and was lost. The '*Citta Di Palermo*' was a steamer of 3414 GRT built in 1910 and was carrying troops. The *Citta Di Palermo* came from Durazzo and had 143 British soldiers on board.

The Lily Reiach and her fellow drifters rescued a large number of survivors that day but fifty seven (57) lives were lost in the sinking of the Italian cruiser.

The mine that had sunk the *Citta De Palermo* had been laid by the small German mine- laying submarine *UC 14* on December 10, 1915. Shortly after the *Citta di Palermo* was sunk, three Steam drifters also suffered the same fate; the *Frenchy*, the *Morning Star* and the *Gavenwood* were all lost in the same mine-field. Ships were being sunk all over the place according to contemporary sources as German U Boats spewed out mines over the area.

Just a couple of weeks or so after the incident with the U Boat the *Lily Reiach* struck a mine about 1715 hours on 25th February 1916 when she was off Kap Laghi near Durazzo and was sunk with all hands. Robert Grant was dead. Another widow had been made. There was apparently one survivor who was rescued by the SD Clachnacuddin. The mine had been laid by UC12 and the following crew men were lost on that day.

I have listed Robert Grant along with the rest of the crew for the sake of continuity.

Grant	Robert	T/Y Skipper	RNR
Buchan	Alexander	2 nd Hand	RNR SA 1311
Clatworthy	Joseph H	Engineman	RNR E S 2529
Cordiner	David	Deck Hand	RNR D A 5155
Davidson	Charles	Trimmer	RNR T S 2535
Deakin	Harold B	TY S/Lt.	RNR
Fisher	George A	Deck Hand	RNR (S.S.) SD3249
Howes	Albert C	Trimmer	RNR T S2499
Jeffrey	Thomas	Deck hand	RNR D A8337
Weir	William	Trimmer	RNR T S2473

For those who are interested Robert Grant is commemorated at the Portsmouth Naval Memorial situated at Southsea Common. The grave memorial reference is 22. this memorial is worth a visit if you are in the area.



The Portsmouth Naval War Memorial

The young widow left at home soon got the black bordered telegram telling her that her husband was dead having been killed in action on the *Lily Reiach*. She was now a widow and her daughter who was just one year old was fatherless.

Following the death of her husband in the above action, Barbara Ann Robertson and her infant daughter moved back to her parents house, her father John Robertson and mother Barbara Thain had three boys and the other two girls already there. James, John & Joseph, Margaret and Josephine. Barbara Ann had been born on the 18th January 1891.

On the 5th September 1920 she remarried David Findlay who had been born on 7th May 1885 to James 'Hooker' Findlay and his wife Jane McDonald. His dad's fishing boat was the Carolina BF953. David Findlay shared his parents with his sisters Mary, Jean and Margaret and brothers Alexander, John, James, George and Alfred who all stayed in the house at 52 and a half Seatown Cullen. The young couple set up home and soon Mary Ann was joined by Jean, Barbara, Mary, Dinah, Josephine,

James and Ellen Findlay. David Findlay had his own boat, a steam drifter BF102 Xmas Morn.

David Findlay 'Hooker' died on the 5th December 1975; his wife Barbara Ann had died some years earlier on 26th December 1967.

There are countless tales of Fishing Drifters being sunk with loss of lives; this has been a short story of one of them. Others who had kin who died in similar circumstances will read this and recognise the familiar lines.