

A Llangwm Tragedy



By Graham Stephens

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All communities with ties to fishing and the sea have tales of heroism and tragedy. Llangwm is no exception and over the years lives have been lost as fishermen and women sought to earn their keep on the fishing grounds of Milford Haven, the Daugleddau estuary and the Cleddau rivers.

The deaths of Sam and Mary in the 1930s now form part of the recorded history of the village. Perhaps less well documented is the death of Edwin Davies of Edwards Pill who tragically lost his life on April 1st 1970.

In the 1960s and 70s fishing for herring especially in the area of Castle Reach, just north of Benton Castle was an annual spring event as the fish headed up river to spawn. Throughout February, March and April, a small flotilla of boats including several traditional Llangwm craft and a larger number of more modern designs, would leave Black Tar to head downstream to Gullydraft to shoot their seine nets over the hours spanning low water. Such was the lucrative nature of herring fishing at this time, that many of the fishermen took annual leave from their day jobs in order to "go on the herrings". In many cases this then funded the purchase of new fibreglass boats with a larger carrying capacity.

The distance from Llangwm to the fishing ground is around one and a half miles and apart from the cold at that time of year, the strenuous effort involved in hauling nets and picking out the herring, the work is usually safe and uneventful. But on this Wednesday, as just two boats headed out from Black Tar, the wind was from the north and blowing strongly down Llangwm Reach, though this presented little problem for the small craft as they set off downstream on the last of the ebb.

Despite the wind and cold, it was a sunny morning and David Davies in his traditional wooden thirteen foot Llangwm boat had his cousin Ian Jacob on-board, home for the holidays from art

college. Having shot their net, they awaited the turn of the tide before recovering their lines. Success or failure of the catch on these occasions can be somewhat hit or miss but this was a good day and when David and Ian hauled their net they had been lucky. They brought on board nearly eighty stone of fish and with each net, their boat began to sink lower in the water. An adjacent boat of a newer design, with Don Rees aboard had less luck so Don decided to try again. This time he too struck lucky and brought on board a similar haul.

The delay in returning to Llangwm and the deteriorating state of the conditions as the tide turned and created a short lumpy sea, prompted David's father Edwin to head down river with fellow fisherman Kenneth Morgan to see if any help was needed. They met David and Ian heading back up river and Edwin transferred to his son's boat, allowing Kenneth to continue on downstream.

The heavily laden fishing boat now continued its journey back to Black Tar accompanied by Don Rees in the other boat. The traditional Llangwm boat sat low in the water with only nine inches of freeboard at the bow and just six inches amidships. This was not unusual and many is the time that boats returned home, laden down to the gunwales with fish. The different design of Don Rees' boat gave it more freeboard despite it being smaller and equally laden with fish.

The days of rowing the catch home were a thing of the past and both boats were powered by small outboard motors. The slow journey up the relatively sheltered Beggars Reach under Benton Wood was uneventful but as the boats began to turn north at the Ferry Bay, the short, steep waves driven by the fresh northerly wind, began to send spray and water over their bows.

It was at this fateful time, that the engine of David's boat began to splutter and then stop. With conditions too challenging to row, Don Rees turned his boat around and came alongside to render assistance offering to tow David's boat back to Black Tar. Ian now transferred to Don's boat to lessen the weight of the towed boat and both vessels set off for home. It was then that a larger wave

overwhelmed the second boat causing it to sink and leaving its occupants struggling in the cold waters of the river. Don Rees immediately let go of the tow and turned his boat around to pick up the men but as they grabbed the gunwale to get on board, that boat too was swamped and all four fishermen were now left to swim for shore. Although only twenty to thirty yards off the land, the cold water and heavy clothing made swimming almost impossible. Don managed to grab Edwin's shoulder to help him get to the shore but another wave saw them parted and he lost sight of him. Don and Ian did manage to scramble ashore at the Ferry Bay whilst David grabbed on to a small buoy that had floated out from one of the sunken boats. Of Mr Davies senior, there was no sign.

The incident had been witnessed by those at Black Tar, awaiting the return of the men. Soon another boat with Idwal England, his son Roderick and Gareth Morgan arrived at the scene and rescued David from the water. But despite an extensive search, Mr Edwin Davies was not found until two days later.



Edwin Davies (1907 - 1970)

The incident, although fifty years ago is still etched deep in the memory of the family, those directly involved and those who

witnessed the tragedy. It is also a reminder of the dangers and harsh working conditions of villagers who have risked their lives in one of the traditional industries that has shaped the Llangwm we live in today.

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References:

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Thanks to David Davies and Ian Jacob for sharing their first hand recollections of the tragedy and to David and Sue for allowing me to take copies of the newspaper reports.