

A Harrowing Tale of Death at Sea

One fine night in June 1858, John Williamson, William Jenkinson & William Ross left Filey to fish about 5 miles south and towards Flamborough. They had just about begun to shoot their lines when a sudden squall of wind caught hold of their coble and turned her over. John Williamson and William Jenkinson were thrown clear but William Ross was partly underneath her. William Jenkinson managed to get back. He dragged William Ross from underneath and helped him onto the upturned coble. Eventually John Williamson managed to reach them and the three of them realised what peril they were in.

By this time the coble was a couple of feet underwater and leaning over. John Williamson uttered "Lord, help us!" William Jenkinson passed them a bowl¹(pronounced bowel) each to help keep them afloat William Ross is then quoted as saying afterwards "I tied him fast to one with a tow (pronounced tow) which was raffled with mine, and in the boat's bottom, all loose. I loosed it off the bowl strop, took my neckerchief off my neck and weaved it through the bowl strop, and then Jenkinson made it fast round me. John Williamson had his in his hand. The wind now rose and the water dashed against us very heavy. John Williamson was washed off and I took an oar from William (Jenkinson) and pushed it towards him. He took hold and I pulled him to us and got him on the coble again. Then John Williamson said "Let's us all shout as hard as we can, likely there may be someone riding under the cliffs" They were about a mile off for the Flamborough boats were 'trunking' (Catching crabs)"

They shouted till they were hoarse, but no-one heard and they gave up thinking it was no use. The wind increased and blew more furiously and they began to sing "Jesu lover of my soul." The boat began to sink further down into the water. John Williamson who was the oldest of the three men (50 years) was washed off again. William Ross goes on to say "I took an oar for the second time to try and reach him but I reached too far and fell off into the water and I was washed ever so far from her, but found when I got back that she was so much underwater that when my feet touched her, I was up to my waist. At last I got hold of the end of the mast and hung on there. I could see John Williamson not very far off, but he was so exhausted that he couldn't reach us. He realised he was sinking and was singing "Cover my defenceless head, with the shadow of thy wing" I could just see the top of his sou'wester out of the water and within a minute or two we could see him no more. We were by ourselves.

William Jenkinson said "Ross, can you pray?" - - He was converted you see sir, and I was not - and I said. "No. I don't know how" so he said "then say the words after me as I say them", and he began to pray. I said what he said; and then he sang and I sang - and at last I believed in Jesus who died for sinners like me, and could save me on a boat's bottom out at sea on a dark night. After that, I felt all my fear go away and had a feeling that I should not die. I thought that I would try and swim to land - I left the boat but soon failed and got back with difficulty. Jenkinson was still praying, in fact

¹ A small fisherman's float

he never stopped. I rested for about 5 minutes and then ventured a second time to swim to shore. When Jenkinson saw me leaving a second time he said "Oh Lord help me, I am left by myself" I couldn't bear to him say that so I went back and decided not to leave him anymore." They both carried on singing and praying until it went really dark. By this time the coble was well down in the water and the wind was strong.

In the end they both floated off her. William Ross felt around in the dark for William Jenkinson and realised that his head was underwater. (His bowl had shifted and kept him down) Ross could feel Jenkinson's hair but he couldn't see him as it was so dark. He then felt a line in his hand whilst he was struggling and pulled himself back to the coble, hauling himself up onto it. He tried to look around for William Jenkinson but could see nothing. The moon began to rise and just headed the top of the cliffs. He looked towards Filey and wondered if he would ever see his home again in this world and whether rescuers would come and save him. By now it was about 10 o'clock or maybe a bit later.

Then he saw a billy-boy to the north and leeward of him and he shouted, but no-one heard even though she seemed to be a stones throw away. Shortly afterwards a schooner came to windward, but again no-one heard. By now he was drifting way out to sea and he had to creep backwards and forwards on his knees to stop her from sinking altogether. He tried to take her rudder off, thinking that if she went down suddenly that it would keep him afloat, but he couldn't manage it. He tried to lower her sail but couldn't do that either and realised that it was probably that which was keeping her from sinking altogether as when the wind got up it would get underneath it. He then thought he saw a sail in the distance and was overjoyed, but his hopes were dashed when he realised that it was the flag flying at the top of the bowl which he'd fastened to William Jenkinson. He hung on for his life even though the wind became stronger and stronger and the waves kept washing right over him.

Morning was beginning to break and he saw a ship. There were three of them going close around Flambro' Head and he thought to himself that if the first one doesn't see me then one of them will because he was right in their track. They did find him "They came up to me stripped in their shirts and drawers, and without shoes. They laid hold of me and took me in. The first and only words I could say were "Pull for yon bowl" which they did and found William Jenkinson's body still tied to it. They handed me two or three pots of coffee over her side to refresh me. I was then taken on board and shifted (clothes changed)." It was now about 4.30am. The vessel which rescued William Ross was The Shepherdess and Captain Richard Britlington of Hartlepool who told young Ross that at first they thought they heard the birds on the cliffs and then the mate took out his glass and saw what he thought was a man on a plank.

William Ross was the son of Wesleyan parents and the only unconverted member of a very large family. All of his brothers belonged to the Wesleyans and one was the Reverend Castle Ross who was a travelling preacher. Another brother was John Ross who was a local preacher and class leader and the 'ranter' on the yawl 'Charity'. John Ross recounted how he'd seen the vessel come into the Bay with her flag at half mast – and which meant only one thing. He was at his mother's house on Cliff Top at the time and so removed his brother William's stockings, gurnsey and other things which

were on the line so that they were out of his mother's sight – the reason for this was that he remembered how his own father Isaac Ross had drowned and how the sight of his clothes affected his mother.

William Jenkinson was engaged to John Williamson's daughter, Mary Elizabeth and she later married William Ross (in 1865). John Williamson was found a while afterwards when he was washed up by Flambro'. He was buried on the 8th July. Mary Elizabeth's brother John married Betsy Jenkinson and they had a son Thomas who married Ann Jenkinson. Ann is mentioned in 'The Diary of an Edwardian Schoolboy' when the boy stayed with her at 85 Queen Street.

Transcribed by George Shaw with additional notes by Kath Wilkie