

## **THE STOTFIELD DISASTER**

**Christmas Day, Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> December 1806**

### ***The Loss of the Fishermen of Stotfield***

Stotfield, now a part of Lossiemouth, was a very different place in 1806. Branderburgh had not yet been built, and the village of Stotfield was separated from Lossiemouth by the Coulard Hill and its quarries. The road out of Stotfield followed the line of what is now Tulloch's Brae, joining the road leading from Lossiemouth to Elgin by way of Oakenhead, Caysbriggs and Pitgaveny.

The village of Stotfield consisted of a few rows of cottages set with their backs to the sea, the survivors of which can still be seen in the old Paradise Row, whilst the small sandy bay in the shelter of the Hythe Rock formed a natural harbour for the fishing boats. A few villas had already been erected along the coast as summer residences for some of the more prosperous businessmen of Elgin, so that they could take advantage of what is now the west beach of Lossiemouth. The lighthouse at Covesea had not been built by this time.

The morning of Christmas Day, Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> December 1806 dawned calm and fair, and boats from most of the fishing villages along the Moray Firth put to sea. This included the complete fishing fleet of Stotfield, three boats crewed by twenty-one men, who set to sea early in the morning. This was the whole male population of the village apart from three elderly fishermen who were now too old to go to sea, and three boys who were too young to go to the fishing.

The fishing grounds were just a few miles off the coast, outside the Halliman Skerries, and the boats were quite small undecked open vessels, with only a low rail for the protection of the fishermen. They could easily be pulled up onto a sheltered beach, but provided little protection for the men and were easily swamped in even a moderately rough sea.

By about noon the fishermen were returning to shore, and were in sight of their families waiting on the beach, when, according to contemporary reports "a violent and tremendous hurricane came from the West and Southwest". Mountainous seas broke over their boats, and despite the best efforts of the men to row back to the Hythe at Stotfield, the boats were carried down the Firth and into the open sea. Neither boats nor men were ever seen again.

The storm affected the whole of the Moray Firth, and boats from Avoch on the Black Isle and from Rottenslough in the parish of Rathven were also lost, and a boat was overturned in Burghead Harbour with the loss of three lives.

In Stotfield 17 widows and 47 children were left unprovided for, and, with two of the wives being pregnant at the time, this made a total of 49 fatherless children, together with numerous aged parents and relatives who were also dependant on the support of the fishermen. Out of the 21 men no less than 10 bore the surname Edward, and were all closely related as fathers, sons, brothers, uncles and nephews. Because of the common practice of intermarriage within these fishing villages many of the womenfolk had lost more than just a husband.

It soon became obvious that a purely local collection would not raise sufficient aid for these families, and the minister of the parish of Drainie sent appeals for subscriptions as far afield as Aberdeen, Edinburgh and London, and a committee was established to manage the fund. Extracts from the 'Minutes of the Managers of the Stotfield and Burghead Widows Fund' are reproduced here, and give a very complete list of the victims of the disaster and their dependants.

### ***The Setting-up of the Widows Fund***

*The following folios are reproduced verbatim from 'The Register of the Proceedings of the Managers of the Stotfield and Burghead Widows Fund 1807 – 1842'.<sup>1</sup>*

*f1.* This charitable institution took its rise from a very calamitous event that fell the Fishing Village of Stotfield in the parish of Drainie near Elgin on Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> Decem<sup>r</sup>. 1806. The morning of that day being very calm and favourable most of the fishing boats in the Moray Firth went to sea; and among others the boats of Stotfield, the crews of these being all the seamen belonging to the place, excepting three superannuated infirm men who had given over the business of fishing, and a few boys too young to ingadge in it, - After having finished there process of fishing and while on there return home with the fruits of there industry, these unfortunate people were about noon overtaken by such a violent and tremendous hurricane from W and SW that after there utmost exertions none of them were able to regain the shore, and being driven before the wind, down the firth, neither men nor boats were ever seen or heard of afterwards!!!. This dreadful gale continued with unabated fury for about four hours and then the wind changing to the N gradually subsided.

*f2.* By this melancholy disaster no less than twenty one seamen lost their lives, leaving seventeen widows and forty seven children, unprovided for to bewail their untimely fate, besides aged Parents and other relatives all depending for there support in the labouring of the deceased.

<u>No</u>	<u>Names of Seamen Lost</u>
<u>1<sup>st</sup> Boat</u>	
1	Joseph Young, Senior, Skipper
2	Joseph Young, Junior, son to ditto
3	Alex. Young, also son to Joseph Young

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<sup>1</sup> National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh, Drainie Kirk Session Minute Books CH2/348/11

- 4 William McLeod, Elder
- 5 John McLeod, son to ditto
- 6 Alex. Edward, Junior
- 7 Robt. Edward, brother to ditto

2<sup>nd</sup> Boat

- 8 Alex. Edward, Skipper
- 9 Wiliam Edward, Junior, son to ditto
- 10 William Edward, Senior, brother to the Skipper
- 11 John Edward, son to “Little” John Edward
- 12 William Baikie
- 13 James Edward, Boatswain
- 14 Jamie Edward, son to ditto

3<sup>rd</sup> Boat

- 15 James Mitchell, Skipper
- 16 William Crocket
- 17 John Young
- 18 John Edward, Junior, “Fixie”
- 19 Alex. Main from Nairn
- 20 James McLeod from Nairn
- 21 John Edward, Senior

*f3. The numbers in parentheses in the following lists appear to relate to the numbering in the list above;*

<u>No</u>	<u>Names of Widows</u>	<u>Sons</u>	<u>Daughters</u>	<u>Losses sustained in their families</u>
1	Margt. Meals (Mrs Young) Bachelor Bachelor		5	Lost husband and her sons (2,3)
2	Janet McQueen (Mrs McLeod)	1	5	Lost husband and son (5)
3	Elspet Edward (Mrs McLeod)	2	5	Lost husband and father-in-law
4	Margt. Cooper (Mrs Edward)	2	1	Lost husband and brother-in-law
5	Anne Garden (Mrs Edward)	1	1	ditto
6	Janet Edward (Mrs Edward)	1	1	Lost husband and son (9)
7	Jean Findlay jnr (Mrs Edward)	1	3	Lost husband and nephew
8	Jean Findlay snr. (Mrs Edward)	1	1	Lost husband
9	Isobel Findlay			

	(Mrs Edward)	1	1	ditto
	Widower			
10	Christn. Mitchell			
	(Mrs Edward)	1	3	Lost husband and son (14)
	Bachelor			
11	Janet Meals			
	(Mrs Mitchell)	4	1	Lost husband
12	Janet Young			
	(Mrs Crocket)	2	2	Lost husband and brother (17)
13	Margt. Edward			
	(Mrs Young)	2	3	Lost husband and brother (21)
14	Margt. Dick			
	(Mrs Edward)	1	1	Lost husband
15	Margaret Mitchell			
	(Mrs Main)	1	2	Lost husband and brother (15)
16	Margt. Edward youngest			
	(Mrs McLeod)	2	3	Lost husband and brother (18)
17	Margt. Edward senior			
	(Mrs Edward)	2	3	Lost husband and two brothers (8,10)

*f4.* Besides the children annex'd there were three;

1. Jean Mcleod, daughter of William McLeod (No 4) married to Alexr Maine, seaman in Nairn
2. Robt. Mitchell, son of Jamie Mitchell, Skipper (No 15) sailor on board the 'Fame' belonging to Findhorn
3. Wm. Baikie, son of William Baikie (No 12) sailor on board a brig belonging to Nairn

Two children have also been born since 25<sup>th</sup> Decem<sup>r</sup>. 1806 by widows left pregnant, viz;

1. Alex Edward, son of Alex Edward (No 6) by Margaret Cooper
2. Margt Edward, daughter of John Edward, "Fixie" (No 18) by Margaret Dick

*f5.* List of those dependent relatives, besides widows and children, and requiring either occasional or permanent assistance.

1. John Edward senior, father of John Edward jnr, (No 11), long bedridden, since dead.
2. Robert Mitchell, superannuated seaman, father of James Mitchell (No 15).
3. Alex. Edward, old skipper, uncle to Alex and Rbt. Edwards (No 6,7).
4. Margaret McQueen, mother of John Young (17), removed with her daughter Janet Young (No16) to Buckie.
5. Christian Edward, aunt and Guardian to William Baikies orphan children (No 12)
6. Jean Edward, mother of John Edward junior "Fixie" (No 18)
7. Isobel Innes, aunt to Alex. and Robert Edwards (No 6,7)
8. Margaret Robertson, stepmother to James Edward, Boatswain (No 13).

f6. The unexpected loss of so many useful and important lives, and the number of persons involved in consequence in the deepest misery excited in a high degree the regret and commiseration of the country, and it was proposed by some humane Gentlemen living in the neighbourhood that a Subscription and Collection should be set on foot, with all convenient speed for the relief of those distressed families, and after sundry conferences on the subject this measure was at last fully resolved.

But the people of Stotfield were not the only sufferers on this occasion, a boat was that same day overset in the harbour of Burghead, in the adjoining parish of Duffus, and three of the crew perished leaving three widows and six children, as under;

<u>Seamens Names</u>	<u>Widows</u>	<u>No of Children</u>
1. James Jaffrey	Isobel Shaw	5
2. Hugh Roy	Jean Logie	-
3. William Edward	Isobel Shaw snr.	1

On considering the circumstances of the above destitute families in Burghead, it was agreed that they should be admitted to participate in the benefits arising from the proposed Subscription and Collection, not only on account of the similarity of there situation, but to prevent two separate (f7.) applications for public aid, and that the money to be thus raised should be divided between the sufferers in Stotfield and Burghead in proportion to the number of distressed Seamen's families to be provided for in each place being eighteen in Stotfield and three in Burghead, - that is to say that one seventh part of the money collected should be applied to the sufferers in Burghead and the remainder to those in Stotfield.

*The subscription paper was drawn up, and it was agreed that the money should be lodged in the hands of James Milne, Esq., agent for the Aberdeen Banking Company in Elgin.*

f8. *The Managers of the fund were listed as;*

#### Drainey

1. John Brander Esq. of Pitgaveny
2. Mr George Watson, Ardivot
3. Revd. Mr Lewis Gordon, Minr of Drainey
4. Mr Wm. Reid, Merchant in Lossiemouth

#### Elgin

5. James McAndrew, Esq.
6. Alexander Brander, Esq.
7. Revd. William Gordon, Minister of Elgin
8. Mr John Jack, Merchant

#### Burghead

9. Sir Archibald Dunbar, Bart.
10. William Young Esq., of Inverugie
11. Mr Donald Smith, Factor, Gordonstown
12. Revd. John Gordon, Minister of Duffus

*f9.* The managers were restrained from applying to the towns of Cullen and Banff to the eastward, and Inverness and Fortrose to the westward, as the same unfortunate storm had proved fatal to a boat crew of seven men at Rottenslough in the neighbourhood of the former towns, and to another of the same number at Avoch in the neighbourhood of the latter.

Besides in addition to the former disasters of the winter, on the 26<sup>th</sup> February another boat belonging to Pettie was driven on shore at Spey's Bay near the Black Hill with two dead men on board, lashed to the timbers, the remainder of the crew having perished at sea.

*f10 – f24 give details of the collections and its disbursement.*

*f25.* Total raised by Subscription and Collection £1359/14/2d<sup>2</sup>.

### ***The Widows Fund and its Distribution***

The total amount raised by the fund seems to vary according to different sources. The Minutes quoted above list the total sum as £1359/14/2d, whilst the memorial tablet set up in Drainie Kirk mentions a figure of £1152/2/3d, and Agnes Keith<sup>2</sup> quotes a final total figure from all sources of £1426/12/4d.

The first distribution of money was made on 12<sup>th</sup> March 1807, and payments were made three times a year, being £1 to each widow and 10 shillings to each child and elderly relative, giving a total of £3 a year to every widow and £1/10/0d to each child or elderly relative. During the famine of 1808 the payments were modified, with four distributions of meal and two of money. From 1809 to 1814 the pattern of three payments per year was resumed, these being made in February, June and October.

From 1814 the frequency of payments was reduced to two each year, the widows still receiving £3 each year, but the children, who were now by this time growing up and providing income for the family, had their total payments reduced to 23 shillings a year. By 1822 the youngest child recipient reached the age of 14, and ceased to be a charge on the fund, but sixteen people remained on the register, being 14 widows, one elderly man and a woman who received a small fee for looking after the sick and the elderly.

By 1833 the fund was running down, and the payment to the widows was only made once each year, in October, being by this time reduced to £1/10d. This idea of only one payment a year proved to be unpopular with the recipients, and the managers of the fund reverted to the system of two payments, in May and October, until the fund was finally exhausted in 1842 and was wound up.

The final page in the book of the Stotfield Charity Fund reads;

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<sup>2</sup> Keith. A. The Parish of Drainie and Lossiemouth, private publication, Lossiemouth 1975, in Moray District Archives.

“Elgin 7<sup>th</sup> June 1842. At a meeting of the Trustees of the Stotfield Widow’s Fund held here this day, Present, the Revd, Dr. Rose of Drainie and John Jack, Elgin, and finding that the fund is drawing to a close, their remaining only a ballance of eight pounds and ten pence, in the hands of the British Linen Co. It was agreed to divide the whole of this day’s distribution amongst the Survivors of those having an interest therin, so as finally to wind up, and close the concern.

The five surviving widows each received £1/10/0d, and the remaining 10/10d was given to a woman whose father had been lost in the disaster and who had been in very poor health for many years. The names of these five surviving widows are given as;

Jean Findlay	(Mrs William Edward)
Elspet Edward	(Mrs John McLeod)
Margaret Edward	(Mrs John Young)
Margaret Cooper	(Mrs Alex. Edward)
Christian Mitchell	(Mrs James Edward).

### ***The Meteorological Aspects of the Disaster***

In 1806 very few records of the weather were being kept, and in this area it would appear that only Gordon Castle, Innes House and the Manse of Boharm were taking regular readings. Only the latter record has so far been traced.

From an analysis of this record it would appear that December 1806 was characterized by a series of Atlantic depressions crossing Scotland. This would have made it difficult for the fishermen to put to sea on a regular basis, and they would have been obliged to take advantage of whatever weather window presented itself. Although on the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> of December 1806 the wind may have been light, they would almost certainly have been aware that the thickening frontal cloud moving in from the west indicated that a change was on the way, which would have limited the time they were able to spend at the fishing.

This depression, however, seems to have been more intense than the earlier ones, and was probably accelerating and deepening rapidly, the consequences of which caught them unawares.

At 9 a.m. on the 24<sup>th</sup> December the minister at Boharm recorded that the skies were fair, with a SW wind, a temperature of 42° Fahrenheit, and a barometer reading of 29.51 inches (1001.2 mb). On the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> the skies were still fair, the wind still in the SW, the temperature had risen to an unseasonable 54° F, but the pressure had ominously fallen to 28.77 inches (976.1 mb). This fall of 25 mb overnight would have indicated the approach of a deepening area of low pressure, but it is unlikely that the fishermen of Stotfield had the benefits of a barometer to give them this advance warning.

The depression crossed the Moray Firth during the afternoon of Christmas Day, and by 3 p.m. the temperature at Boharm had suddenly plummeted to 39° F, and was to fall still further during the evening. By the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> the wind was NW'ly with snow falling, the temperature stood at 36° F, and the barometer had risen just as rapidly as it had fallen, standing at 29.52 inches (1001.4 Mb).

### *Postscript*

To quote again from Agnes Keith, writing in 1975; “Fishing is no longer carried on from the little harbour of Stotfield, and the story of the Stotfield disaster has passed into history. But the echo lingers on. To this day no Lossiemouth fisherman will put to sea on Christmas Day.

In 2005 the fishing industry in Lossiemouth is no more, but the memory of those Stotfield fishermen remains in the haunting words of the song about the disaster, written by Trevor Foster, which was so often performed at the Lossiemouth Folk Club in the Beach Bar overlooking the Hythe of Stotfield, from where the fishermen has sailed to their death so many years before.