

THE EDWARD ROE COLLECTION

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Kerry County Museum

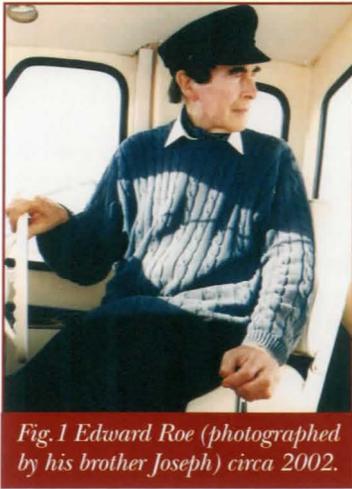


Fig.1 Edward Roe (photographed by his brother Joseph) circa 2002.

Edward Roe was well known in Tralee as a local historian who had a particular passion for the sea and maritime history (fig.1). Sadly he passed away during the summer of 2009, but, generously, his brother Joseph donated Edward's collection of books and papers to Kerry County Library and his collection of maritime artefacts to Kerry County Museum. It is the latter collection that this article will largely deal with, although the paper archive and the artefacts are inextricably linked.

Roe was meticulous in his research and there were a number of specific projects that he carried out exhaustive research on, such as his study of Barrow castle, which was published in *Blennerville: Gateway to Tralee's Past*. However, it was his exploration and detailed study of two shipwrecks off the Kerry coast that is of concern here. During his physical investigation of these wrecks from the mid 1960s to the mid 1980s, he recovered numerous artefacts, at a time before more modern legislation concerning shipwrecks, which now requires one to have a licence before investigating any wreck over 100 years old.

One of the wrecks was a schooner called 'Onward', a 99 ton vessel, the remains of which lie at Barrow beach (fig. 2). Roe's research led him to discover that the boat was built by George Asplet on Jersey in 1859 and was registered at Swansea in the ownership of Mr. Henry Hoskin. The ill-fated ship was carrying a cargo of coal from Swansea to Tralee in January 1877 when it was wrecked. In 1984, when storms drove the wreck closer to the shore and broke it up, its cargo was scattered all along the beach, with the result that many people in the Tralee area had warm fires that winter. One local wit complained at the time that the delivery had been delayed by over a century. Roe went so far in his research of the wreck that he even had the metal components from the ship scientifically analysed to determine their composition and, with the assistance of a contact in Swansea, had the coal analysed to determine its likely source in Wales. *The Kerry Evening Post* reported on the 17th of January 1877 that:

On Monday morning last the schooner Onward of Swansea (Griffiths master) ... struck, on what is known as the Flag Rock, a small flat rock which is only visible at low water, and which is situated about 1 mile to the north west of the large Muckelagh rock and is very dangerous. The crew believing she was in danger of going down, though it was blowing a gale at the time, took to their boat, and, after being buffeted about for nearly six hours, at last sighted the light house at the Samphire roads and providentially reached it in safety. The sails that the schooner had on at the time they left her were let flying, and, as the tide was rising, she floated off the rock and was blown ashore, where from the violent weather since, she is expected to go to pieces.

What could be salvaged from the ship at the time was auctioned soon after and Roe recounts the fate of the ship's figurehead in one of his letters to John Jean of Jersey, written on the 25th March 1884.

A quaint detail of how the vessel's destruction is remembered in local folklore is, I think quite interesting. A custom, not



Fig.2 Remains of "Onward" at Barrow (courtesy of Kerry Library).

altogether dead, in Kerry and one which may have been practiced widely in Ireland, is, by some believed to have pre-Christian origins ... The late evening of 1st February, "St. Bridget's day", is known as "BIDDY'S NIGHT". Groups of young men and young women bedecked with coloured ribbons, bonnets, shawls and sometimes masks, would go from house to house in their local areas with "the biddy", a female effigy, usually a rag doll, which possibly depicted the saint. They would usually have tin whistles, a fiddle, a concertina - to provide suitable accompaniments for some of their number who would perform some lively dances for the entertainment of each household, by whom they would be rewarded with treats or money.

At the sale, by auction, of the ONWARD, on 22nd January, 1877, some iron, timber and the ship's figurehead were acquired by JOHN SCANLON of BARROW, a blacksmith and small farmer. Ten days later, the figurehead was paraded as the biddy, surpassing all rivals. The "Barrow Biddy" as it came to be called, was a celebrated local 'possession', proudly displayed on its annual outings. In time, the custom died out locally, the 'biddy' hidden away and unregarded in an outhouse, was left to moulder. Some 20 years ago, when I first researched the Onward, I hoped that the figurehead might then still exist. It came as a profound disappointment to me to learn from John Scanlon (grandson of the blacksmith and then about 50) that the old figurehead had become decrepit and ravaged by woodworm when, a "few years ago" (his words), he put it on the fire ...

Material recovered by Roe from this vessel includes: timber planking and sections of the frame; treenails, metal bolts and tacks; as well as metal sheeting. He also retained a large lump of coal from the wreck, as well as a fragment of a whiskey jar that he identified as coming from T.D Hammett, Bonded Storekeeper and Provision Merchant in Swansea. Interestingly, in an 'agreement and account of the crew' for the previous year - it was specifically stated that no spirits were allowed on board.



Fig.3 Tankards from Grenzhausen, Staffordshire ware teapot & glass bottle.



Fig. 4 Roe's reconstruction drawings of one of his tin-glazed earthenware bowls (courtesy of Kerry Library).

A wreck that is far more mysterious and important when it comes to Roe's collection and research is one from Ballyheigue dating from the 18th century. After a decade of persistent research from the mid-1960s, Roe appeared to have been as yet uncertain as to the conclusive identification of the Ballyheigue wreck. While later tentatively identified by him as the 'Wind Trader' which supposedly went down in 1746, his reasons for this are presently uncertain and so this identification remains for the moment unconfirmed, unless further information is forthcoming. Fortunately, some of the items recovered from the vessel provide quite a tight date-range during which this wrecking could have taken place. A Russian Kopek coin, dated 1727, was recovered, as well as a number of clay pipes stamped with the initials CH. Roe discovered that Charles Hicks of Bristol produced these pipes from 1722 and ceased manufacture of them in 1746. If nothing more, at least we can conclusively date the shipwreck to the second quarter of the 18th century, and more specifically to a 20-year period from 1727-1746. We also know that there was at least one human life lost on the ship. As well as a small number of pig bones salvaged from the wreck, there was the humerus (upper arm bone) of an adolescent. Roe does not seem to have salvaged timbers or bolts from this wreck, as he did from the Onward, although he did recover a wooden pulley.

Roe apparently visited the wreck a number of times over a period of at least ten years, starting in the mid-1960s. In a letter written in 1984, he described the circumstances surrounding his discovery of the wreck while visiting Ballyheigue beach with an acquaintance. Investigation of the wreck produced two large, seemingly intact, Westerwald jugs (or vases), embossed with the cipher GR (Georgius Rex), which Roe says were brought home by the boy who uncovered them, whose parents were acquaintances of his. These jugs were kept in their house for a while, until they were given away. Their present location is unknown, though Roe managed to photograph and record them prior to their disappearance.

The material from this ship provides a rich cross-section of the cargo of an 18th century trade-ship. The bulk of the material acquired by Kerry County Museum from this wreck consists of 18th century pottery, most of which is English, but with the addition of four remarkably preserved grey - and blue-glazed German Westerwald tankards of the aforementioned type, all with the GR cipher (fig. 3). These were identified for Roe by an expert at the National Museum of Ireland as being from the Grenzhausen region of Germany.

Of significant importance in the collection is a large assemblage of Staffordshire tea-ware in exceptional condition (fig. 3). Tea - and coffee-houses were increasing in popularity during the early 18th century and this type of plain stone-ware pottery would have been cheaper to produce for the commercial market, though still being a high quality ware suitable for the wealthy customer. Most of these complete teapots, saucers, mugs and containers were 'Staffordshire salt-glazed', being off-white in colour and glazed by throwing rock-salt into the kiln during firing. They are elegant yet simple in style, and decoration, where it occurs at all, is minimal. A number of the Staffordshire teapots are decorated with a dark-brown glaze and a red-brown glaze also. The intact or near-intact state of most of these pieces is due in part to the fact that they were carefully packed in straw for transport during the voyage. Their near-perfect condition,

particularly in view of the fact that they, in their day, would not have been considered high-status, expensive items, only adds further to their rarity and value as archaeological artefacts.

There is also a large quantity of broken pottery shards from the wreck, representing a number of different types and regions. Roe had samples of each type sent to a ceramics' specialist at the Museum of London for identification in the 1960s. In particular, a quantity of broken 'delftware' bowls - colourfully decorated tin-glazed earthenware - captured Roe's imagination, despite being of poorer quality (fig. 4).

Perhaps most significantly of all the artefacts in the collection are three felt hats with horsehair buttons, in exceptional condition (fig. 5). Roe sought advice from the Textile Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum in cleaning and conserving these - as he sought advice and consulted on all of the items he recovered - and was told that these were probably tricorne hats and were very rare items in such good condition. The preservation of these hats is really quite extraordinary considering their immersion in the ocean for over two centuries, but their remarkable condition is also presumably due to the manner in which they were stacked for transport.

Also very important additions to the collection are six wine or port bottles, which were apparently found packed in casks (fig. 3). As they were corked, their contents are retained, though one of the bottles was opened by Roe in order to investigate the contents. The liquid contained within is quite acrid, having been turned to acetic acid in the intervening centuries. The bottles themselves are of a typology identified as having been produced in Bristol during the 18th century.

In 1974, perhaps during one of his last visits to the wreck, Roe recovered an ornate shoe buckle, a horn knife handle, a hatchet and a cannon ball. A number of other items, including wine bottles, buckles and Grenzhausen ware were recovered by other individuals around the same time. A sharpening stone, photographed and described by Roe, is amongst the artefacts missing from his collection. Some items - a Westerwald jug, a silver spoon with a 'W' mark on the bowl, a number of buttons, a gunshot and a buckle were reportedly in the possession of a group, mainly Listowel-based, that was set up at the time with the aim of responsibly preserving and recording artefacts recovered from the wreck. Though Roe was personally in possession of some of these reported items, it is not known what became of the Westerwald jugs and spoon, as they are not part of the collection donated to the museum. It is also unknown what became of the Kopek coin and the items recovered by other individuals from the wreck, though some of the wine bottles were reportedly sold locally.

In addition, 62 fragments of Westerwald and Staffordshire pottery from the wreck were donated to the museum by Mr. Maurice

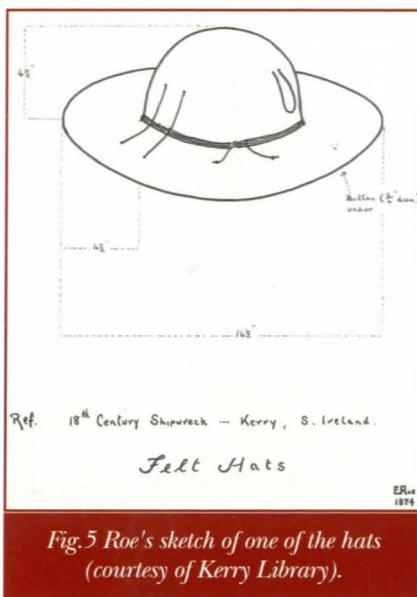


Fig. 5 Roe's sketch of one of the hats (courtesy of Kerry Library).

O'Keeffe, while another sealed bottle was recently handed in by Mr. Michael Brown. Kerry County Museum would be very pleased to hear of any other material or information that people may hold, so that they can learn more about this fascinating wreck. Edward Roe's meticulous research, documenting and labelling makes this material so important, for without that there would be no context and, thus, no story to tell.