



TALES OF THE RIVERMAN 62



FERRIES

We do not have this problem in our City now, we have bridges, but all over the world there still seem to be similar accidents involving ferries.

Ferries are mentioned a lot in the minutes of the Society. Sometimes, the ferries themselves got into trouble. The following are some interesting passages taken from the 1800's. Few photographs in those days' but excellent reading.

30th November 1864 a rare tragedy occurred when a ferry boat in the harbour area capsized and twenty seven people were thrown into the river. Twenty of them lost their lives. "Glasgow Weekly Herald 1864. Saturday morning, December 3rd Terrible Catastrophe at the Broomielaw. Every day's experience proves the truth of the inspired axiom, that "in the midst of life we are in death". Accidents of various kinds - explosions of fire-damp and gun powder - railway and shipping collisions - storms, fires, and murders - are every now and then filling our graveyards with men and woman cut off without warning in the prime of life; but when the causes can be traced clearly to our own folly, want of foresight, recklessness or stupidity, we may well question the extent and reality of our boasted civilisation. We believe that prevention is better than cure. We have had another terrible warning in the awful catastrophe which occurred at the Broomielaw on Wednesday evening, and we earnestly trust that it may be turned to a profitable account. The story may be told in a very few words. There was an overcrowded boat - a flooded river - a dark night - an unskilful rower - an upsetting of the craft - and the rest is known. At least twenty men, the majority in the prime of life, have lost their lives by the catastrophe. It is an awful list of mortality - it is a sad and agonising commentary on the manner in which these ferries have been conducted. Looking to the sad result, we may now express surprise that calamities of this kind have not been of more frequent occurrence, when we regard the enormous and ever increasing passenger traffic at the river ferries which has been carried from side to side in such clumsy boats. The habit of overcrowding the ferry boats was either winked at or ignored altogether. It was also an everyday practice, from morning to night, for the ferryman to allow all and sundry to take the oars and welcome; and in this way the labour was shifted from the proper shoulders, and the dangers of the passengers considerably increased. And, moreover, the boatman never attempted to keep the slightest order among the passengers; and in cases of overcrowding, indeed, they could not. People were regularly permitted to stand, not only upon the seats, but often upon the very gunwales and the platforms on a level with them at either end of the boat, with the sullen and slimy waters rippling and beating within a few inches of their feet. The centre of gravity was thus raised far above the gunwales of the boats, and the point

of danger reached in innumerable instances without the slightest necessity whatever. This reckless practice has become so very common, indeed, that, in the course of yesterday, while the blanched bodies of the poor victims were being dragged from the river, people were actually seen standing upon the seats of the moving ferry-boats gazing upon the sad spectacle. The calamity of Wednesday night, in short, was the natural and almost inevitable consequence of negligence on the part of the authorities, of carelessness or indifference on the part of the boatman, and of ignorance on the part of the unfortunate passengers. The catastrophe which occurred at Govan Ferry upwards of three years ago, whereby seven persons lost their lives, induced the River Trustees to erect a landing-stage at the Point House; but this only removes one-half of the danger. The ferry still remains, with its frequently over-crowded boats, liable at every hour of the day to be capsized by the passing steamers. A calamity far more deadly has again occurred in the river, and most assuredly the public will not be satisfied unless something is done and that immediately, to prevent the recurrence of such tragic scenes in future.

Same paper p. 5 –Report-Terrible Catastrophe at the Broomielaw-Upsetting of Ferry Boat-Twenty lives lost. Ferry boat in charge of assistant Ferry-man, left the stairs opposite the foot of Clyde Street for the south side of the river. Licensed, we believe to carry 24 persons besides the Ferry man. As for the boat, she did not sink, but turned right over and floated bottom upwards down the stream, with several persons clinging to her keel and gunwales. Immediately after the accident, a Captain, of the Clyde Police, whose exertions throughout deserves honourable mention, despatched messengers to the Humane Society House, and to Renfrew, for assistance, in the shape of men and boats. At a late hour operations were commenced with a view to recover, if possible, the bodies of the drowned. Mr. George Geddes of the Humane Society dragged the river for some time in the neighbourhood of Clyde Street. But, the search proved unsuccessful. The dragging was greatly impeded by the flooded state of the river, and the strong south-easterly wind which was blowing. The search for the bodies of the drowned commenced and carried on for some time without success on Wednesday evening, was resumed shortly after eight o'clock on Thursday morning. Mr. George Geddes of the Humane Society set to work, with an assistant, and subsequently attained the services of another boat, with two men. In addition to these the Police Captain had got up four boats connected with the river Trust service, so that the search was prosecuted simultaneously by six different crews. About 10 o'clock the exertions of the searchers were rewarded by the discovery of a body, .until five o'clock in the afternoon, the result being the recovery of seventeen bodies. All between Clyde Street and Hydepark Street Ferry 200 yards Within 30 yards of the north Quay (The Recovery House at Windmill Croft Quay and a shed at Clyde Trustees yard were used. Mr. Geddes and his assistant had pulled to the surface two bodies which had been lying in close proximity to each other – this had led to rumour spreading about the two causing a disturbance.) The practice of permitting passengers to land from and get on board steamers out of ferry-boats is attended at all times with considerable danger, and therefore we think it ought to be

abolished. It serves no end of public importance, and one serious accident in a long term of years is quite sufficient to outweigh all its advantages. We trust, therefore, that the Trustees will set about the reconstruction of the ferry boat system on the Clyde in a liberal spirit and we venture to predict that the city will not be startled for a very long time by a similar catastrophe to that which occurred at the foot of Clyde Street on Wednesday evening”.

The Clyde Ferries as man traps—Glasgow Herald May 5th 1874. Sir, I am just come from seeing a man drowned in the Clyde and will state the case as briefly as possible. A man the worse of drink comes forward to the Clyde Street Ferry, pays his halfpenny, passes through the bar and goes forward to the head of the stair. There are two or three men waiting on the boat which is at the opposite side and the tide is at its lowest. Surely, however there is some provision made by the managers of the ferries with their former abundant and now increased revenue, for such cases as this. They will have their stair well lighted, buoys hanging and a hook at hand? None of these. The stair is dark, a Policeman stands outside the rails, but by the time that he comes round the man has risen and sunk to rise no more. There is neither buoy nor hook to be had and one has to stand helplessly looking on. This I believe is no solitary case, many of them I believe occurring without anyone ever hearing of them. Now were there some inattention shown by any of our railway or steamboat companies to the convenience and safety of the public as what is done by the management of the ferries I am confident that it would not be borne for a week. The Clyde Trust should be obliged to have their stairs well lighted and properly railed up. No drunk man should be allowed through the bar without a party in charge of him and they ought always to have a man stationed at Clyde St and Finnieston St Ferries to keep order, as the traffic there is far in excess of what it is at many of our railway stations, and at all the ferries, proper appliances at hand in case of anyone falling in the water. The public, I believe, have it in their own hands to get these reforms. The managers lately showed by their operations at Clyde St, that they can look after their own interests, let them be shown that there are lights in which to look at the matter, and we may have some reform, but not tell them”.

