

# DANGER AT DAUNT ROCK

In hurricane force winds, Ballycotton lifeboat crew launched to the aid of eight men on a lightship near Daunt Rock. 70 years on, it's a feat of courage and endurance still seen as one of the most demanding rescues in RNLI history



**49**  
HOURS  
AT SEA

**FORCE 12**  
HURRICANE



**7 MEDALS**  
FOR  
GALLANTRY  
AWARDED



Ballycotton lifeboat crew

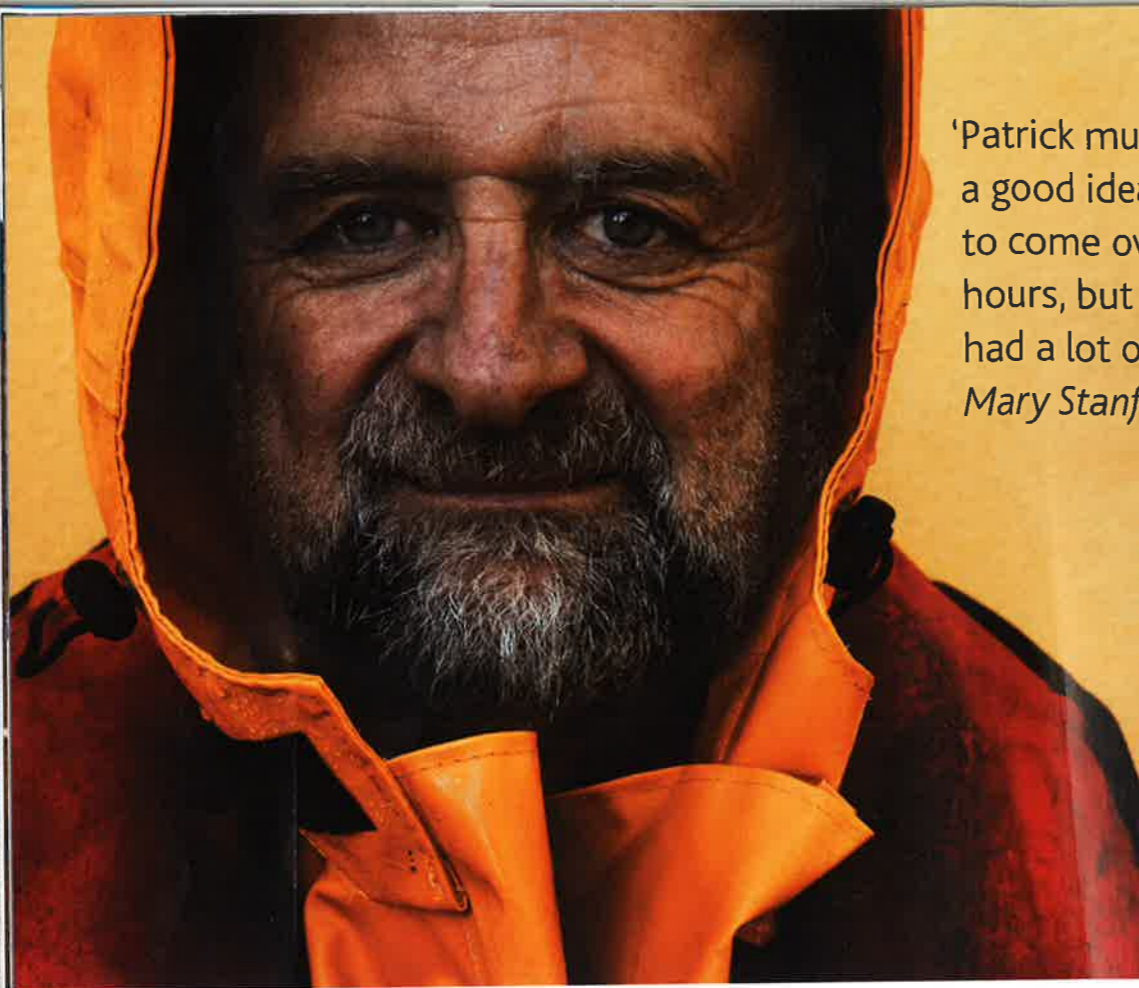
At midnight on Monday 10 February 1936 'it was blowing a hurricane force never before experienced by the oldest inhabitant in Ballycotton ... the harbour was a seething cauldron ... stones, a ton in weight, were torn from the quay and flung about like sugar lumps'.

So wrote Ballycotton RNLI's Honorary Secretary Robert Mahoney in his account of a 63-hour shout to the lightship *Comet*, which had broken her moorings and started drifting towards the coast. In those conditions, it was almost unthinkable that the volunteer crew of Ballycotton's lifeboat – a 15.5m motor vessel named *Mary Stanford* – would be able to launch, let alone save those onboard the stricken vessel.

But, to Mahoney's amazement, Coxswain Patrick Sliney and his crew were heading across the storm-tossed harbour within minutes of the alert. The coxswain 'had not fired the maroons, for he did not want to alarm the village,' recalled Mahoney. 'Without a word they had slipped away.'

By now it was the morning of Tuesday 11 February. Heading out to sea, the lifeboat volunteers were repeatedly knocked off their feet by waves crashing over their vessel. Word had got around that the lifeboat crew were out. Mahoney's records note: 'People watching her left the quay to go to church and pray.'

With visibility severely impeded by sleet and spray, the stricken lightship was eventually located near Daunt Rock. Her crew would not abandon their heavy vessel to become a shipping hazard. With help from the Royal Navy destroyer HMS *Tenedos*, the Ballycotton lifeboat crew attempted to establish a tow but each attempt was thwarted by strong waves, which snapped the steel cables like string.



'Patrick must have had a good idea what was to come over the next hours, but would have had a lot of faith in the *Mary Stanford's* abilities'

Colm Sliney, Ballycotton Deputy Launching Authority and grandson of Patrick Sliney (below)



By nightfall, the lifeboat volunteers were exhausted, cold and famished. But after an all-too-brief night in Cobh, where Robert Mahoney brought fresh clothes and supplies, they set off again in the early hours of Wednesday 12 February.

#### ANOTHER DAY AT SEA

When the lifeboat arrived back at the scene, HMS *Tenedos* had already left. Thick fog now covered the area and the crew of *Mary Stanford* stood-by alone all day. It must have been with a heavy heart that Coxswain Sliney agreed, at 6pm, to stay through the night too.

By the morning of 13 February the RNLI crew members were hungry, frozen, soaked, and burnt by salt water and wind. They headed back to Cobh again to refuel themselves and their lifeboat, and at dusk returned to the *Comet*, joined by *Isolda*, a vessel of the Commissioners of Irish Lights.

It was around 9.30pm, with the wind and sea conditions worsening, that the lightship started losing her battle with the sea. She was on course to collide with Daunt Rock, with her starboard bow increasingly below the water, plunging and rolling in the waves. Coxswain Sliney decided it was time for action: 'The only thing was to get

astern and make quick runs on her port side,' wrote Mahoney, adding that the lightship's crew would have to jump for the lifeboat when they could.

#### LEAPS OF FAITH

Despite the weather and risk, Patrick managed to pass the lifeboat alongside the *Comet* five times. Urged by the RNLI volunteers, six sailors jumped aboard. On a sixth run, the two remaining lightship crew members – too exhausted and injured to jump – were seized and dragged onboard the lifeboat, with Patrick remarking that it was no time for 'by your leave'. With the entire *Comet* crew now onboard, the *Mary Stanford* began her journey back to Cobh, where she arrived at 11pm on the night of Thursday 13 February. It was not until 12.45pm on Friday 14, the fourth day since they set out, that the crew of Ballycotton lifeboat reached home. All in all, the sea had completely engulfed their vessel 12 times, and for one 25.5-hour stint, they had gone without food, shelter or rest.

An RNLI Gold Medal was awarded to Coxswain Patrick Sliney for his bravery and fortitude in the rescue, with Second Coxswain John Lane Walsh and Motor Mechanic Thomas Sliney both receiving Silver Medals. Crew Members Michael Coffey Walsh, John Shea Sliney, William Sliney and Thomas Walsh were also awarded Bronze Medals for their service and Patrick Mahoney, whose records have immortalised the bravery of Ballycotton lifeboat's volunteer crew, received binoculars.

Words: Laura Rainbow  
Photos: RNLI/Nigel Millard, Colm Sliney  
Painting: Tim Thompson

#### MARY STANFORD TODAY

Ballycotton's Deputy Launching Authority Colm Sliney is the grandson of Coxswain Patrick Sliney, and his father, William Sliney, was just 20 years old when he assisted with the rescue of the *Comet*.

Colm says: 'After the call came, Patrick must have had a good idea what was to come over the next hours, but would have had a lot of faith in the *Mary Stanford's* abilities. As a motorboat, she was seen as safer, faster and more agile than the earlier pulling and sailing vessels. That said, compared to our Trent class, which has a covered cabin, is manoeuvrable and can do 25 knots, it was a real feat of endurance.'

The *Mary Stanford* was returned to Ballycotton in 2014 after falling into dilapidation, and Colm has been heavily involved in her restoration (pictured below).

'This lifeboat put our small fishing village on the map and carried those crews safely to many a dangerous rescue,' Colm says. 'All that's left now is a few finishing touches and she'll be back to her former glory.'



#### Tuesday 11 February

8am: Robert Mahoney receives a call to say that the *Comet* had broken her moorings.

3.30pm: The lifeboat *Mary Stanford* and Royal Navy Destroyer HMS *Tenedos* attempt to establish a tow, but heavy seas make it impossible.

9.30pm: Ballycotton's volunteers return to Cobh Harbour to rest.

#### Wednesday 12 February

The lifeboat stands by the *Comet* all day. At 6pm, Coxswain Patrick Sliney accepts the request to stand-by all night too.

#### Thursday 13 February

9am: The lifeboat reaches Cobh Harbour to refuel after almost 26 hours at sea.

4pm: *Mary Stanford's* crew head out again. By evening, the lightship is in imminent danger of crashing into Daunt Rock, so evacuation begins.

11pm: Crew disembark with the casualties at Cobh. All are suffering saltwater burns, cold, exhaustion and hunger.

#### Friday 14 February

12.45pm: After a night in Cobh, the lifeboat arrives back at Ballycotton.