

## *RMS Leinster Log*

*April 2019*

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Welcome to the April 2019 bulletin which is being sent to those who have asked to be kept informed of plans to mark the centenary of the sinking of the *RMS Leinster* in October 1918. This Bulletin is currently being sent by email to over 200 people.

### **Thanks to you, we remembered them**

Folks, it's hard to believe, but it's coming up on six months since we remembered the sinking of the *RMS Leinster*. On 10th October 2018, commemorations were held in Dun Laoghaire, (formerly Kingstown) County Dublin, Ireland, Holyhead, Wales, Doncaster, Nottingham, Southampton and Warrington, in England, the Isle of Man and Geneva, Florida in the United States. Events were held in Ennis, County Clare, Courtmacsherry, County Cork and Ardcath, County Meath near the date of the centenary. The events received an amazing amount of public support, with a huge involvement by relatives of people who were aboard the *RMS Leinster* on 10th October 1918. Thank you to all of you who participated in the commemorations. Many of you went to a great deal of trouble and expense to do so. We hope you found it a worthwhile, memorable and enjoyable experience.

We on the *RMS Leinster Team* are still recovering from what was two years of pretty intensive work on our part. We have not, however, been idle since the centenary. Will Lockhart has been looking after our website. Lucille and Brian Ellis have continued to diligently research

those who were aboard the *RMS Leinster* and I have been busy giving public talks to tell Irish people the story of the sinking. Despite the success of the centenary commemorations, most Irish people have never heard of the sinking and, unfortunately, never will. But we on the *RMS Leinster Team* are determined to continue the noble work, bringing the story to the attention of anyone who will listen.

We on the team were – and are – very excited by an initiative of Joan Sugrue, a granddaughter of Postal Sorter William Henry Wakefield. Joan approached us asking to be put in contact with the relatives of other Postal Sorters. She would like to promote contact between relatives of the Postal Sorters in order to share information and promote research into the lives of these men and the small group of their fellow Sorters who were not on duty on 10th October 1918.



Postal Sorter William Henry Wakefield

According to Stephen Ferguson's book *Sorting Letters on the Sea: Holyhead mail boats and the Leinster tragedy*, at the time of the sinking the Postal Sorting staff aboard the mail boats was made up of "46 men, 3 Assistant Superintendents (Class 11) and 43 SC&Ts" (Sorting Clerk and Telegraphists, the official title of the sorters.) One Assistant Superintendents and 20 SC&Ts were lost in the sinking. One SC&T survived.

Following Joan's approach, I sent out a bcc group email to the relatives of the Postal Sorters with whom we are in contact, with a message from Joan asking them to contact her. As a result of the email, relatives of four of the Postal Sorters who were on the *RMS Leinster* are now in contact. Amazingly Joan was approached by a relative of a Postal Sorter who was not on duty on the day of the sinking and I was approached a relative of another Postal Sorter who was ill at the time of the sinking. This means that Joan is now in contact with the relatives of six of the small group of 49 men who manned the sorting offices on the mail boats.

Joan is conducting research into the circumstances of the Postal Sorters. Once the Postal Sorter Relatives Group has been established, we plan to seek a meeting with the Irish Post Office to inform them of the existence of the relatives' group, to seek access to further records on the Postal Sorters and to ask that the Irish Post Office annually remember their colleagues on the anniversary of their deaths.

We on the *RMS Leinster Team* very much hope that the relatives of further Postal Sorters will contact Joan. If you would like to do so and are unable to access the email containing her message, please email me at [info@rmsleinster@gmail.com](mailto:info@rmsleinster@gmail.com) and I will give you Joan's email address.

I would really recommend Stephen Ferguson's book to all relatives of the Postal Sorters. It gives an excellent background to the work in which they were engaged.

In future bulletins we will start to tell the story of the commemorations on 10th October 2018. It would be really interesting to hear the stories of people who commemorated their relative/s on the centenary. Now is your chance to tell your family's story. We would love to hear from you. Please let us know how you travelled, who you travelled with, who you came to remember etc. If you have some photographs to share, it would be great. I will close by asking if perhaps there is a relative of one of the *RMS Leinster* crew who would like to undertake a project for the ship's crew similar to Joan Sugrue's Postal Sorter Relative's project. As with Joan's initiative, such a project would receive the full support and participation of the *RMS Leinster Team*.

**Philip Lecane**

### **Frank Higgerty - my link with the *RMS Leinster***

I was 20 years old when I first heard of the *RMS Leinster* and began to unravel the story of my great great uncle, Frank Higgerty. Unfortunately, Frank's story had been forgotten in our family and not passed down to my generation, much like the story of the *RMS Leinster* itself. It took considerable effort over years to re-establish the story in my family and to ensure it wouldn't be forgotten again. I am pleased to say that my two children of 5 and 8 years old are very familiar with the *RMS Leinster*.

My grandfather was 10 years old when his uncle Frank died. He would have been close to Frank and know the story and the tragedy it was to the family. He never mentioned it to me, however I was only 14 when he died.



When I first found out about the *RMS Leinster* in 1996, the only mention of it on the web was in the UK Scuba Divers website. Back then information was slow to come by and the details were amassed over time with the exchange of letters.

When I was 22, I visited Ireland for the first time to see what more I could learn about the sinking. I visited the newspaper offices and was amazed that they were able to hand me copies of the papers from 10<sup>th</sup> October 1918 and the days following. These provided all kinds of details about the sinking and first-hand accounts. Before leaving Canada, I had connected with Irish Ferries and lined up a meeting with the two historians they employed.

I remember that meeting fondly. It was the first time I had met anyone that knew about the sinking. I left with lots more information and a few post cards of the *RMS Leinster*. On that visit I also visited the Maritime Museum and the anchor in Dún Laoghaire, which had only recently been retrieved from the wreck.

Years later I was very fortunate to have connected with Philip Lecane just before he completed his first book on the sinking. I was able to share Frank's story and was delighted that it was subsequently included in the book. Later, Philip and I put the website [www.rmsleinster.com](http://www.rmsleinster.com) together to share the story of the Leinster with a wider audience. We've continued working closely over the years in the lead-up to the centenary.

I had resolved in 1996 that I would be back at the anchor for the 100th Anniversary of the sinking. It was a great experience to be there for several days around the centenary and to participate in the various events. Amazingly there was even more information to take in, for example through the lectures that took place at the Maritime Museum in the days before the centenary. On the day of the event there was the church service, the very impressive official commemoration and then a musical / play in the evening. After all these years, it was the first opportunity I had to meet in person with others who had lost relatives in the sinking. It was significant and rewarding to be there and see the event commemorated the way it was.

**Will Lockhart**

Ottawa, Canada - Relative of Frank Higgerty

### **Research continues**

Since Philip Lecane's book *Torpedoed!* was published in 2005 the availability of information has increased dramatically. This has enabled us to continue and progress the research into the 800+ people who were on the *RMS Leinster* on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1918. This was an event which changed forever the lives of relatives and friends of those who died and were injured, and of those who survived. As is the case in many disasters, the people involved were there as a result of a series of events which coincided, with the consequence that they were on the *RMS Leinster* on that day. This is particularly true in the case of the passengers, military and civilian. The Crew and Post Office workers would have been frequent travellers but their presence on that sailing on that day was largely a matter of chance.

Our aim in researching all those on board is to make the information available to relatives and friends, many of whom had little information about the circumstances behind the sinking. We were fortunate that the National Maritime Museum of Ireland in Dún Laoghaire were keen to commemorate the Centenary of the sinking in a suitable way and also had a recently installed "touch screen" display which proved to be ideal for displaying the information in a comprehensive and accessible format. The format has the advantage that relatives can access information about individuals on board the *RMS Leinster* as well as general details about the ship and the circumstances of the sinking. It can also be updated relatively easily.

The touch screen display includes text, pictures, diagrams etc as appropriate. Lucille and I began preparing information in early 2017 for the touch screen and the display continues to be updated as more information becomes available. Currently the display in the Maritime Museum includes available information on 810 people who were on board. This includes 6 people who have been added since the Centenary as a result of further information and research:

**DAVEY**, Arthur J., casualty

**PANKS**, Bertie George, survivor

**RUTE**, Ellis Thomas, survivor

**WALSH**, Mary, survivor

**MOLONEY**, Joseph, casualty

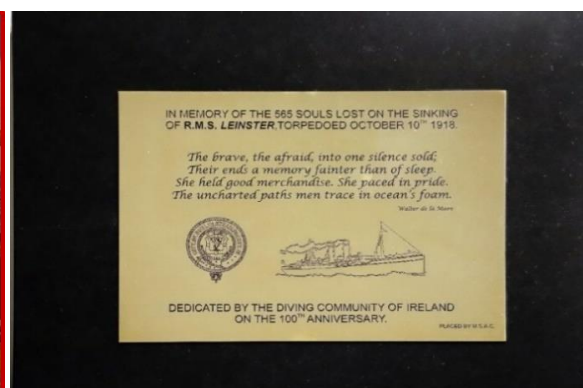
**McGLYNN**, Edward, casualty

*Research continues, particularly with local newspapers.*

A full listing of the names of the 810 identified so far will be put on the *RMS Leinster* website shortly. We hope to also make further information about those on board available on the website.

The display in the Maritime Museum, Dún Laoghaire, was seen by many relatives and other interested visitors during the period of the Centenary last October and continues to be available to visitors to the Maritime Museum.

A replica of a marble plaque, which was placed on the wreck of the *RMS Leinster* last December by members of the Marlin Sub Aqua Club, was recently donated to the Maritime Museum and will shortly be put on display there.



**Brian Ellis**



## How did we find your ancestor?

Tracing the lives of the people on board *RMS Leinster* has been an absorbing activity, and especially gratifying when we can give information to a relative that was not known before. We decided to put the stories of all 810 people on a touch screen in the National Maritime Museum in Dun Laoghaire, with the long term aim of going online.

We started with the list of names that Philip Lecane had painstakingly collected from multiple sources for his book *Torpedoed!*. This was then put on a spreadsheet with basic information such as place of birth, names of parents and spouses, latest address and occupations, titles or military rank. This information, or as much of it as possible, along with a photograph where available, is contained on an "Extract" page for each person.

A fuller biography of each individual is being worked on, and over 400 of these are now available. All the people whose relatives contacted us have been completed, as well as the Post Office Workers and the crew. Apart from a small amount of personal information given to us by relatives all the sources used are in the public domain, though some are through pay-per-view websites. These biographies have been researched by Brian Ellis, professional genealogist Claire Bradley and myself.

Birth, marriage and death certificates not only give names and dates but also addresses and occupations. Census returns give names and ages (not always accurate!), occupations and addresses and, in the case of Irish census forms, the quality of housing and who the neighbours were. Newspaper notices of marriages and deaths often listed family members and gave addresses and places of burial. It was interesting to note that the families of crew members in Kingstown / Dún Laoghaire were far more likely to put notices in the newspapers than the families of the postal workers on the north side of the city. Using these facts, and inferring from these facts, allowed us to build a narrative of the people's lives.

When it came to the military, and there were over 500 of them, the first port of call was the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website which has all casualties listed, usually with military number and regiment named, and often with parents' or spouse's names and addresses. It is significantly more difficult to trace those who survived.

It has often been asked why there were so many military on board the ship that day and often the answer is that Ireland was used for R&R and recuperation from wounds. I have found however that is only a small part of the situation. Many soldiers were Irish and were home on leave to their families in Ireland. Many regiments had battalions posted to the multiple army barracks to be found throughout Ireland (the website Long, Long Trail is particularly good on identifying where they were at different stages of the war). They were there as reserves for the war in France, in preparation for invasion from Germany and to quell incipient Irish unrest. These men returned to Britain on leave, crossing the Irish Sea. There was also a significant Navy presence in Queenstown, boosted by the arrival of US soldiers from 1917.

Why did so many civilians travel when they must have known how dangerous it was? It must be remembered that Ireland was still part of Britain then, so there were commercial travellers doing business in Ireland for their English firms. Two Trade Union officials were travelling to

a meeting in Manchester because the Irish unions were based in Britain. An MP, representing Limerick, was returning to Westminster and several nurses were going back to their hospitals throughout Britain. Several people travelled to visit relatives in hospital in England, some having been wounded in France. Several families were moving to England for career or personal reasons.

Some of the soldiers from Australia or Canada had family reasons to visit Ireland. One Australian went to visit the family of his fiancée, and a Canadian was visiting cousins of his family who had emigrated some years before. Another Canadian, who had been born in Australia, went to County Clare to visit his godfather who had emigrated himself to Australia but then returned home. These men were all travelling to take up their positions on the Front.

It is noticeable that very few death certificates were issued for those whose bodies were recovered and brought to Dublin. The military authorities do not appear to have organised death certificates for the 144 military personnel who were buried in Grangegorman Military Cemetery. In contrast, most of those whose bodies were recovered on the shores of Scotland have the usual detailed Scottish certificate. Certificates were also issued for those whose bodies were being repatriated to the U.K. or U.S.

Researching these biographies has brought me to places and events that were new to me, as well as greatly improving my geography! I look forward to continuing the task that will keep alive the memories of those who travelled on *RMS Leinster* on the 10th of October 1918.

**Lucille Ellis**

For information on our privacy policy under Data Protection Regulations see link below:

<http://www.rmsleinster.com/privacy.htm>

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**Remembering all those who sailed on the final voyage of the *RMS Leinster*,**

**Philip, Will, Brian & Lucille**

**The RMSLeinster.com Team**

You can contact us at [info@rmsleinster.com](mailto:info@rmsleinster.com)