

# Drowned at Sea

## The Tragic Passing of a Man of God

*Edited transcript of a talk given by Margaret Stacey to  
Uppingham Local History Studies Group in 2009*

### Setting the scene

The year is 1899 - Maundy Thursday to be exact. In the English Channel - thick fog, visibility down to a few yards, the sound of a fog horn, the Captain ordering half speed, the lookout shouts 'stop her' and the ship is spun hard to starboard - then a tremendous crunch as the Royal Mail ferry, the SS Stella hits the treacherous Casquet rocks twenty miles north of Guernsey where the ship was headed. The decks are crowded with women and children screaming and crying, the men standing silently by, stiff upper lipped Victorians. Sailors are busy launching lifeboats and trying to create order out of chaos. Mercifully the lifeboats are launched quickly and many are saved thanks to the efficiency of the sailors and bravery of the passengers. But in fifteen minutes the ferry sinks and seventy seven lives are lost out of one hundred and nineteen passengers.

As the boat sinks, there, kneeling in prayer on the deck with passengers gathered around him is the figure of a bearded and dog collared minister of religion. He prays aloud and leads those left in hymn singing.

These events happened on Thursday 30th March 1899, and the clerical gentleman who went down with the ship was the Reverend George William Clutterbuck, minister of Shoreham by Sea Methodist Church, former minister for Uppingham and Oakham (Oakham Wesleyan Circuit) and missionary to India. He was forty one years old.

### Background

Mr Clutterbuck was a Londoner, born in 1858 in Lambeth, the son of a gas fitter. He was said to have converted to God when sixteen years old. He entered the ministry in 1886 after training and then was sent to Bombay where it was said *'he laboured with great zeal and devotion'*<sup>1</sup> for five years. He wrote a book on his time there and in fact when he drowned he was on his way to Guernsey to give a fundraising talk on his missionary work in order to raise money for a new chapel at Shoreham. Ministers were not given much, if any choice in where they were 'stationed'. So after five years in India he was sent to the Oakham Circuit from 1891-93.

He had married Amelia Collins in 1881 at Brockley Wesleyan Church, south London and the couple had two sons by the time they arrived in Oakham. They lived in the Manse, which was probably in Brooke Road at that time. The youngest child, Millie Gertrude, was born in Oakham in December 1891 and baptised by her father in 1892. Times would have been hard. Stipends were very small, and minimal allowances were given for wives and children.

During Clutterbuck's time in Oakham (just two years) he seems to have had great energy. [His name appears constantly in church records.](#)<sup>2</sup> He was responsible for opening several new chapels, and refurbishing others. Morcott chapel was opened in 1892, and [Clutterbuck himself donated six chairs.](#)<sup>3</sup>

*'One of the first tasks which the Rev G. Clutterbuck set himself after coming to the circuit was the forming of a Society here.[Morcott] He tells us in his 'Featherbed Lane' "that in a moment of guidance we were directed to three old cottages owned by the Earl of Ancaster. His Lordship conveyed the whole property to us freehold for the sum of £10." One cottage was cleared: a new floor, seats and a modest reading desk put into the room. Another of the houses was transformed into a comfortable classroom and vestry, and the remaining one was restored for occupation as a dwelling-house'*<sup>4</sup>

Oakham Chapel had been built in 1865, but by the time of Clutterbuck's ministry a preachers' vestry and Sunday school classrooms were added. Mr Clutterbuck seems to have been very involved in these plans although the work was not finished until he had moved on.

Evidence from Oakham's records seems to suggest that he may sometimes have acted precipitously as after he left Oakham, it is recorded that there were problems with some unpaid builders' bills. [This got quite nasty and it was only the intervention of a notable London Methodist who appeared to have staved off a court case.](#)<sup>5</sup>

In Uppingham his enthusiasm also caused difficulties. In 1892 Dormans of Adderly Street wrote to Mr Clutterbuck with a specification for 'proposed alterations and new roof to Wesley House, North Street'. This is now a private house and is next door to the Thring Centre, at the time owned by Mr Haslam of Brooklands, a master at the public school. Presumably these works were underway when a dispute arose over an encroachment of a gable end onto Mr Haslam's property. A correspondence ensued between Mr Hodgkinson, Haslam's solicitor, and Mr Clutterbuck. A letter was received from William H. Brown of Kensington stating:

*'The piece of Garden Ground was purchased by my father about 40 years ago from Lord Gainsborough. It was then a Farm Yard occupied with [sic] the Falcon Hotel. An old barn extended the whole length on the North side which was pulled down and it was found that the cottage at the East End was built into the Gable of this old barn..... the Gable end of the Barn was then pulled entirely down and rebuilt by my father running the cottage into it as it was in the old Barn Gable before'*

The dispute must have been solved as on 15th November 1892 a document was drawn up: [Agreement to Ownership of a Gable Wall between premises in North Street Uppingham.](#)<sup>6</sup>

Mr Clutterbuck must have had boundless energy. He would have preached all around the circuit at least twice on Sundays, held midweek meetings, visited members, as well as having his own family duties. In his two year stay, he baptised thirty two infants from twelve villages, a third more than ministers either side of him, and it is recorded that 'more than one thousand pounds was raised during his ministry in Rutland and membership in the circuit increased from [one hundred and sixty nine to two hundred and thirty](#)'.<sup>7</sup>

## The disaster

John Wesley had established the 'itinerant' ministry and ministers were moved frequently - usually every two or three years. Mr Clutterbuck moved on from Oakham to Highbury, London for three years, to Hyde for a two year stay, and then to Shoreham by Sea just about seven months before the disaster.

Shoreham by Sea needed a new building and using the same energy he showed in Oakham Mr Clutterbuck was keen to raise funds. His own contribution was to attend a Missionary Meeting at Delisle Chapel Guernsey where he would give an Address to which Methodists would subscribe. Later, the Superintendent of the Circuit stated '[he had with him the beautiful lantern slides with which he was accustomed to illustrate his lectures on Bombay and the work in India](#)'.<sup>8</sup>

He duly booked his ticket and travelled from Southampton. Awaiting him in Guernsey were the minister and friends who were to entertain him and hear his lecture.

## The incident

The disaster is well documented, with newspaper reports, witness accounts, and the subsequent Board of Trade Inquiry. Channel Island Services were operated by two rival railway companies - LSWR, and the GWR. Both these companies were offering a special Easter excursion - GWR from Weymouth and LSWR from Southampton. We could surmise that there was scope for a race although the inquiry could not prove this. As stated, the ship hit the notorious Casquet rocks in a thick fog. Although Captain Reeks was found guilty of poor seamanship by travelling too fast in the conditions, his behaviour and management of his crew when disaster struck was said to have been exemplary. Reeks was last seen standing on the bridge as the ship went down. [The Times reported that 'the captain and chief officer appear to have thoroughly maintained the credit of British seamen'](#).<sup>9</sup>

The crew quickly launched the lifeboats and women and children were got away first. A brave stewardess, Mrs Rogers who has a memorial in Liverpool Cathedral offered much help with the ladies, heroically giving up her own lifejacket. Four lifeboats got away, but one capsized. And then the ship broke in two as the boilers exploded.<sup>10</sup>

## Reports of the loss

The Rev. HENRY ADAMS, Mr. Clutterbuck's superintendent, writes:—

The Rev. G. W. Clutterbuck was on his way to fulfil an engagement to preach and speak at the Foreign Missionary Anniversary at Guernsey. He had with him the beautiful lantern slides with which he was accustomed to illustrate his lectures on Bombay and the work in India.

On the Tuesday previous he had spent some time in endeavouring to adjust some differences that had arisen at Shoreham, partly through his passion for progressive work. He spent Wednesday with his father in London, and went on board the mid-day boat *Stella* for Guernsey, where the minister and friends were waiting to entertain and hear him. He was in good spirits and vigorous health, and expected a good time, hoping to bring back with him some financial help towards the Shoreham building scheme which he had in hand.

The first intimation that anything had gone wrong was conveyed to me by a telegram from the Rev. H. H. Vowles, from Guernsey, which ran: "Ascertain if Clutterbuck sailed in the *Stella* mid-day boat; if so, break news gently; we fear he is lost with the ship." I had arrived home late on Friday night from a country appointment and found this startling message awaiting me. I had to keep the news through that night, and got to the unsuspecting household to break the news before the morning papers could reach them. It was a fearful task, and the change wrought in that home in a few seconds can only be imagined by those who have passed through similar experience. But the blow was borne with true Christian faith and courage.

For a while the widow and orphans refused to believe the worst; it was too awful to be true. Then the second telegram came which killed all hope, and the dreadful calamity had to be faced—the loved husband and father, the diligent pastor, the ever-willing colleague was no more.

Sympathetic messages have come in full of appreciative references to this active, earnest, hard-working minister. It was with great difficulty that we struggled through the Easter Sunday services, but they made clear the only true light that shines through the gloom into which this circuit has been suddenly plunged.

*The Methodist Recorder* 1899 <sup>11</sup>

No one will be surprised to learn that Mr. Clutterbuck has left his family very inadequately provided for, having entered the ministry so lately as 1886, and as a married man. Mrs. Clutterbuck has no claim upon our Annuitant Society, and two children are not upon our Connexional Funds. Although Mr. Clutterbuck did what he could by insuring his life, the income from all sources is by no means sufficient for the most ordinary necessities of life. It is a case of great need to which many, I am sure, will wish to afford help. All contributions, with your kind permission, will be acknowledged in your columns, and may be sent to me at 38, Penn Road Villas, Holloway, N.—I am, dear Sir, yours ever sincerely,  
J. HENRY GREEVES.

*The Methodist Recorder* <sup>13</sup>

## Afterwards

Mr Clutterbuck's body was never found which must have compounded the grief of the widow and children. Mrs Clutterbuck was allowed to stay on in the Shoreham manse for a few months, presumably until September when it would have been needed for a new minister. Then sometime between 1891 and 1901 she moved back to London. In the census of 1901 she is shown living 'on own means' in Stoke Newington. The boys at age seventeen and eighteen are commercial clerks, and there are also two boarders in the house.

By 1911, both sons were married with children, both in the London area - one worked for London County Council, and the other was a law clerk. Both served in World War I, George was badly gassed and died in 1921.

The boat was scheduled to arrive at St Peter Port at 5.30 pm. One can imagine the consternation of the waiting friends and minister when the boat did not arrive.

It fell to the Reverend Henry Adams (Superintendent of the Shoreham Circuit) to break the news to the widow. In his letter to the Methodist Recorder of April 6th he recounted the circumstances.

The Times gave full coverage to the disaster from Easter Saturday (presumably no papers on Good Friday) right through to the Wednesday following. One column was headed 'Terrible Disaster occurred in the English Channel'.<sup>12</sup> A full account of the events and rescue attempts were given, also witness accounts, a list of the saved and an official statement by the railway company. On Monday 3rd April more coverage was given with a list of the missing, and more on Tuesday. On Wednesday a message from Queen Victoria who was in Nice was printed. As the days went by many details of the saved and missing were given, mostly concentrating on 'the great and the good' but Wednesday's paper has the first mention of Clutterbuck on his knees praying.

The Methodist Recorder was a weekly paper coming out on Thursdays so the disaster was first reported a week later. Prominence was given to Clutterbuck but also there were quite a few other Methodists on the ship. There were numerous stories of heroism and rescue, the coverage continuing for several weeks. Many letters were published testifying to Mr Clutterbuck's godly and energetic life. A fund was set up for widow and children, and the publisher of Clutterbuck's book on Bombay promoted the sale of a second edition urging Methodists to clear two thousand copies, the whole of the proceeds to be given to the family.

A letter setting up the fund reads:

Money poured in, maybe helped by the fact that most subscribers had their name printed in the Methodist Recorder!

In the Methodist Recorder of 20th April the secretary of the Shoreham church wrote proposing that the new building in Shoreham, for which Clutterbuck had been attending Guernsey, should be built as a memorial to him. This was accomplished in time and there is also a memorial to him in a church in Bombay.

The little girl who was born in Oakham was still with her widowed mother in London in 1911, and unusually she was still a school pupil at 19. There were three boarders in the house, one of whom, John Browning Varwell was destined to be her husband. Millie attended North London Collegiate School and obtained a BA Hons degree at London University. She worked at the air ministry and was awarded the MBE. She has descendants.



*The Reverend George W Clutterbuck and his family c.1897*<sup>14</sup>



*The SS Stella*<sup>15</sup>



*Captain H. Reeks*<sup>16</sup>  
*The ill-fated captain of the SS Stella*

#### References:

- <sup>1</sup> Minutes of Methodist Conference 1899 pages 32-3 Obituary of George William Clutterbuck
- <sup>2</sup> Most records of Uppingham Methodist Church and Circuit are held in the Record Office for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland ROLLR
- <sup>3</sup> An account of Mr Clutterbuck's time in the Oakham Circuit is given in Gill Junior, Josiah, History of Wesleyan Methodism in Melton Mowbray and the Vicinity, (Melton Mowbray 1909) GILL
- <sup>4</sup> ibid
- <sup>5</sup> Rutland Record no 13 1993 The Building of the Methodist Church and School Hall in Northgate, Oakham, 1865-1935
- <sup>6</sup> Correspondence in church records in ROLLR
- <sup>7</sup> GILL
- <sup>8</sup> See letter to Methodist Recorder below
- <sup>9</sup> The Times 1st - 5th April 1899 © British Library Board shelf mark 072.1 TIMES
- <sup>10</sup> A full account of the disaster is also given on websites [www.museum.guernsey.net](http://www.museum.guernsey.net) and [www.jakesimpkin.org](http://www.jakesimpkin.org)
- <sup>11</sup> The Methodist Recorder 1899 © British Library Board shelf mark 072.1 MR
- <sup>12</sup> TIMES
- <sup>13</sup> MR
- <sup>14</sup> Photo courtesy of Robin Marlow
- <sup>15</sup> Photo courtesy of Guernsey Museum
- <sup>16</sup> Photo courtesy of Guernsey Museum