

## Burnmouth Disaster 1853

The 1881 disaster was not the only tragedy to hit the Burnmouth community. When the 'Lively' sank on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 1853 five women in Burnmouth and one in Eyemouth were left widowed, all with young children. The following News reports give an account of the disaster and more information can be found in Peter Aitchison's 'Children of the Sea.

Berwick Advertiser 8th January 1853 (Saturday).

**BOAT LOST - SIX MEN DROWNED.** Yesterday fore-noon (Friday) about eleven o' clock while the fishing boats belonging to Burnmouth were at the fishing grounds, about 15 miles from the shore, a sudden gale of wind came on, which raising the sea placed the entire fleet in considerable peril, and many of them were obliged to run for shelter without getting up their lines. We regret to state that one boat, the "Lively" of Burnmouth, was unsuccessful in reaching the shore, and being struck by a heavy sea swamped and disappeared with all on board. Another boat was within sight, but the disaster was completed before any assistance could be rendered. By this occurrence six men have met a watery grave, all of whom have left widows, and about 30 young children without their natural protector and provider. The sufferers were all young men, ranging from 30 to 40 years of age, and their names are: - Thomas Lauder, master; John Aitchison, William Martin, Alexander Anderson, William Spowes (sic). All these belonged to Burnmouth. John Cowe, belonging to Eyemouth, who had gone to sea as the substitute of one of the boat's crew, who was detained at home by indisposition. This disaster has plunged the entire inhabitants of Burnmouth in the greatest distress.

The Scotsman, 12th January 1853. **THE LATE BOAT ACCIDENT AT BURNMOUTH.** A public meeting of the inhabitants of the parish of Ayton - in which Burnmouth is situated - was held on Monday in the Rev. Mr. Stark's church, Ayton, to take into consideration the best means of helping the six widows and thirty children, left destitute by the melancholy accident reported in our last - A. Mitchell-Innes, Esq., in the chair. After prayer by the Rev. Mr. Stark, the Chairman said that the circumstances that had called them together were of a very painful nature. A fishing boat belonging to Burnmouth went out to sea on Friday morning last for the purpose of fishing; about mid-day, a severe storm arose when they were about twelve miles from land, the crew left their lines and were returning to the shore with great caution, when a sea struck the boat, in a moment sank her, and all hands perished. Another boat's crew, a short distance from them, saw the boat sink, and tacked to seaward but did not observe any of their fellow fishermen, and were obliged to proceed homewards in order to save their own lives. After an address from the Rev. Mr. Cameron, the Rev. Mr. Montgomery proposed a committee for the purpose of collecting subscriptions; and the chairman announced, for the information of those at a distance, that as Mr. Bowhill, banker, Ayton, had been appointed secretary and treasurer, any charitable person who wished to subscribe towards the aid of the widows and the fatherless might make their remittances to him.

Berwick Advertiser 15th January 1853 (Saturday).

Part of article, naming crew of the "Lively." ...six widows and no fewer than 30 children,

not one of whom is above 14 years of age, and 20 of whom are under 10, live to lament their loss. The names of those who were lost are: Thomas Lauder, skipper, aged 38, who has left 7 children; Alexander Anderson, aged 43, left 6 children; John Aitchison, aged 36, left 8 children; William Spouse, aged 33?, left 4 children; William Martin, aged 36, left 4 children; and John Cowe, aged 44, left 1 child. Two of the widows are, besides, in a state of pregnancy, one of them being far advanced. The last named man belonged to Eyemouth and had been engaged by John Spouse (father of William who was drowned) to supply his place, he being unwell. James Spouse (brother of William Spouse) was also one of the crew of the "Lively", but was so severely attacked by rheumatism on Thursday night, as to be unable to go out with her on Friday, and thus escaped the watery grave of his fellows.

For the benefit of family historians there follows a little more of the background of the families involved.

The skipper of the 'Lively' was Thomas Lauder. Thomas was the son of Alexander Lauder and Janet Martin who were living at Partanhall at the time of the tragedy although they originally belonged Ross. Thomas was married to Agnes Whillis. They lived in Cowdrait and had 7 children: Euphemia b 1839, Alexander b 1841, Janet b 1843, Agnes b 1844, Helen b 1847, Richard b 1850 and Mary b 1852. When the 1861 census was taken Euphemia was 22 and was head of the household so, although no record has been found, it must be assumed that Thomas's widow Agnes had died also. Euphemia was left to bring up her brothers and sisters. In 1861 Alexander was still at home and as a white fisher was bringing in a wage but Helen was only 14 and Richard and Mary were still at school. To add to her troubles Euphemia had an illegitimate baby, Thomas, in 1860.

John Aitchison was 36 when he drowned. He was the son of William Aitchison and Margaret Johnston. He was married to Helen Speirs from Eyemouth. She was the daughter of William Speirs and Helen Dougal. Helen did not go home to her family in Eyemouth when she was widowed but stayed in Burnmouth. The couple had 8 children: William b 1839, Andrew b 1840, Margaret b 1842, John b 1843, James b 1846, Helen b 1848, Ann b 1851 and Alexander b 1852 or 1853. Helen may have been one of the widows who was pregnant at the time of the disaster. The couple had registered a child called Alexander Speirs Aitchison in 1851 but this child appears to have died because in the 1861 census Ann was 10 and Alexander was 8. He too had the middle name Speirs. Helen's oldest son William was 14 when his father was drowned and, according to Peter Aitchison in 'Children of the Sea', he left school and went to the fishing to support his family. William married in 1859 but by then Andrew, his brother, was old enough to take over that responsibility. Helen's youngest son Alexander did not marry until 1875 so there was always a wage coming into the house. Towards the end of her life Helen lived next door to her son John in Cowdrait but John was a widower with two grown up children and three still at school living with him. Helen's unmarried daughter who was a fish worker lived with her but she was described as a pauper. Helen died in 1893 at the age of 77. There is a photograph of her son, Alexander Speirs Aitchison on the Burnmouth web site.

Less is known about Alexander Anderson. He was born about 1810 in Dirleton, in East Lothian and his wife Janet Kerr was born in Cockburnspath in about 1814. Alexander's parents were Mark Anderson and Alison Martin. Alexander's siblings were all living in Burnmouth at the time of his death. Alexander and Janet had 6 children, the oldest was 14: Mark b 1839, William b 1842, Catherine b 1844, Alice b 1841, James b 1847 and Susan b 1852. In addition to losing her husband Janet lost her son, Mark Kerr Anderson, when the 'Albion's Delight went down in 1858. Janet lived at 4 Cowdrait, next door to Euphemia Lauder who was in number 5. Alexander's brother and sister, James and Elizabeth [Betty] who were both unmarried seem to have taken Alice to live with them. All Janet's surviving children married and had families of their own. Janet died in 1900 at the age of 86.

William Spouse was the son of John Spouse and Alison Anderson. He was married to Isabella Richardson. His father John and brother James ought to have sailed on the 'Lively' on the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup> of January but they were both unwell. James had three children and another on the way. Although he was only 32 he seems to have suffered from rheumatism. William and Isabella had 4 children: Isabella b 1843, John b 1846, George b 1849 and Alison b 1851. All Isabella children were school age or younger but John went to sea as soon as he was old enough, Alison married when she was 21, John stayed with his mother until he was 30 when he got married to Isabella Anderson. George remained single and stayed with his mother. When she was too old to keep house they employed a young servant. Isabella died in November 1891 after a bout of influenza. Her death certificate reveals that her father, George Richardson had been a joiner and an entry in the 1851 census states she was born in Whitsome.

William Martin and his wife Susan Kerr had 4 children and another on the way when he was lost. They lived in Ross. Their children were: William b 1844, Thomas b 1845, George b 1848, Catherine b 1850, and Elizabeth b 1853 probably after the death of her father although her birth was not recorded. Susan is the only widow of the 'Lively's' crew to be described as a pauper. William and Thomas were working as fishermen but they were very young. Catherine died of TB when she was 21 and Thomas was lost at sea in 1877. Elizabeth married but William and George remained single and stayed at home with their mother. In 1881 they had a live in servant. Susan lived until she was 72. She died in 1900.

The other 'Lively' crew member to perish was John Cowe from Eyemouth who left behind a wife and child.

Burnmouth folk contributed little to the collection being taken for the widows and their children but few Burnmouth folk would have anything put aside for a rainy day. How many of us have found that our Burnmouth ancestors died in abject poverty. Yet, looking at the old photographs, the children look happy and cheeky and some of the old men look positively mischievous.