

The Clarendon

The Clarendon a West Indiaman had left St. Kitts (West Indies) on the 27th August 1836 with a cargo of sugar, molasses & rum, under captain Samuel Walker, carrying 16 crew and 10 passengers, including several children. The ship was battered by gales in the Atlantic Ocean and by the time she entered the English Channel the storms had increased, forcing it towards Portsmouth.

At 6am on the morning of 11th October, in a howling gale and heavy seas, the Clarendon hit the beach at Blackgang Chine broadside on, rolling over on to her side. The ship broke up in under 10 minutes. A Miss Gourlay, daughter of Captain Gourlay RN, drowned, her body was carried out to sea and was reported to have washed ashore at Southsea, opposite her father's house.

Lt. Shore of the 14th Regiment, his wife and 4 daughters, aged between 18 years and 9 months all perished. Out of the 27 people on board the ship only 3 of her crew surviving. 18 of those drowned are buried in Chale church yard.



A sketch made on the spot by William Daniell R.A. (1769-1837)

Local fisherman John Wheeler was largely responsible for the rescue of the 3 crew members. On seeing the Clarendon's plight, he and a group of other fishermen ran to Blackgang Chine to help. As the ship hit the rocks Wheeler tied a rope around his waist, whilst a few of the men held the end of the rope he ran in to the sea and shouted for those on board to jump. Only 3 crew jumped, and Wheeler managed to drag them to shore. According to the survivors, those on board could see their would-be rescuers trying to get to them.

By remarkable coincidence, John Thomson, one of the three men saved by Wheeler, had served with him on the Falcon, Lord Yarborough's yacht. Four years before, Thomson had saved Wheeler's life.

Like the shipwrecks before it, parts of the Clarendon were salvaged by the locals. Remains formed part of an inn later called the Clarendon Hotel, now renamed the Wight Mouse Inn.

Pieces of wood and a spar can be found at Blackgang Chine theme park. It started out as a museum and shop when general manager Simon Dabell's great, great grandfather came to the island in the 1830s. Mr Dabell said: "It helped the start of this business because people flocked from far and wide to see the scene of the disaster."

"Most of the shipwrecks were a loss of goods or crew, both of which could be replaced or insured. "But this caused a much bigger stir in the national press. It really hit the moment and people thought it was a terribly dangerous piece of coast."

"For generations, the people along the Back of the Wight profited from shipwrecks and so there was little incentive to stop them by building a lighthouse or lifeboat station.

So great was this disaster that the building of a lighthouse began in 1837, at St Catherine's Point. It was completed and first used on March 25th, 1840."After the appalling nature of the Clarendon disaster and the large loss of life, attitudes were firmly changed. "People would still benefit from wrecks but saving lives became more of priority, as evident from the fact that in the space of 20 years the lighthouse was built and a coastguard station and three lifeboat stations were installed at Brook, Atherfield and Brighstone."

Sources:

The BBC.

Back of the Wight - Fred Mew.

Shipwrecks of the Wight - J.C. Medland.

Shipwrecks of The Isle of Wight - Ken Phillips.

The Lifeboats of Brighstone Bay - Christopher J. Willis and Edward H. Roberts.