

MALIN HEAD

WAR | WEATHER | COMMUNICATIONS | CONTRABAND





The landmark of Ireland's most northerly point is the Signal Tower on Banba's Crown. This tower was constructed in 1805 by Lloyd's Shipping Insurers by Order of the British Admiralty during the Napoleonic Wars. Its original purpose was to act as a coastguard, reporting on ships passing along this busy transatlantic route. Semaphore and telescope were used to maintain communication with ships and with the island of Inishtrahull where another signal tower was erected on the western end of the island. When in line of sight of the tower, ships would signal their destination using flags and in turn the coastguard would inform Lloyd's in London. The semaphore system was subsequently replaced by Morse code in 1902 when the Marconi Wireless Company (located beside the tower) superseded Lloyd's signal system. The Marconi Company sent the first commercial message by wireless from Malin Head to the passenger ship S.S. Lake Ontario. In years to come, Malin Head became an important base for transatlantic communication. In 1912, the Titanic tested its Marconi radio equipment with Malin Head. Smuggling was rife along the eastern coastline of Inishowen at the beginning of the 19th century. The principal commodities smuggled were tobacco and rum, and towards the middle of the century the coastguard station was built on Inishtrahull to combat this trade. The sea captains would transfer the contraband to the islanders' boats. The islanders then brought it to Inishtrahull until it was safe to bring it ashore to hide in coastal caves. From here it was taken to Derry by the captains' agents and sold.



Many wreck sites in the area are still dived on today

The World Wars

The current coastguard station at Malin Head was built by the British in 1913. During World War One (1914-1918) the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers were billeted at the station. During the war, many ships were destroyed off Malin Head. Some fell victim to mines, while others failed to navigate through treacherous winter conditions. One such ship was HMS Racoon, which sank on 9th January 1918. It is believed it struck the Garrive Isles when caught in a snow storm a mile off Malin Head. None of the 100 man crew survived. In 1996 Malin fishermen unwittingly came across live ammunition from the wreck among their lobster pots . . .

During World War Two, look-out post huts were built at Malin Head to protect Irish neutrality. They were manned by the Irish Defence Forces who kept watch and reported activities at sea and in the air. These huts still stand on the headland. Another symbol of Irish neutrality was the "EIRE" sign, painted on stones and pressed into the grass. Still visible below Banba's Crown, the sign was a message to WW2 pilots that they had entered neutral territory.

The 'Battle of The Atlantic' began on 3rd September 1939 when Britain declared war on Germany. The ocean became a hunting ground for German U-Boats. Distress signals were received at Malin Head. On 24th August 1940 the lighthouse keeper on Inishtrahull used semaphore to relay to Malin Head look-out posts that crew from the torpedoed cargo ship, the Havildar (which was enroute to Burma) had landed on Inishtrahull. In the same month, another ship in distress was the 16,923 ton Transylvania which was damaged by a torpedo off Malin Head. Three hundred survivors were safely transferred to trawlers. Two officers and 20 men were killed. Today the wreck of the Transylvania sits upright and almost intact 135m below the water's surface.

This article was originally written as part of the publication *Malin Head: An Enchanting Place, A Colourful Past* (@Donegal County Archives, Donegal County Council)