

## The sinking of the SS Laurentic

Another story of history imposing itself on Inishowen, is the story of the Laurentic. The ship was famous for more reasons than the tragic loss of life at sea during the First World War though, the ship's story of intrigue and mystery is just as captivating as the story of its demise.

Built in the same ship yard as the Titanic, at Harland & Wolff in Belfast in 1908, she sank off Dunree Head in 1917 after entering a minefield left by German u-boats.

At 570 feet long, she could outrun any German u-boat of the era, with a speed of up to 17 knots. The ship currently lies 40m deep off the coast of Dunree Head.

Before the British Admiralty commissioned the ship to join the war effort, she was also associated with another infamous moment in history - the capture of the supposed murderer, Doctor Crippen. For those who haven't heard of him, Dr Crippen was an American doctor who allegedly murdered his wife, Cora, a older time 'socialite' in London, following a party at their home in London. As the story goes, he drugged then butchered his wife, and buried her remains in the cellar. Shortly after, he openly began having a relationship with his mistress, telling police that his wife had left him to go to America, and had later died there.

With detectives asking questions, he fled to Belgium, and went into hiding. As the net closed, he and his mistress boarded a ship called the Montrose in disguise, bound for Canada. Detectives on his trail quickly realised he had fled again, and with the Montrose three days ahead of them, they boarded the much faster SS Laurentic to give chase. They arrived in Quebec three days ahead of him, and waited on the Montrose to arrive. He was arrested and returned to London, where he was later executed.

With the outbreak of the First World War, the British Admiralty called upon the Laurentic, and she was put into service to aid the war effort, transporting prisoners of war as well as raw materials across the Atlantic, between America, Canada and Britain.

The ship was later tasked with transporting 43 tonnes of gold bullion to help pay for the war effort. Shortly after leaving Liverpool on the 23rd of January, 1917, the Captain was instructed to stop off at Buncrana, or HMS Hecla as it was known then, a naval base, to disembark five sailors who were suffering from yellow fever. Officers on board took the short opportunity of a brief 'shore leave' and enjoyed a meal at the local Swilly Hotel, before setting back off to sea.

Sea conditions at the time were poor as a force 12 snow storm battered the ship, in freezing temperatures. However things were about to get much worse. After leaving the safety of Lough Swilly, and between Dunree and Fanad Head, the Laurentic struck two mines in quick succession, and began to sink quickly.

The damage was devastating. The ships engine room was destroyed, emergency pumps rendered useless, and without power, no radios were operational. It was pitch black, and

while the Captain evacuated as many as possible, the crew were on their own. The storm continued, meaning no land-based rescues could be launched. Many aboard the lifeboats died from exposure to the freezing conditions.

The following day, the Swilly Hotel where officers had dined the night before, was converted into a makeshift morgue for the casualties. Of the 470 crew aboard the ship, 354 lost their lives at sea. Many bodies were trapped below the lower decks as the ship sank, and were washed up for weeks afterwards. Some victims of the tragedy are buried at St Mura's Church in Fahan, as well as Cockhill graveyard in Buncrana.

Beyond the tragedy, the intrigue with the ship continues today. Shortly after the sinking, the Royal Navy launched a recovery operation to retrieve the sunken gold that the Laurentic was carrying on that fateful night. The operation lasted two years, and while virtually all of the 3200 gold bars were recovered, 22 remain lost at sea.

In today's money, these gold bars would be worth €3 million. Locally, legend has it that the gold is still on board the ship, or somewhere near the wreck.