

The North Sea's Own 'Titanic' Disaster

The Sinking of the S.S. Elbe in 1895



Picture: Illustrated London News, 2 February 1895

The accident

The S.S. *Elbe* belonged to the North German Lloyd Company that operated between Bremen and New York. On the night of 30th January 1895, in freezing weather and huge seas, the liner was bound for New York with 354 people on board.

In these appalling conditions, the *Elbe* discharged warning rockets at intervals to warn others of her presence, but a small steamship

named the *Crathie*, sailing from Aberdeen to Rotterdam with a cargo of coal, did not alter its course. It struck the liner with such force that whole compartments of the *Elbe* were immediately flooded. The 4,510-ton liner sank within 20 minutes.

Why did so many people die?

The collision took place at 5.30 a.m. when most people were still asleep. Amid scenes of great panic two lifeboats were lowered, one of which immediately capsized as passengers crowded in. Twenty people scrambled into the second lifeboat. Of these, 15 were members of the crew! The others were four male second-class passengers and a young lady's maid, Miss Anna Boecker, who was pulled from the sea. The captain ordered women and children to assemble at the other side of the sinking liner, but no other lifeboats were launched in time. Survivors reported that ropes were iced up and unusable. 334 people drowned.

The survivors

The twenty passengers in the one surviving lifeboat were faced with mountainous seas and freezing temperatures. The *Elbe's* distress rockets had not been seen by passing vessels and the boat was nearly 50 miles from land. But after five hours they were seen by a passing Lowestoft fishing smack, the *Wildflower* (LT 557).

The Heroes – the crew of the Lowestoft smack *Wildflower*

*In desperate conditions the crew of the **Wildflower** struggled to pick up the twenty survivors as the lifeboat was breaking up. The skipper, **William Wright**, said the survivors would not have lasted another hour in those conditions and had only survived that far because of the expertise of the **Elbe** crew. Once on board the **Wildflower** the survivors, suffering from shock and exposure, were looked after by the smacksmen and would later praise them for their courage and kindness.*

What happened to the steamship ‘Crathie’?

*The vessel was badly damaged but, astonishingly and to the great shame of the crew, the **Crathie** continued on to Rotterdam. When asked why he failed to help the **Elbe**, the captain replied that he feared his vessel would sink – and he did not hear any cries of distress coming from the liner anyway. It appeared to him that the **Elbe** was speeding away...*

The only female to survive

Miss Anna Boecker was a quiet lady’s maid on her way to Southampton with her elderly employer. In the chaos of the sinking, unable to save her lady, she joined the crush of people being lowered into the first lifeboat. When it capsized with the sheer weight of numbers, the other passengers clambered back onto the sinking liner. Miss Boecker alone was left in the treacherous seas, but was lucky enough to be hauled into the second lifeboat, which in the event was the only one to survive.

Considerable public attention was paid to her after the tragedy, which she found overwhelming. She was invited to the royal residence at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight where she was received by the ex-Empress Frederick of Prussia, daughter of Queen Victoria. She was asked to appear on stage with theatre groups to talk about her experience; a couple offered to adopt her. She quietly declined them all and went back to her work.

The aftermath

In November 1895 a court in Rotterdam found the steamship Crathie was alone at fault. The blame was attributed to the mate, who had left his post at the bridge at a critical time to chat to a crewmember in the galley, therefore failing to operate his warning lights. The captain of the Crathie was merely censured for leaving the disaster, a verdict that astounded the maritime world. The officers and crew of the Elbe received no rebuke from the court, although the public in Germany did not necessarily share this view.

The gallant crew of the Wildflower each received from Kaiser Wilhelm II the gift of £5 and a silver and gold watch bearing his monogram in thanks for saving the lives of German citizens. Other medals and gifts to the crew followed.

Nearly a century later – the wreck is located

Early in 1993, Dutch amateur divers located the wreck of the Elbe and salvaged a large quantity of glasswork and tea sets.



The Rescue of the Survivors from the Liner Elbe by the Smack Wildflower 30th January 1895.

George Vempy Burwood (1844-1917) Oil painting on canvas.

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