

Honouring the heroes of the greatest loss ever suffered by the Irish RNLI



The Tragedy

Two years ago, composer Liam Bates produced a work for large orchestra and choir to honour the volunteers of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), and this was performed by the Wexford Sinfonia in the National Concert Hall in Dublin. The name chosen for this piece, which would honour volunteers throughout Ireland and the UK, was, *The Heroes of the Helen Blake*.

Every year since its formation 192 years ago, the RNLI has relied on volunteers to crew its lifeboats with virtually every occupation and profession represented. And it was no different on that fateful day when the farmers and fishermen who made up the crew of the *Helen Blake*, set out from Fethard on Sea on a rescue mission that, sadly, would make history.

Around mid-day on the 20th February 1914, the Norwegian three-masted schooner, the '*Mexico*', was 20 miles off Hook Head, battling through gale force winds on the last leg of a 5000 mile journey from South America. Visibility was almost zero, the weather was atrocious, and the winds were getting worse. The captain was left with very little choice but to run for shelter, but even that wasn't possible, and she was driven further south by the fierce wind.

Just two hours later, the *Mexico* was aground on the rocks surrounding the Keeragh Islands in Ballyteigue Bay.

On shore, news of the disaster was relayed to Fethard on Sea, the alarm was raised and the men who made up the lifeboat crew abandoned their work and made their way to the boathouse from where they set out on a rescue attempt that would end in tragedy, with only 5 of the 14 man crew returning to their homes.

What they did that day is almost unbelievable. A cold winter's day, rain lashing down, wind blowing so hard people could hardly stand straight, at sea the waves so high the view beyond them was totally obscured, and in the midst of all this, fourteen brave men launched a 35 foot rowing boat to fight their way through three miles of wind and waves, putting their own lives at risk, to save the lives of people they didn't even know.

Statistics say nine crewmen lost their lives that day, but in Fethard on Sea it's seen as far more than just a number. These were nine neighbours, nine individuals, nine people snatched away in the prime of their lives leaving behind grieving families and three widows with sixteen children who would grow up without a father. And it's not just those who lost their lives; the remaining crewmen, and those whose lives they had saved, spent three days and nights on the Keeraghs in atrocious weather, with no real food or water, before they could themselves be rescued.

It is those men, those heroes that their descendants and fellow villagers want to honour by building a replica of their boat that will be a fitting tribute to their selfless bravery.

The Benefactor

When Michael and Mary Sheridan's daughter, Helen, was born in Claremorris in 1800, they could have had no idea that she would become a lady of Victorian Britain whose name would live on hundreds of years later in the village of Fethard on Sea at the other end of Ireland.

As a teenager, Helen was sent by her schoolteacher father to work with his brother, the proprietor of Trawley's hotel in nearby Castlebar, and it was there, when she was just 18 that she met a British army officer more than twice her age, who was staying at the hotel. Robert Dudley Blake, like most officers of that era, was from a wealthy family and his father, Sir Francis Blake, had been appointed High Sheriff of Northumberland by King George III.

The unlikely couple of British officer and Irish country girl fell in love, but such a union would have been deeply unpopular so they eloped. Reports say they were pursued by Helen's father and uncle from Castlebar to Ballyglass and on to Tuam. Love won out, however, and they made it to Scotland where, in 1819, they married before moving to Handcross Hall in Cuckfield, Sussex.

Helen attended a fashionable boarding school in London where she completed her education and thus qualified to mingle with the wives of other officers in her husband's regiment. The couple were well known in the social circles of Victorian London and their marriage was a singularly happy one, punctuated with a great sadness when their only child died in infancy.

Robert progressed well in his career and by the time of his death, in March 1850, he had been promoted to lieutenant-general. There was both consternation and surprise when he left his entire estate to Helen, excluding his family from any inheritance, and this intrigue was added to a month later when Robert's brother, Francis, died and also left a sizeable portion of his estate to Helen.

Robert's death hit Helen very hard and she moved out of their beloved Handcross Hall to a smaller and more manageable house at 4 Earls Court Terrace in Kensington where she led a quiet life until her death in September 1876, fifty eight years after leaving Ireland. She was buried alongside her husband in Norham, a small village just three miles from the family seat of Twizell Castle, in Northumbria.

Although Helen had drafted a will, it was not signed, so the Crown took possession of her entire estate, valued at around \$200,000 (over \$13,000,000 today). However, the words, "*let right be done*", followed by the signature of the monarch, authorised any heirs not only to proceed against the crown for recovery of her fortune, but also suspends the statute of limitations in this case.

In the years that followed, there were numerous claims to her estate from people throughout the world and although none were successful, it is often said that there are still Sheridans around Claremorris who could be related. The Crown did honour the bequests in Helen's will however, and one of those was for the sum of \$8,350 to build two lifeboats for Ireland. It is said that the cost of each boat was in the region of \$1,175, adding to the intrigue, and leaving a mystery as to where the other \$6,000 went.

Built at the Thames Ironworks boatyard in London, the *Helen Blake* arrived in Fethard on Sea in November 1905, and the *General R Dudley Blake* went to Blackrock, Co Louth where it was in service from 1909 to 1935.

Helen's money is still with the Crown and in the UK her story is all but forgotten. In Fethard on Sea however, her legacy lives on and it is the villagers' intention that the replica *Helen Blake* will honour its original benefactor as well as the brave crew members when it takes to the water again to be admired and enjoyed by generations to come.

The Project

It was a casual conversation between two brothers that led to the residents of the tiny village (population 890) embarking on the ambitious project to build a full size replica of the historic lifeboat. One hundred years after the disaster, in which a total of ten people lost their lives (including one crew member from the *Mexico*), the crew were remembered and commemorated during a ceremony attended by the Norwegian ambassador, at the monument erected to their bravery in the heart of the village.

Following the ceremony two brothers, descendants of a crew member, suggested it would be a fitting tribute if a replica of the lifeboat could be built. The idea was quickly picked up, a number of villagers got together, a steering committee was formed and the project started to take shape.

Thanks to local man John Hickey of Bord Iascaigh Mhara (the Irish Sea Fisheries Board), funding was provided to cover the costs of a feasibility study, which was followed by detailed drawings and stability calculations by renowned naval architect Theo Rye.

Building the boat is estimated to take 18 months and the work will be carried out by 18 to 25 year olds as part of a Tús initiative, a community work placement scheme providing short-term working opportunities for unemployed people, enabling them to gain valuable skills as well as work experience. Construction will be under the supervision of local shipwright John Colfer, who counts the Dunbrody famine ship amongst the previous projects on which he has worked.

Work is now underway to raise the funds needed for the project with various initiatives planned throughout the building period. An Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign was recently launched with a €20,000 target to purchase the specially imported Khaya hardwood that will ensure the *Helen Blake* is still here in another 100 years.

If you would like more information on the project as it progresses, please have a look at the website www.TheHelenBlake.com or the Facebook page, 'The Helen Blake'.



Sponsorship Opportunities

A range of sponsorship opportunities has been developed allowing everyone to share in this ambitious project; it is sincerely hoped that you will show your support.

BRONZE €25 - €99 (US\$27.50 - \$109.50)

You will receive an individually inscribed, specially designed, Certificate of Appreciation printed in Irish and English on premium quality textured paper, with an embedded image of the lifeboat, and personally signed by one of the descendants of the original *Helen Blake* crew. Your name, or your company's name, will also be featured on the Roll of Honour on the *Helen Blake* website to show your support of the project.



SILVER €100 - €499 (US\$110 - \$549.50)

In addition to the Bronze rewards, you will receive a photographic print of the original *Helen Blake*, mounted on double thickness cream art board, ready to be inserted into a frame.

GOLD €500 - €4999 (US\$550 - 5499.50)

In addition to the Bronze rewards, your name will be featured on the Roll of Honour, which will be on permanent display with the boat.

You will receive a limited edition 12 X 8 canvas print of the original *Helen Blake* mounted on a frame and ready to hang on your wall.

You will also receive an invitation for two people to an exclusive pre-launch reception.

PLATINUM €5,000 (US\$5500)

In addition to the Bronze rewards, your name will be featured on the Roll of Honour, which will be on permanent display with the boat.

You will receive a limited edition 16 X 12 canvas print of the original *Helen Blake* mounted on a frame and ready to hang on your wall and a unique commemorative wooden plaque made from the same specially imported Khaya hardwood timber used for building the *Helen Blake*. This will be engraved with your name, or your company's name, making it ideal for display in your office.

You will also receive an invitation for six people to an exclusive pre-launch reception.

As a platinum supporter, we will arrange a private trip for up to six people of your choice on the *Helen Blake* to the Keeragh Islands, scene of the 1914 tragedy, followed by lunch for the group at Neville's gastro pub in Fethard on Sea.



Brendan Power ... 00 353 87 986 1756 ... DePaor@HiberniaHeritage.com