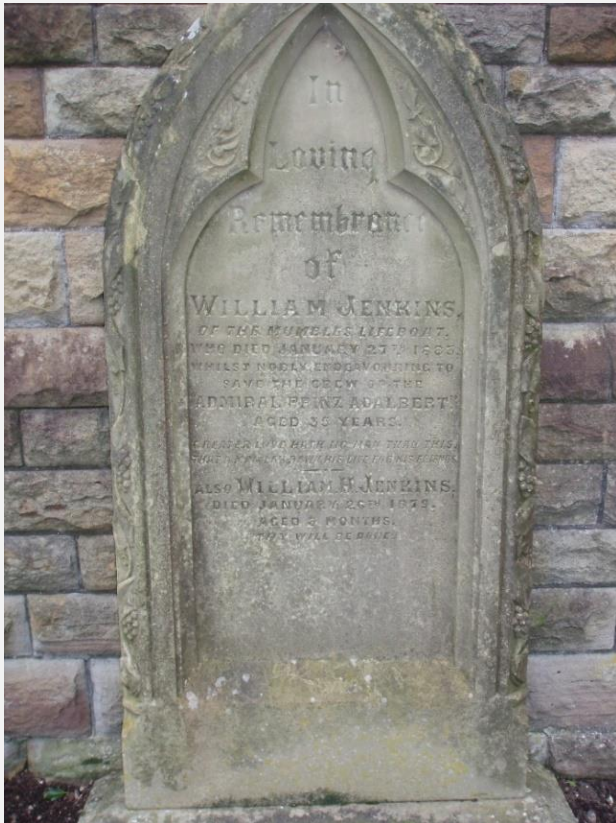


Mumbles, Swansea

The Great Storm of 1883

The Women of Mumbles Head



The Cambrian newspaper said '*Living memory holds nothing to compare with it and local history offers no parallel.*' It was a terrible day. A south westerly gale on 27 January 1883 caused the death of over fifty people, including four of the Mumbles lifeboat crew.

The storm broke at about 5.00 am and within thirty minutes the *Agnes Jack* sailing from Sardinia to Llanelli was in serious difficulties at Port Eynon. The crew were seen clinging desperately to the rigging but the ship was swamped and eighteen men were lost.

The French schooner *Surprise* sank at Overton. '*The only living thing that came ashore was a black dog and the poor animal, which was wholly unhurt, was kindly treated by the Overton people.*' Bodies were washed ashore for a number of days.

In the evening, the Porthcawl lifeboat telegraphed Mumbles for assistance in rescuing the crew of the *James Grey* from Whitby. It sank on Tusker Rock with the loss of all twenty five members of the crew and they could not understand why the Mumbles lifeboat hadn't turned up. It was quite simple. It had sunk.

You see, things had not gone well at Mumbles either. "*In Oystermouth the state of things was piteous in the extreme.*"

The German ship *Prinz Adalbert*, sailing from France to Swansea with over 900 tons of pitwood, had been in considerable distress during the morning. The Swansea tug *Flying Scud* was attempting to tow it to safety but the tow rope snapped and it drifted into the rocks at Mumbles Head. The lifeboat *Wolverhampton* was launched and, despite the heavy seas, a line was fixed between the two vessels. Two members of the *Prinz Adalbert's* crew were safely transferred but when

the third man was in transit the lifeboat's anchor cable snapped. The boat was overturned and the men thrown into the water. The lifeboat righted itself and men scrambled back aboard but it was hit by another wave and capsized. The crew were dashed against the unforgiving rocks. Four of them died and others were badly injured. Of the survivors, two were rescued by the daughters of the lighthouse keeper, Jessie Ace and her married sister Margaret Wright. They waded into the surf up to their armpits and, with the help of Gunner Hutchings from the lighthouse fort, rescued John Thomas and William Rosser using their shawls as lifelines to pull them in.



The coxswain Jenkin Jenkins was found badly injured, washed up in Bob's Cave on Mumbles Head but he lost two sons John and William and his son in law when the lifeboat capsized.

The tragic irony is that the crew who stayed on board the *Prinz Adalbert* were perfectly safe. When the tide receded they simply walked ashore unharmed. The ship broke up on the rocks the following day. *'Her timbers and cargo were strewn all found the Bay and the Coast.'* Six men were prosecuted for unlawful possession of wreckage as people began to collect it.

In March Jenkin Jenkins received a silver medal from the RNLI and £50 whilst Gunner Hutchings was given a framed engraving of thanks, £2 and a telescope. The Mayor of Swansea who made the presentation dismissed suggestions that the Gunners stationed in the Mumbles Battery had done very little. He said that it was Hutchings who threw out a rope to the two men and pulled them in. But in protecting his reputation, he dismissed the part played by the two women. *'Mrs. Wright and her sister rendered all the tender assistance that could be expected of brave women in such an emergency.'* At least the Empress of Germany recognised their role when she sent the Ace sisters the thanks of the country and gave them two silver brooches *'consisting of a splendid carbuncle of oblong shape, set in a solid gold oval, with the German Imperial crown atop, surmounted by a miniature cross, the whole being relieved by seventeen small brilliants, which added much to the beauty of the effect.'*

But the Ace sisters seized the popular imagination. Their pictures were sold by Mr Chapman, Swansea's photographer, who sent a copy to Queen Victoria. Punch magazine said Jessie was "clearly not only an Ace but a very Ace of Trumps."



Their reputation was assured by the poem written by Clement William Scott (1841 – 1904) the drama critic of the Daily Telegraph. *The Women of Mumbles Head* has rhythm and momentum and more than anything else imprinted the two women in the popular imagination. It was published in 'The Theatre' magazine in March 1883 although it had been

performed at the end of February at the new Theatre in Swansea to raise funds for the Disaster Fund when it was '*recited with excellent elocutionary and characteristic effect*' by Sallie Booth. For at least the next thirty years the poem was a staple of the music hall repertoire across the country. It featured in entertainments welcoming troops home at the end of the WW1. It was an enduring celebration of heroism and Jessie and Margaret were rewarded with the kind of immortality only literature can give you.

*'Come back', said the three strong soldiers, who still stood
faint and pale,*

*'You will drown if you face the breakers, you will fall if you
brave the gale'.*

*'Come back', said the girls, 'we will not, go tell it to all the
town,*

'We'll lose our lives, God willing, before that man shall drown'

There was a lot of poetry about. Charles Bevan, the secretary of the lifeboat station in Port Eynon, wrote about the loss of the Agnes Jack and his poem was performed every year on the anniversary of the disaster.

*And in the rigging human forms
Were clinging for their lives,
We gazed with pity on them there,
For help we heard their cries.*

No, we should never dismiss the power and skill of Clement Scott's *Women of Mumbles Head*.

When Jenkin Jenkins died in April 1893 the Cambrian reported his memories of the disaster. He remembered abusing soldiers on the rocks "*You scoundrels, save the men, for shame! Don't let the men drown before your eyes.*" He remembered his dead son John floating past him. But he was adamant about the part played by the Women of Mumbles Head.

'They tied two shawls together, and both of them threw them into the water. They almost went out of their depth to save these men, and were both in the water up to their armpits. The soldiers did throw something into the water resembling a clothes line, but they did not go near enough to throw it to reach them'

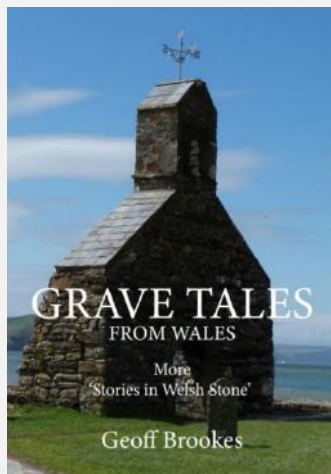
Against the wall of All Saint's Church you can find the gravestone of his son William who was thirty five when he died. He is remembered, along with his three month old son who died four years earlier, almost to the day. The gravestone which remembered John, who floated past his father dead in the water at Mumbles, and his three children, was smashed in 1983.



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