

Iolaire

Timeline of events

31 December 1918

- 16:00** Iolaire arrives at Kyle of Lochalsh on the Isle of Skye short of crew as about half of the men are on Christmas leave.
- 19:00** Two trains arrive at Kyle of Lochalsh laden with servicemen.
- 19:30** The Iolaire sails from the Kyle of Lochalsh to Stornaway with 260 Naval ratings from Lewis and Harris and 24 crew on board followed by the Sheila at 8pm.

1 January 1919

- After about 12.30** Squalls and drizzling rain are encountered by the Iolaire.
- 01:00am** Commander Mason retires to his quarters. Lieutenant Cotter now in charge.
- 01:55am** Signalman William Saunders sees a 'blue light' which he reports as the signal of a vessel requiring a pilot. This was in fact a rocket and was a sign of distress signal. Testimonies from survivors recount this was approximately the time the ship struck the rocks at the 'Beasts of Holm'. The Iolaire now lays exposed and wrecked in a howling gale.
- 02:25am** John Finlay MacLeod, 32, takes hold of a long heaving line, fastens it about his wrist and takes grip, plunges into the water and tries to swim towards the shore: "...but - oh- the waves had got up terribly at that time." Miraculously defying both the cold and being based on the rocks, John Finlay MacLeod makes it to shore thereby providing a lifeline to half of the Iolaire survivors.
- Approx 03:15am** The Iolaire is listing heavily to port and her stern slips off the rock on which she's been pinned to. As she moves seaward and sinks into deep water, she drags with her the hawser (a thick rope or cable for mooring or towing a ship) to which many men are still clinging. None of them survive.
- In little groups or in pairs, dazed and stumbling survivors attracted by the lights in the farmhouse windows make their way to Stoneyfield farm where they are taken in and attended to by Mr and Mrs Anderson Young. The toughest and least hypothermic men are encouraged to make their way to town to raise the alarm amongst the townspeople there.
- 03:30am** Five half-dead bedraggled survivors were made to report to Rear-Admiral Boyle at his office in Stornaway. He later wrote that 'little information could be obtained from them'.



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06.10am

The scale of the disaster was finally becoming apparent to the townspeople.

Sometime after 9.00am

A report is received that there is a man clinging to the mast. Lieutenant Wenlock stated to the Fatal Accident Inquiry 'I immediately took the motor launch Spense and with a volunteer crew went out to rescue the man'. This would turn out to be Donald Morrison, 20 years old and known as Am Patch. He later recalled: "The sea was still pretty rough at daybreak but between then and 10 am it seemed to subside a bit. The first boat attempted to come near where I was hanging on, but it had to turn back. I thought then I'd be safer where I was than trying to get to that boat."

Nearing physical collapse but finally helped onto the little skiff, of the 284 men who had been aboard the Iolaire, Donald Morrison would later recount to admirers: "I was the only one to step ashore on Stornoway Pier".

Within hours exhausted, bedraggled survivors begin staggering into their townships.

Later the same New Year's Day and for many days following relatives and friends would comb the shores searching for the bodies of their sons, husbands, brothers, neighbours. Many would never be recovered.

10 February 1919

Fatal Accident Inquiry opens in Stornoway Sheriff Court.

January 1970

The Admiralty makes available all papers relating to the disaster to the public for the first time.



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