

## John Francis Girardot (1829-1902)

Francis Girardot, born in Nottinghamshire, lived in Tenby during the 1880s.

With large ships and excellent communications in case of hazard, we tend to forget just how dangerous travel by sea used to be. Yet tragedy rarely hit the headlines in the manner, say, of a modern aviation disaster. This was partly because it was so much more common and partly because when a ship failed to turn up when expected, it could simply be because it had been delayed. In the days of sail, the time taken for a long passage was unpredictable and by the time people assumed the worst, the overdue ship may have gone down; it could have been lost for a very long time.

The *Royal Tar* which had sailed out of St John, New Brunswick, in 1836 carrying a circus and two side shows, caught fire at sea. In the normal course of events it would have been lost without trace but proximity to the coast allowed many of those on board to survive and to tell their story. Passengers ripped up deck planking and lashed together a raft; when they were aboard it in the water, an elephant jumped onto them. One passenger sought to escape with the aid a rope attached to the superstructure which he looped around his neck, nearly being throttled when several other passengers grabbed hold of his legs as he lowered himself into the water. He managed to transfer the rope to one ankle only to find that others seeking salvation grabbed and held on to his other leg. Another passenger dragged his trunk on deck, transferring 500 silver dollars to a moneybelt before pushing his trunk into the sea and diving in after it; the trunk floated.

Even where there was less incident, the crew looked after itself. When the *Arctic* collided with the *Vesta* in fog in 1854, 322 passengers including women and children were drowned, the one surviving lifeboat contained 14 passengers and 34 crew. When the *SS William Browne* hit an ice-berg in 1841, just one overloaded lifeboat escaped – the crew threw out 16 passengers in order to lighten it.

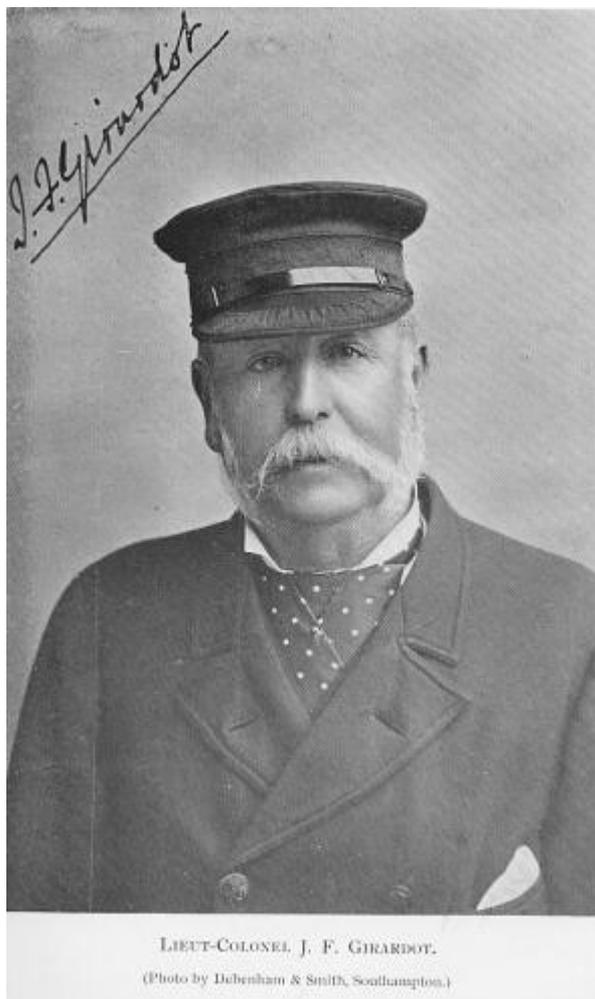
The culture of “looking after number one” was, however, about to change.

The troopship H.M.S. 'BIRKENHEAD' was wrecked at one o'clock on the morning of the 26th February 1852, off the Cape of Good Hope. She carried men for nearly every regiment at the Cape, fighting against the Xhosa in order to establish the British Cape colonists. That for the 43rd consisted of one Sergeant and forty Privates, under command of Lieutenant Francis Girardot. There were 700 on board, including the families of some of the men. As the ship went down, the women and children were transferred to the lifeboats which stood off about 100 yards from the ship's side. Some twenty minutes after the first shock, the Commander called out 'All those who can swim jump overboard and make for the boats'. Lieutenant Girardot, 43rd, and Captain Wright, of the 91st, immediately implored the men not to listen to this suggestion, or the women and children must inevitably be swamped.

The soldiers did not move, even as the ship broke up. Some of the soldiers managed to swim the 2 miles to shore over the next 12 hours, often hanging on to pieces of the wreck to stay afloat, but most drowned, died of exposure or were taken by sharks. All the women

and children on board, 20 in number, were saved; 23 officers and 468 soldiers and sailors were drowned. The King of Prussia ordered this story to be read on parade at the head of every regiment in his service as a lesson in discipline.

But this was not the last act of heroism on the part of Girardot. As the ship went down he dived into the sea and struck out for shore, finding a cabin door to support him. He came up with and joined four or five others on a bundle of spars tied together which were carried by the waves into a narrow creek, a hundred yards from the beach. One of the party could not swim—he had laid hold of the spars when the ship went down but now, though so near shore, was helpless. On hearing this, Girardot desired him to rest his hands on his shoulders, and thus, though exhausted, having passed ten hours in the water, swam in, and safely deposited his burden



Francis Girardot was feted as a hero and became Colonel of the Royal Sherwood Foresters Militia. In 1885 he signed a lease for 3½ years at £50 a year on no 2 Lexden Terrace in Tenby. He finally retired to Southampton and died in 1902.