

## The Dead of the S.S. Hilda

On the 18<sup>th</sup> November 1905, the cross channel ferry SS Hilda, owned by the London & South Western Railway, struck rocks approaching St Malo in France, with the tragic loss of all but one of her Southampton-based crew.

Exhibiting a compassion sadly lacking a few years later by the White Star Line, the L&SWR had all the casualties' bodies brought back to Southampton, and seventeen were buried in the two existing cemeteries. Fourteen were laid to rest in Southampton Old Cemetery, and three in St Mary Extra Cemetery.

Recently a correspondent asked us if there was a memorial in Southampton Old Cemetery to the victims of this disaster, as it seems that this had been stated as a fact in a summary of the tragedy published in '*South Western Circle*' a magazine for local railway history enthusiasts. This in turn seems to have been based on a retelling of the story of the disaster in the Echo in 2002. The significant part of that story was a report by a very elderly lady who was a descendant of one of the victims, who recollected visiting the Cemetery when she was young, and seeing the grave of Captain Gregory with the names of the crew.

My correspondent had sent me a list of the crew, and Bereavement Services provided the grave locations for those buried in Southampton. Ann Jacobs and I spent a fascinating couple of hours locating these plot locations, and seeing what state any memorials were in.

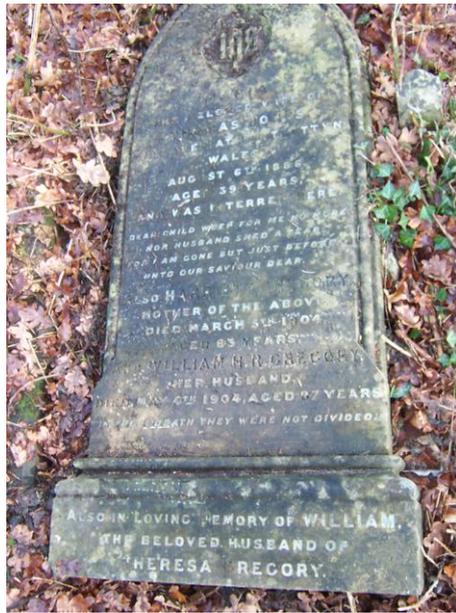
In summary, of the 14 burials in the Old Cemetery, 7 have visible memorials, and of 6 there is no sign of a gravestone although the plot was found. In one case the plot was located in the middle of a huge bramble patch, so the existence of this memorial must remain unknown for a while.

Three of the graves are near a path, although a certain amount of bramble cutting was needed in order to get close enough to read the inscriptions.

Chief Engineer John Topping is buried next to the main carriageway, and although his death is inscribed on the well preserved tombstone, it does not mention the Hilda.

Captain William Gregory's gravestone is quite close to the Douro memorial, which may be the cause of the original confusion, as the Douro memorial does list the names of the lost crew. Gregory's stone has been broken and the main part is flat on its back. The inscription is mostly readable, although some of the lead letters have been lost.

The bottom of the main stone bears the wording "*Also in Loving Memory of William, the beloved husband of Theresa Gregory*" while the part of the base that remains upright completes the inscription "*Drowned in the steamship Hilda November 18<sup>th</sup> 1905 aged 56*" "*Thy Will Not Mine O Lord*"



*Captain Gregory's gravestone –  
parts 1 and 2*

The Memorial stone to George Grimstead required the excavation of a huge anthill, but the reward was to find an inscription that said “*Drowned in the wreck of the S.S. Hilda*”. Nearby the grave of George Warren had a stone that was leaning forward and deeply buried, and it proved impossible to uncover the bottom part of the inscription.

William Burrough turned out to have a fine rock gravestone, and the effort put into removing lots of plant life and turf was rewarded by the discovery of a clear inscription that said *“Who was Drowned Through the Foundering of the S.S. Hilda”*.



*Uncovering the Burrough inscription*

The only Hilda-related gravestone I had been aware of before was that of Benjamin Chester, which is the subject of one of Bernard Lavell's drawings, and this too says *“Drowned in the Wreck of the S.S. Hilda”*.

The only other gravestone we found was that of Sidney Marett, but this one doesn't mention the Hilda.

Every one of the Hilda burials we found were in existing family graves, even that of Captain Gregory whose elderly parents had both died in their eighties the year before. It is this fact that may be the reason that there is no general memorial to the Hilda victims, as there was no obvious place to put it, and it might have appeared unnecessary to have a memorial to individuals buried all around.

*Dave Jacobs Feb 2009*