

## The Coxswain's Widow: Charity, Heroism, and the Working Class in the Life and Death of James Maynard

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A strong westerly wind blew the sails of the *Elizabeth Scown* as she drew closer to Bude Harbour. She came from Newquay, around sixty nautical miles southwest, laden with cut stone blocks for the expansion of St. Michaels, the Anglican church at Bude. It was early March of 1877, and the damp air still held the chill of winter.<sup>1</sup> The sun had long since set, and a thick front of rain had descended on the coast, obscuring the almost full moon from view. The master of the schooner, a Jerseyman named William Sluggett, stood on deck and called for the signal light to be hoisted.<sup>2</sup> The light was meant for the hobblers on shore—men tasked with guiding ships around the jagged reefs of the waterfront and into the safety of the harbour. On an ordinary night, the hobblers would return the signal with one of their own, a beacon ablaze at the top of Chapel Rock, the stone mound at the end of the breakwater protecting Bude Harbour from the brunt of the Atlantic. When Sluggett caught a glimpse of it, though, the light had not yet reached its destination: while the signal had been lit, the man carrying it was only halfway across the rocky wall jutting into the sea. In the confusion of the storm, Sluggett mistook the light for the entrance to the harbour. As the gale whipped around him, he drove the *Scown* into the shoal at the end of the breakwater. The ship lurched to port, her wooden hull caught on the jagged stone reef, and was wrecked.

At the first sign of distress from the *Scown*, observers onshore raised the alarm and sprang into action.<sup>3</sup> Manned by ten men, the *Elizabeth Moore Garden*, an immense green lifeboat, launched from the boathouse on the Bude Canal and into the darkness. Her captain, coxswain James Maynard, had more than a decade of experience with the Royal National Lifeboat Institute and carefully guided his crew towards the wreck at the end of the breakwater.<sup>4</sup> As the lifeboat neared the floundering ship, it became clear that the water was too treacherous to make contact with her

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<sup>1</sup> The following events took place around 8:15 pm on March 3, 1877.

<sup>2</sup> “Elizabeth Scown,” *Shipping & Mercantile Gazette*, March 9, 1877. William Sluggett’s report on the wreck of the *Elizabeth Scown* proved to be one of the most important sources in understanding the event. Sluggett had served on ships in the locality of Bude since his late teens, and took over the *Scown* from his previous master, John Elliot, sometime between 1871 and 1877.

<sup>3</sup> “Lifeboat Disaster on the Cornish Coast,” *Shields Daily Gazette*, March 5, 1877. This newspaper report of the wreck notes that during the initial grounding, the *Scown* “dragged her anchors and showed the distress signals.” None of the reports specify what these signals were: as it was a stormy night, it is likely that they were some kind of flare or signal light, or the observers on the shore recognized the schooner had been wrecked and sent for help.

<sup>4</sup> For the remainder of this essay, I will refer to James Maynard by either his full name or his given name.

crew: James was forced to turn back. The waves and rocky coast, however, would prove too much for the lifeboat—on the return trip, she caught a reef and capsized at the mouth of the harbour. Her rudder drum was lost, several oars splintered and broke against the rocks, and her crew was cast into the dark water.<sup>5</sup> Most would survive the ordeal, in large part because of the regulation cork life vests they wore: James Maynard, the veteran coxswain, did not.<sup>6</sup> Not until morning, after the crew of the *Elizabeth Moore Garden* had reached the muddy shore and the men of the *Scown* had escaped from the breakwater at low tide, was James' absence discovered. He was dead: lost to the sea.<sup>7</sup>

In the months following the drowning of James Maynard, the circumstances of his death were commemorated in prose. A poem, "The Lifeboat," was written by an accountant from Exeter named Samuel Steer. Describing James' heroism and the tragedy of his loss, both to his family and the community at large, Steer published his work as part of a general fundraising effort for Thirza Maynard, widow of the late coxswain, and her eleven children. It was this poem that first drew me to the story of James Maynard—though he was my third great-grandfather, I knew nothing of his life or death before encountering "The Lifeboat."<sup>8</sup> From its lines emerged a narrative of heroism, charity, working-class ideals, intertwined with the history of a changing seaside community at the heart of the Victorian era. To Steer and the people of Bude, Cornwall, and beyond, James was the personification of popular British values of the nineteenth century: his story marks the intersections of class, gender, personal image, and patriotism at the forefront of contemporary social discourse. In this essay, I will follow the life of James Maynard, the repercussions of his death, and the extent to which these relate to the experiences of his widow, Thirza, the Exeter accountant Samuel Steer, and a myriad of other players, local and otherwise. His voice is never heard directly—he left no record of

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<sup>5</sup> "Wreck at Bude," *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, March 9, 1877. This article on the wreck focuses largely on the damage done to the *Elizabeth Moore Garden* and less upon the loss of James Maynard.

<sup>6</sup> "Lifeboat Disaster on the Cornish Coast," *Shields Daily Gazette*, March 5, 1877. This is the only newspaper article covering the wreck that notes the presence of cork life vests, which were introduced to the Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI) in 1854. The local history blog *Bude Past & Present* claims that Maynard was not wearing his regulation life vest at the time of the wreck: this information is unconfirmed.

<sup>7</sup> "The Late Fatal Lifeboat Accident," *Western Times*, March 13, 1877. Ten days after the wreck of the *Scown*, Maynard's body had not been located: while he does have a gravestone, no official death record has been located, and it is presumed his body was never found. This article references the one feature that would have helped identify James, as well as the only information on his personal appearance: a tattoo of his initials, "J.M.," on his left arm.

<sup>8</sup> James Maynard is my third great-grandfather through my maternal grandfather. I started doing genealogical research in 2015, coming across *The Lifeboat* while I was still in high school. I am unaware of how much my grandfather knew about this history: I missed the opportunity to ask him, and the relatives I've contacted since have had no knowledge of the story of James Maynard, or even the family connection to Bude.

his personal thoughts and feelings—but his story remains nonetheless, told through accounts of his actions and efforts to do him justice. Through the magnification of a single tragic tale amidst a sea of history, this essay and the story of the late coxswain present a view of life, death, and British values of the Victorian era.

*Part I: In Life*

The small seaside village of Bude, located at the mouth of the River Strat, is set into the northernmost coast of Cornwall, England. Described in S. Baring Gould's *A Book of Cornwall* as an “unpicturesque, uninteresting place,” with “very fine coast scenery,” it stands among drifted sandhills and high, jutting cliffs.<sup>9</sup> It is a windswept, treeless place, with beaches of fine yellow sand and a handful of painted white cottages overlooking the shore. Through the centre of the village runs the Bude Canal, an artificial channel stretching close to forty miles inland. Completed in 1826, the canal connects Bude with the larger parish of Stratton, surrounding Cornwall, and neighbouring Devon. While its harbour had once made the village a thriving port, the canal supported a more specific export well into the Victorian era: shell sand. The unique makeup of the sand around Bude, rich with calcium carbonate, made it an ideal natural fertilizer, and the canal allowed for its export to inland farms and markets via tub boats. By the 1870s, however, its industry was transitioning from the sale of sand to the tourist trade. Bude had long been a site of seaside holidaying: a description of the village from the 1814 *Magna Britannia* notes the presence of “a few cottages...for such families as frequent the coast in the summer season for sea–air and bathing.”<sup>10</sup> The popularity of seaside holidays as an “English invention and cultural export” had risen during the Romantic era of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>11</sup> Inspired by the “sublime” nature of the sea and the patriotic link between the British Isles and maritime culture, those who could afford the long trip to the coast would do so to take in the therapeutic benefits and recreational activities of the seaside.<sup>12</sup> With the arrival of cheaper means of transport over the course of the Victorian period, such as daily stagecoach lines and passenger trains, the growing middle and working classes, products of the industrial era,

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<sup>9</sup> S. Baring–Gould, *A Book of Cornwall* (Methuen & Co., 1906), 261.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Lysons and Samuel Lysons, *Magna Britannia: Volume 3, Cornwall* (T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1814), 297.

<sup>11</sup> John K. Walton, “Urban Space, Public Pleasure, and Cultural Conflict: The Seaside Resort in England c. 1840–1939,” in *Divertissements et loisirs dans les sociétés urbaines à l'époque moderne et contemporaine*, ed. Robert Beck and Anna Madœuf (Presses universitaires François–Rabelais, 2005), 321.

<sup>12</sup> Walton, “Urban Space, Public Pleasure, and Cultural Conflict,” 322.

further popularized seaside holidays.<sup>13</sup> The 1866 edition of Bradshaw's Guide, a semi-regular publication of railway schedules and travel guides, described Bude as a "fashionable marine resort" with a view of the sea that was "striking, bold and sublime."<sup>14</sup> Eventually, the railway would disrupt the old industry of Bude. Rail lines would overtake the canal as a form of rapid transport for both products and passengers alike, and the village would shift almost entirely to the tourist trade.<sup>15</sup> It was a world split between two ideals: the traditions of a small seaside community, far from the beaten path, and the progress and growth of Victorian Britain.

James Maynard was born in Bude in September of 1835.<sup>16</sup> He was the ninth child and sixth son of Thomas and Mary (née Squire) Maynard, both natives of Stratton parish, who had moved from the town of Stratton to Bude one year earlier.<sup>17</sup> James' father was a cordwainer by trade, making his living through the manufacture of leather shoes and boots, while his mother operated the London Inn at Bude, located at 11 Queen Street, where the family lived.<sup>18</sup> Mary died in December of 1843—the same day that neighbouring Stratton held one of its annual cattle fairs—less than a year after giving birth to her twelfth child, Jacob.<sup>19</sup> Thomas Maynard, a widower at forty-one, never remarried: he continued his work as a cordwainer and

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<sup>13</sup> "Barnstaple Station to Ilfracombe," *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, September 19, 1857. This newspaper ad exemplifies the presence of rail lines in Cornwall as early as the 1850s and notes that a stage could be taken to locations, such as Bude, inaccessible by locomotive.

<sup>14</sup> *Bradshaw's Guidebook for Tourists in Great Britain & Ireland, (in Four Sections), Section II* (Bradshaw & Blacklock, 1866), 38.

<sup>15</sup> "Bude," *Southern Railway Email Group*, September 12, 2008, accessed April 1, 2021, [https://sremg.org.uk/location/bude\\_01.html](https://sremg.org.uk/location/bude_01.html). By 1879, the London & Southwest Railway company had opened a line to nearby Holsworthy, sending holiday-goers to Bude by way of stagecoach. Only in 1898 did a train station open in Bude, allowing the community to capitalize on the tourist trade like never before.

<sup>16</sup> "The Late Coxswain of the Bude Lifeboat," *Western Times*, March 28, 1877. This article, incorporating information from an informal interview by Samuel Steer with John S. Avery, curate of Bude, mentions that James Maynard (in 1877) would have been "42 in September next," meaning he was born sometime in September of 1835.

<sup>17</sup> R. E. Gosnell, *A History of British Columbia* (Lewis Publishing Co., 1906), 399.

<sup>18</sup> "England and Wales Census, 1841," *FamilySearch*, accessed 5 March 2021, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MQBQ-D4L>, Thomas Maynard, Stratton, Cornwall, England, United Kingdom; "1841 England, Scotland and Wales census," *findmypast*, <http://www.findmypast.com>; PRO HO 107, *The National Archives, Kew, Surrey*. Mary Marynard's operation of the London Inn is never stated directly, but rather inferred from the records. The 1841 England census lists the family living at the inn, listing Thomas as a "cordwainer," but does not give Mary an occupation; by 1851, the family is still living at the inn, but Thomas has taken on the role of "beerhouse worker," following Mary's death in 1843. This indicates the presence of the previously hidden (or implied) role of Mary or the family as a whole that only came to light when the male head-of-household took on the work.

<sup>19</sup> General Register Office, England, "Search the Online GRO Index: Death Registrations," *HM Passport Office*, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certi>, entry for Mary Maynard, December qtr. 1843, Stratton, vol. 9/186, General Register Office, Southport.

took on the additional role of running the London Inn in his wife's absence.<sup>20</sup> Growing up, James attended Bude–Haven School with his siblings while working at the family's inn, eventually taking on an apprenticeship with his father.<sup>21</sup> Living so close to the sea, he also spent time working on the ships that frequented Bude Harbour. While no records exist of James' specific work history, the biography of his older brother, Richard, offers some insight into this period of his youth:

*For his serious business life he was apprenticed to learn the shoemaker's trade and the leather business in general. But his strongest inclination when a boy was for the life of a seaman, and he consequently went to sea in the ship Stickly, under Captain Greenway, and for a year was engaged principally in the coasting trade between England and Wales. He then returned to Bude, and for some years following he worked at his trade during the winter and followed the sea in the summer.*<sup>22</sup>

Sometime in his late teens or early twenties, James met Thirza Allin. Thirza, three years his junior, was a housemaid from Black Torrington in the nearby county of Devon. The daughter of a carpenter—a tradesman, like James' father—she had previously worked for the Ridsen family of Holsworthy on Butterbeer Farm but was now employed by the Tallamy family of Sheepwash.<sup>23</sup> Though impossible to tell precisely when the two

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<sup>20</sup> "England and Wales Census, 1851," database with images, *FamilySearch*, accessed 9 November 2019, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:SGKJ-SQS>; Thomas Maynard, Stratton, Cornwall, England; citing Stratton, Cornwall, England, 33, from "1851 England, Scotland and Wales census," *findmypast*, <http://www.findmypast.com>; PRO HO 107, *The National Archives of the UK, Kew, Surrey*. Thomas's occupation is specifically given as "Cordwainer & Beerhouse Worker."

<sup>21</sup> "England and Wales Census, 1851," Thomas Maynard, Stratton, Cornwall, England. The same census record simply notes that fifteen-year-old James' occupation is the same as his father's.

<sup>22</sup> R. E. Gosnell, *A History of British Columbia* (Lewis Publishing Co., 1906), 401. This brief biography of Richard Maynard, written the year before his death in 1907, highlights his life and career as a gold miner, shoemaker, and early photographer in Victoria, British Columbia. Richard was the husband of Hannah Hatherly Maynard, also from Bude, who was a pioneering Canadian documentarian, experimental photographer, and spiritualist on the east coast during the Victorian era.

<sup>23</sup> "England and Wales Census, 1851," *FamilySearch*, accessed 9 November 2019, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:SGJX-53>, Thurzdan Allin in household of Joseph Risdon, Black Torrington, Devon, England; citing Black Torrington, Devon, England, p. 9, from "1851 England, Scotland and Wales census," database and images, *findmypast* (<http://www.findmypast.com>: n.d.); citing PRO HO 107, *The National Archives of the UK, Kew, Surrey*. All transcriptions of this specific census I've come across have misspelt Thirza's name – even the original refers to her as "Thurza," a common variant spelling. James Tallamy is noted on James Mynard Allin's birth record as the informant. On the record, under "Signature, Description, and Residence of the

first encountered each other, they were at least acquainted by January of 1860 as, nine months later, Thirza gave birth to their eldest son, James Mynard Allin.<sup>24</sup> James and Thirza were married at the Chapel of St. Michaels, situated along the Bude Canal, on February 12, 1861.<sup>25</sup> The wedding was officiated by the Curate of Bude, John S. Avery, and witnessed by four of James' siblings: his older sisters, Honor and Elizabeth, and younger brothers, Joseph and Jacob. The couple would go on to have eleven children in total, all surviving into adulthood. James would only know ten of them—his youngest, Thirza, named for her mother, was born twenty-seven days after her father was lost at sea.

For his occupation, James took on a variety of work throughout his adult life. He was a cordwainer, or shoemaker, like his father, following in the paternal trade invested in him at an early age; at the same time, he worked as a mariner and hoveller, engaged in the more traditional industry of the Cornish coast.<sup>26</sup> Both were sporadic in terms of income but also allowed a degree of flexibility in day-to-day life. It was this flexibility, combined with James' experience as a sailor, that made him an ideal candidate to volunteer with the Royal National Lifeboat Institute. The Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI) began in Great Britain as the National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck.<sup>27</sup> Established in 1824, the organization created a chain of lifeboat stations,

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Informant," he gave his mark (denoting illiteracy) and described himself as the "occupier" of the home in which the child was born. Thirza's relationship to the Tallamy family is technically unknown, though they may have employed her as a servant.

<sup>24</sup> England, General Register Office, birth record (PDF copy of an entry of birth) for James Mynard Allin, born October 5, 1860; registered November 3, 1860, a copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Births in the Torrington Union District vol. 05B/479, entry 92, Shebbear Sub-district, Devon, England, dated March 3, 2021, General Registry Office, Southport; "Black Torrington – Bible Christian Festivities," *Western Times*, January 14, 1860. As a point of (largely irrelevant) conjecture, the approximate conception date of James and Thirza's first child coincides with a bazaar held in Black Torrington from January 1–2, 1860, celebrating the sixteenth anniversary of the opening of the Hope Chapel there. Victorian bazaars were major social events and places where the atypical intermingling of men and women of varying socio-economic classes could occur with little restriction: it would have given a reason for James to be in the area, as he may have been selling shoes there made either by himself or his father and may have afforded the young couple an opportunity to meet.

<sup>25</sup> England, General Register Office, marriage record for James Maynard and Thirza Allin, married February 12, 1861; Stratton District vol. 05C/1, entry 51, Bude-Haven Sub-district, Cornwall, England, dated March 30, 2021, General Registry Office, Southport.

<sup>26</sup> In 1851, at the age of fifteen, James worked as a "cordwainer" (likely an apprentice) and "beer house worker" in his family's inn. At the time of his marriage in 1861, James is listed as a "mariner." In the 1861 Census of England, taken on April 7 of that year, he appears as a "sailor (mate)." By 1871, however, he is noted as being a "shoemaker," and one of the newspaper reports following his death describes him as a "hoveller" (a general seaman; variant of "hobbler"). What this shows is the flexibility of his work, as well as the seasonal nature of these trades in general.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Dunkley, *Ships and Boats: 1840–1950* (English Heritage, 2012), 12.

manned and operated by volunteer sailors and fishermen, along the British coast: by 1877, more than 12,000 men made up its ranks.<sup>28</sup> Physically, psychologically, and emotionally testing, the work required passion, versatility, and a high level of trust among crewmates.<sup>29</sup> Volunteers were restricted in their movements, having to be ready and available to their stations at a moment's notice, and as work was done in their home communities, the men often had personal connections to those they rescued or recovered. Through a combination of the dangerous work environment and a sense of ownership of duty, the volunteers of the RNLI formed a strong collective relationship—a brotherhood, figurative or literal.<sup>30</sup> For many, the role of the lifeboatman was a necessary sacrifice to make in ensuring the safety of those they knew and loved. At its core, it was work that embodied a firmly Victorian form of masculine identity “bound up with service to and care for others, belonging, endurance, and ... adventure.”<sup>31</sup>

The RNLI came to Bude following a pair of shipwrecks along its coast in October of 1836.<sup>32</sup> Both the steam packet *Providence* and an unidentified schooner were wrecked, prompting a letter to be written to King William IV reporting the losses and requesting payment for a lifeboat. One such vessel, approved by the RNLI, was constructed at Sunderland the following year: at the cost of £100, it was christened *The Royal Bude Lifeboat* and presented to the village with the pomp of a royal ceremony. In its first half-century of service, the Bude lifeboat station saw countless life-saving operations involving merchant vessels and unlucky bathers alike. While not all souls survived such rescue attempts, the lifeboat station itself had an almost spotless record. Before 1877, only one incident of volunteer casualties had occurred in its history: in 1844, two men drowned when their boat overturned during an exercise in Bude Harbour.<sup>33</sup> The work of a lifeboatman was dangerous, but even during the Victorian era it was an occupation “provided with every available means of security.” A boathouse had been constructed along the Bude Canal to allow for quick

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<sup>28</sup> “Annual Report,” *The Life-Boat, or Journal of the National Life-Boat Institution* 10, no. 104 (1877), 27. The use of male identifiers throughout this essay is purposeful – Victorian-era lifeboat crews were all male: today, it remains a male-dominated field.

<sup>29</sup> Michelle O’Toole and Chris Grey, “Beyond Choice: ‘Thick’ Volunteering and the Case of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution,” *Human Relations* 69, no. 1 (2015), 96. “The sea doesn’t treat you different just because you are on a lifeboat.”

<sup>30</sup> As an established British institution, service in the RNLI often became a family tradition. Sons would follow their fathers, and generations would volunteer out of a sense of familial obligation, as with a trade or military service. James’ own brother, William, was a member of the Bude lifeboat crew for over forty years, beginning his service around the same time and retiring in 1901 due to old age.

<sup>31</sup> O’Toole and Grey, “Beyond Choice,” 101.

<sup>32</sup> “Bude’s Station History,” Lifeboats, *Royal National Lifeboat Institution*, accessed March 31, 2021, <https://rnli.org/find-my-nearest/lifeboat-stations/bude-lifeboat-station/station-history-bude>.

<sup>33</sup> “Bude’s Station History,” Lifeboats.

launches, and a rocket apparatus was installed on the shore to help establish lines of communication during rescue missions.<sup>34</sup> Safety measures, such as training exercises and the introduction of regulation cork life vests in 1854, ensured a degree of protection for the “stout hearts and strong arms” that made up the RNLI.<sup>35</sup> The individual roles of the crewmen were also vital in maintaining the safety of volunteers, none more so than the coxswain. When at sea, the coxswain was in charge: in a lifeboat, he was pilot and commander of the crew, requiring a level of authority over his mates and, as a rule, “years of experience” as a local navigator.<sup>36</sup>

James Maynard became coxswain of the Bude lifeboat station in the winter of 1862, his appointment coinciding with the wreck of the *Bencoolen* on the sands outside Bude Harbour on October 21, 1862.<sup>37</sup> The *Bencoolen*, a large sailing ship from Liverpool, had set out for the port city of Bombay eight days prior. While she had few issues through the Irish Sea, the Cornish coast would prove her downfall. On the afternoon of October 19, a strong gale blew one mast overboard, causing a chain reaction that would end with the loss of all main masts, smashed pumps, a damaged wheel and compass, and a split deck.<sup>38</sup> Attempts to repair the damage had little effect: the ship drifted aimlessly on the Atlantic for two days until the crew spotted land on the morning of October 21. The coast guard at Bude, having spotted the ship, lit signal lights to guide the *Bencoolen* through the poor weather to safety. By that afternoon, she had struck sand at the entrance to the harbour and a lifeboat was sent out to aid in the rescue of her crew. Robert Hoyle, head boatman of the coast guard, had previously attempted to contact the ship via the rocket apparatus on land, but to no avail. Even with the lifeboat, the poor weather combined with the nature of the Cornish coast around Bude—specifically the entrance to the harbour—made rescue by sea impossible:

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<sup>34</sup> “A Short History of the Life Saving Apparatus,” *South Shields: Board of Trade on Life Saving Apparatus on the Coasts of the United Kingdom*, 1913. Accessed April 12, 2021. <http://www.thessvlbhistory.co.uk/pdf/A%20%20SHORT%20%20HISTORY%20of%201sa%20equipment.pdf>. Sir Henry Trengrouse of Cornwall invented the rocket apparatus in the early nineteenth century. Essentially a mortar with a line and hook, it is meant to be fired from shore to establish a line of communication with ships off the coast. It was in use at the time the RNLI was established in 1823, and due to several references to the failure of the apparatus at Bude in 1862, it can be presumed the device was acquired sometime during the first twenty-five years of the station’s service.

<sup>35</sup> “Annual Report,” *The Life-Boat*, 30.

<sup>36</sup> O’Toole and Grey, “Beyond Choice,” 92.

<sup>37</sup> “Bude’s Station History,” Lifeboats, *Royal National Lifeboat Institution*, accessed March 31, 2021, <https://rnli.org/find-my-nearest/lifeboat-stations/bude-lifeboat-station/station-history-bude>. This timeline notes that James was made coxswain in 1862, though he may have been involved with the RNLI in some capacity prior to the wreck of the *Bencoolen*.

<sup>38</sup> “The Late Wreck of the ‘Bencoolen’ at Bude,” *North Devon Journal*, October 30, 1862.



*[At] Bude the entrance to the Haven is very narrow, bounded on either side by very ugly rocks, and should a life-boat there get capsized or have many of her oars broken, her probable destination would be the rocks I have referred to, or the rocks under the cliffs.<sup>39</sup>*

Nearly all efforts to rescue the crew of the *Bencoolen* failed: in the end, only six of her thirty-two men would survive. The remains of her hull and contents of her cargo lay scattered along the beaches of Bude, and the villagers, standing on the cliffs and along the shore, were forced to watch the tragic events unfold before their very eyes.<sup>40</sup> In many ways, the wreck of the *Bencoolen* was a call-to-action for the residents of Bude. James' appointment as coxswain of the lifeboat, replacing Robert Hoyle of the coast guard, was a means of righting the mistakes of that ill-fated rescue attempt. No longer would one man be expected to be in two places at once: the volunteers of the RNLi needed to be ready at a moment's notice, which was a freedom afforded to James by the causal working nature of a cordwainer turned mariner. He would fill the role well, serving the small seaside population for many years as a steady hand on the rudder of its lifeboat. On that stormy March night in 1877, though, not even his position, and all the experience that came with it, would be enough to save him. In life, he had provided for his community: in death, they would provide for him.

## *Part II: In Death*

The people of Bude and the surrounding area were quick to respond after the events of the night of March 3, 1877. The wreck of the *Elizabeth Scown* and the loss of James Maynard had taken a heavy toll on the small community, both for his immediate family and those who had—and in some cases, had not—known him personally. James had been widely known by the people of Bude, both from his role in the RNLi and his work as a cordwainer. The occupations of saving lives and making shoes were similar in that both were necessities to all walks of life: James was not restricted to working with one type or class of individuals in either position, expanding his sphere of influence throughout the village. His parentage impacted his notoriety, too: the Maynard family was large and widespread, and his father—as both a cordwainer and innkeeper—would have been just

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<sup>39</sup> “The Late Wreck of the ‘Bencoolen’ at Bude, *North Devon Journal*, October 30, 1862. This ominous vision of the mouth of the harbour, describing the difficulty of lifeboat operations there, is almost exactly what happened to the crew of the *Elizabeth Moore Garden* in 1877, fifteen years later.

<sup>40</sup> “The Late Wreck of the ‘Bencoolen’ at Bude, *North Devon Journal*. As one of the most famous shipwrecks to occur at Bude, the memory of the *Bencoolen* lives on today. Several businesses carry its name, such as the Bencoolen Inn and its figurehead, once displayed in the churchyard of St. Michaels, has since been preserved in a local museum.

as well known, if not more. They had a good reputation in Bude: aside from one incident in 1862 of Thomas Maynard serving beer on Good Friday, local newspaper gossip regarding the family was largely positive.<sup>41</sup> Most of these reports concerned the heroic deeds of James himself.

One example, printed in the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* on December 7, 1865, notes the “gallant” rescue of a young Launceston woman from drowning by James and two other men.<sup>42</sup> For their conduct, all three received medals from the Royal Humane Society. Another article, published by the *Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press* on November 13, 1875, describes the Royal Humane Society medal awarded for the September 11 rescue of two-year-old Arthur Bate, who had fallen from his mother’s arms into ten feet of water in the Bude Canal.<sup>43</sup> James, preparing a lifeboat for exercise nearby, heard the woman’s shrieks and dove into the water, saving the child from “a watery grave.”<sup>44</sup> One final appraisal of James’ service and character took place in December of 1875, following the rescue of the crew of the *Island Belle*, a large brig that had become stuck in the sands outside Bude Harbour. James was again commended, this time for the organization of his crew. One account of the rescue, reported in a newspaper from the north-eastern port city of Sunderland, described the work of the volunteers as being without “confusion, hesitation, or delay.”<sup>45</sup> In sharp contrast to the strained and unorganized rescue efforts of the *Bencoolen*, James’ tenure as coxswain had made a difference in the operation of the Bude lifeboat station. In the eyes of the village, James Maynard was a hero.

The depictions of James Maynard as a hero did not end with his life: if anything, they increased exponentially after his death. The Victorian era was a period of immense change and transition. Industry and technology were evolving at a rapid pace, and many felt that tradition—and by extension, morals—were being lost along the way. As a means of coping with the changing economic, social, and cultural landscape, many turned to heroes for guidance. According to Samuel Smiles, Scottish author and Liberal reformer, heroes were individuals who rose above the masses in some aspect but could come from any societal rank and be emulated by

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<sup>41</sup> “Stratton – Drawing Beer on Good Friday,” *Western Daily Mercury*, May 8, 1862. In this article, Maynard is misspelt as “Minard,” but can be identified as the proprietor of the London Inn at Bude. For “drawing beer during divine service on Good Friday,” he was fined 8s, with 12s costs.

<sup>42</sup> “Bude – Gallant Conduct Rewarded,” *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, December 7, 1865. The newspaper article includes the names of the two men and the rescued woman, but the digital copy available through FindMyPast is too faded to make out the details.

<sup>43</sup> “Saving Life,” *Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press*, November 13, 1875.

<sup>44</sup> “The Late Fatal Lifeboat Accident,” *Western Times*, March 13, 1877. While a detailed report of the near-drowning of Arthur Bate, this article incorrectly notes it as occurring “a few months ago” (as of March 1877) though it had been over a year since the rescue.

<sup>45</sup> “Lifeboat Service,” *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, December 24, 1875. Sunderland was the location where the original Bude lifeboat was constructed.

anyone.<sup>46</sup> Heroism was a trait endowed by others, turning individuals deemed worthy of the title into objects of a “collective emotional investment.”<sup>47</sup> In many cases, these heroes were fictional: rising literacy across Great Britain allowed for the proliferation of popular literature and the appearance of classic—and often unlikely—Victorian protagonists like *Oliver Twist*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Sherlock Holmes*.<sup>48</sup> In real-world examples, heroes were often made of soldiers, explorers, and Christian missionaries: as the era pressed forward, scientists, engineers, and ordinary people joined their ranks.<sup>49</sup> In each case, special importance was placed on a sense of “moral heroism” drawn from an “extraordinary sense of duty, endurance, perseverance, and selflessness” invested in the individual. These traits encouraged emulation over adulation and heroes acted as role models for individual self-improvement, another hallmark of the Victorian age.<sup>50</sup> In life, James Maynard had been rewarded for his acts of courage and selflessness in the service of others, demonstrating the value of his acts as examples of moral heroism. In death, his sacrifice was lauded with the language of admiration, and he was described as “brave,” “gallant,” and an “unselfish man who would risk his life at any time.”<sup>51</sup> Volunteer death among lifeboat crews was rare at the time, only serving to elevate him further: his drowning was one of only six casualties that had affected the 12,000 members of RNLi volunteers since May of 1876.<sup>52</sup> James had sacrificed his life in service to his country and, as such, transcended the role of the individual to become a symbol of the “honour and valour” associated with the patriotic RNLi.<sup>53</sup> For those looking to repay the sacrifice that James Maynard had given to Bude, his widow and children presented the perfect solution: just as the late coxswain had provided for his community through industry and pseudo-paternal protection, so now would his community provide for him.

Thirza Maynard, formerly Allin, would be the chief benefactor of this charitable repayment. Widowed at thirty-nine and eight months pregnant, she was left with ten children to care for and another soon to be born. Thirza had lived with James and their large family at 13 King’s Street

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<sup>46</sup> Barbara Korte, “On Heroes and Hero Worship: Regimes of Emotional Investment in Mid-Victorian Popular Magazines,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 49, no. 2 (2016), 189.

<sup>47</sup> Korte, “On Heroes and Hero Worship,” 182.

<sup>48</sup> Lawrence Stone, “Literacy and Education in England 1640–1900,” *Past & Present*, no. 42 (1969), 42.

<sup>49</sup> Korte, “On Heroes and Hero Worship,” 183.

<sup>50</sup> Korte, “On Heroes and Hero Worship,” 183; Christopher Radcliffe, “Mutual Improvement Societies and the Forging of Working-Class Political Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century England,” *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 16, no. 2 (1997), 143.

<sup>51</sup> “The Late Coxswain of the Bude Lifeboat,” *Western Times*; “The Bude Lifeboat Accident,” *Western Morning News*, March 9, 1877; “The Bude Lifeboat Disaster,” *Launceston Weekly News and Cornwall & Devon Advertiser*, March 31, 1877.

<sup>52</sup> “The Late Coxswain of the Bude Lifeboat,” *Western Times*.

<sup>53</sup> “Annual Report,” *The Life-Boat*, 26.

in Bude for at least ten years.<sup>54</sup> A low, two-storey attached home, it was built into a long lane of houses with a cobblestone walk down to Lansdown Road and onto the River Neet. It was here that James likely did his cordwaining—skilled labour often performed in a workshop at home. Thirza may have involved herself in the work—the wives of artisans, limited in occupation elsewhere, were often “*de facto* partners” in small, family-based businesses, though the events of March of 1877 would change her situation dramatically.<sup>55</sup> Beyond the emotional toll from the loss of her husband, James’ death also placed Thirza in a tenuous economic position—her family now lacked a breadwinner. Faced with ten children to feed and an impending “confinement” as the result of her pregnancy, Thirza turned to her community for help.<sup>56</sup>

Alongside ideals of civil service, masculinity, and heroism, the “social fabric of Victorian England” was permeated by charity and the repercussions of charitable relationships.<sup>57</sup> Divided by the motivations and aspirations of donors and recipients, nineteenth-century charity was a mixture of traditional mutual aid networks—neighbours helping neighbours with the expectation of reciprocity—and paternalistic charitable organizations, which generated hierarchies of dependence through imbalanced gift-giving.<sup>58</sup> Bude was a small community and mutual aid would have been common amongst its residents. With advancements in rapid communication through newspapers and telegraphs, however, as well as the rising prominence of the area as a seaside resort, a wider net of aid could be cast in the case of Thirza Maynard. This philanthropic venture, a hybrid of mutual aid and public altruism, manifested as the Maynard Fund. Charitable donations for the widow and her children began with a London meeting of the Royal National Lifeboat

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<sup>54</sup> “England and Wales Census, 1871,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:VFJ7-NBC:19 February 2021>), Thirza Maynard in entry for James Maynard, 1871. Database and images, *findmypast* (<http://www.findmypast.com>: n.d.); citing PRO HO 107. The National Archives of the UK, Kew, Surrey.

<sup>55</sup> Carry Van Lieshout, Harry Smith, Piero Montebruno, and Robert J. Bennett, “Female Entrepreneurship: Business, Marriage and Motherhood in England and Wales, 1851–1911,” *Social History* 44, no. 4 (2019), 444.

<sup>56</sup> “The Bude Lifeboat Disaster,” *Launceston Weekly News and Cornwall & Devon Advertiser*, March 31, 1877; Cynthia A. Huff, “Chronicles of Confinement: Reactions to Childbirth in British Women’s Diaries,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 10, no. 1 (1987), 63. Victorian confinement, or lying-in, was a period of bed-rest, ranging from a few weeks to several months, before and after the birth of a child. During this time, care would be provided by female relatives or (for those who could afford it) a hired nurse.

<sup>57</sup> Alan J. Kidd, “Philanthropy and the ‘Social History Paradigm’,” *Social History* 21, no. 2 (1996), 180.

<sup>58</sup> Kidd, “Philanthropy and the ‘Social History Paradigm’,” 187. In terms of paternalistic gift-giving, “the dependence of the recipient upon the gift and the consequent inability to reciprocate is unlikely to foster solidarity, but rather [serves] to reinforce divisions and even generate resentments.”

Institute on March 9, 1877.<sup>59</sup> The committee, organized around the wreck of the *Elizabeth Scown*, decided on a donation of £150 for the Maynard family, meant as a gesture of sympathy and economic support. As word spread of the tragedy, local subscriptions would appear across Cornwall and Devon to add to the fund. From members of parliament to the Working Men's Mutual Improvement Society, support for these subscriptions was widespread across all socio-economic classes. In the end, the Maynard Fund, raised to "cheer the darkened hour," would contribute over £470 to the family's income.<sup>60</sup>

Of the more than three hundred individuals who donated to the Maynard family, one of the key figures in ensuring the economic success of James' widow and children was Arthur Bate. Bate, estate clerk and father of the toddler rescued from the Bude Canal two years earlier, implored readers of the *Tavistock Gazette* "who [were] in the habit of visiting Bude in the summertime" to recall the "stalwart figure" of James Maynard and donate to the fund.<sup>61</sup> In regular, publicized correspondence with William Rowe, solicitor at Bude and Honorary Secretary of the Bude Lifeboat Committee, Bate suggested a conversion of the money from the fund into a weekly allowance of fifteen shillings on behalf of Thirza and her family.<sup>62</sup> As the clerk put it, this money—a financial replacement for the late coxswain—would "enable us to get the children out into trades, and leave something for the widow in the time of age," demonstrating both the inherently paternalistic nature of the charity, as well as the collective emotional investment placed upon the family of James Maynard.<sup>63</sup>

Another contributor to the Maynard Fund, invested as much in the charitable donations as in their political implications, was Samuel Steer: poet, accountant, and radical Liberal. His work, "The Lifeboat," would be written to help raise money for the Maynard family and, in its own way, push his own ideals to the forefront. Born in 1842, in the village of Winkleigh, Devon, to an illiterate farmer and his wife, Steer had long held an interest in the intersection of poetry and politics. He worked as a clerk for much of his life, travelling to Exeter in 1863 for employment with the tea merchants Wilcocks and Western, and later taking an accounting position with the Freehold Land Benefit Society in the city.<sup>64</sup> Steer was a liberal and nonconformist, no stranger to the progressive social causes that defined middle-class Victorian culture: he supported Irish Home Rule, Froebelian education, and the Liberal leadership of Prime Minister William

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<sup>59</sup> "Bude Lifeboat Disaster," *Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser*, March 14, 1877.

<sup>60</sup> "Bude Lifeboat Disaster," *Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser*; "Drowning of the Coxswain of the Bude Lifeboat," *Western Times*, April 26, 1877. Accounting for inflation, this amount would be close to £54,565 today.

<sup>61</sup> "The Bude Lifeboat Disaster," *Tavistock Gazette*, April 16, 1877.

<sup>62</sup> "The Bude Lifeboat Disaster," *Tavistock Gazette*.

<sup>63</sup> "The Bude Lifeboat Disaster," *Tavistock Gazette*.

<sup>64</sup> "Death of an Exonian," *Exeter Flying Post*, December 10, 1898.

Ewart Gladstone.<sup>65</sup> His enthusiasm for political causes—often earning him the scorn of conservative newspaper columnists—was not to be outdone by his love of poetry, nor was it entirely unconnected. Among his favoured poets were the likes of Byron and Watts, though Steer’s greatest creative influence was Scottish poet and lyricist Robbie Burns.<sup>66</sup> Burns, a pioneer of the Romantic movement, is widely regarded as an inspiration to the founders of modern liberalism.<sup>67</sup> His work concerns themes of republicanism, radicalism, Scottish patriotism, and other social issues, and his influence upon Steer—an almost-fanatic supporter—is clear in both his political and poetic endeavours.

Samuel Steer’s commemoration of the death of James Maynard, a poem entitled “The Lifeboat,” was written shortly after the wreck of the *Elizabeth Scown*. Based on newspaper reports and first-hand information gathered through correspondence, it was first presented to a public audience at a meeting of the Working Men’s Mutual Improvement Society of Exeter in late March of 1877.<sup>68</sup> In August of 1880, the work was published as part of Steer’s *Wayside Flowers: Gathered in Spare Moments*. The book is a collection of thirty-eight poems on “passing events...of a local character” printed by the office of the *Daily Western Times* in Exeter.<sup>69</sup> “The Lifeboat” numbers first among these works, noted as being published “in aid of the Widow and Orphans’ Fund, to which the sum of £20 17s. was remitted.”<sup>70</sup> Its contents describe the events of March 3, 1877 in vivid detail: with his connections to the *Western Times*, which often published his political columns, it is likely that Steer drew his inspiration from their reports of the incident. Amid the descriptions of crashing waves and rocky shores, a number of themes emerge in Steer’s writing: namely heroism, sympathy, and patriotism.

*Oh! landsmen, do ye ever think, / When snugly housed at home,  
/ What dangers these true-hearted men / Oft risk amid the  
foam?*<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> “Meeting of the St. Thomas Working Men,” *Express & Echo*, November 14, 1868; Samuel Steer, “William Ewart Gladstone,” in *Wayside Flowers: Gathered in Spare Moments* (Daily Western Times Office, 1880), 72. Aside from the poem dedicated to Gladstone in *Wayside Flowers*, Steer’s support is clear in his naming his youngest son Samuel Ewart Steer.

<sup>66</sup> “Health of Samuel Steer,” *Western Times*, February 15, 1898. Steer’s interest in the work of hymn writer Isaac Watts (1674–1748) is noted in this article; for Byron, the connection comes from the name of Steer’s son, Harold Byron Steer.

<sup>67</sup> Philip Butcher, “Robert Burns and the Democratic Spirit,” *Phylon* (1940–1956) 10, no. 3 (1949), 267.

<sup>68</sup> “The Late Coxswain of the Bude Lifeboat,” *Western Times*. In this article, Steer conducted an informal interview with the Curate at Bude, showing his continued interest in the story, as well as the accuracy of his poem.

<sup>69</sup> Steer, *Wayside Flowers*, Preface.

<sup>70</sup> Steer, “The Lifeboat,” *Wayside Flowers*, 13.

<sup>71</sup> Steer, “The Lifeboat,” *Wayside Flowers*, 15.

Steer's work follows Smiles' view on heroism, separating the crew of the lifeboat from those in the safety of their homes, painting them as individuals rising above the societal norm. It also emphasizes their masculinity: the Victorian era was a period of strong gender divides between public and private spheres. The home, as the centre of domestic life, was associated with femininity, while independence, duty, and "personal authenticity" outside of the home were hallmarks of nineteenth-century masculinity.<sup>72</sup>

*They reach the land, and soon 'tis known / James Maynard is  
not there, / Swift to his anxious, waiting wife, / The fatal news  
they bear. / Ten children too, alas! now hear / Their father is  
no more; / Oh! what a loud and bitter wail / Now sweeps along  
the shore!*<sup>73</sup>

Steer elicits sympathy from the reader through the plight of Thirza Maynard and her fatherless children. The widowed mother was a tragic figure: the audience, especially those of the male-dominated Working Men's Society, was expected to rise up and protect her, filling the paternalistic role of husband and father in James' stead.

*From hill to hill, from vale to vale, / Is heard the sad refrain, /  
To every British heart it comes, / And cannot come in vain. /  
And while to cheer the darkened hour / We give with liberal  
hand, / We'll pray, "God bless the Lifeboat Men / Throughout  
our sea-girt Land!"*<sup>74</sup>

As he had been adapted as a hero of the RNLI and a rallying point of Victorian charity, James Maynard—or rather, his death—was used by Samuel Steer to further his own ideals of British Liberalism and self-improvement. "The Lifeboat" places a firm emphasis on the heroism of the lifeboat crew and sorrow for the widow and her children under the umbrella of patriotism for "sea-girt" Great Britain.<sup>75</sup> Through the simple language of a heroic ballad, its "emphatic rhetoric of feeling" would have instilled a combination of sympathy and pride in the contemporary reader.<sup>76</sup> Like the wreck of the *Bencoolen*, it was a call-to-action, not only to donate, but to join the wider patriotic cause. By associating the work—and the heroism of James Maynard—with the efforts of the Working Men's Mutual Improvement Society and its charitable acts, Steer was, purposefully or

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<sup>72</sup> John Tosh, "Masculinities in an Industrializing Society: Britain, 1800–1914," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005), 333.

<sup>73</sup> Steer, "The Lifeboat," *Wayside Flowers*, 16.

<sup>74</sup> Steer, "The Lifeboat," *Wayside Flowers*.

<sup>75</sup> Steer, "The Lifeboat," *Wayside Flowers*.

<sup>76</sup> Korte, "On Heroes and Hero Worship, 189.

otherwise, drawing an ideological connection between the two. As a letter from William Rowe to Samuel Steer notes, “All must wish well to an association one of whose objective seems to be ‘to aid the widow and fatherless in their distress’.”<sup>77</sup> As such, the final word on the life of the late coxswain was one of politics: his death acting, in some small part, as a tool of progressive British ideals.

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*“Drown you may, but go you must.”*

These words, adapted as an unofficial motto by the members of one modern-day RNLI lifeboat crew, echo the spirit of Victorian heroism, sacrifice, and service upon which the life-saving institution was built: in many ways, the story of James Maynard does the same.<sup>78</sup> As a man who valued his home and community, who acted selflessly in the face of danger and fulfilled his duties as a husband and father, he was—in the eyes of those who praised him—a vision of Victorian masculinity and, even on a small scale, a symbol of British patriotism. In the presentation of his life and death through the records of Bude, Cornwall, and beyond, James appears as a man beyond reproach: whether true to his character or a result of the cult of heroism that stripped him of negativity, we may never know. The same can be said for the people of Bude and the surrounding areas—newspaper reports of monetary donations only tell part of the story and it is likely that a much more complex network of mutual aid, through the exchange of words and gifts, existed behind the written word. The drowning of James Maynard was commemorated in poetry through his embodiment of the Victorian masculine ideal, through his widow’s financial need and status as “deserving” poor, and with an Exeter accountant’s recognition of his work as a rallying point of British Liberalism and working-class ideals. Though his life was lost that cold March night in 1877, his story was not: it lives on, through census records, newspaper reports, patriotic prose, and in the minds and hearts of those who hope to do it justice.

*Epilogue: What Became of Thirza Maynard?*

Shortly after the death of her husband in 1877, Thirza would leave her home on King’s Street, taking up residence with her children in the house of her father-in-law, Thomas Maynard. For four years she worked as housekeeper of the London Inn and, when Thomas died in late 1881, she

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<sup>77</sup> “The Maynard Fund,” *Western Times*, June 11, 1877.

<sup>78</sup> O’Toole and Grey, “Beyond Choice,” 97.



took over the business.<sup>79</sup> Thirza remarried in 1882 to Samuel Wonnacott, a carpenter from Poughill thirteen years her junior. The couple never had any children of their own, but operated the inn for many years under the name Wonnacott, advertising the premises to the tourists of the Bude seaside.<sup>80</sup> Thirza would manage the London Inn until she died of pneumonia on February 4, 1911, at the age of seventy-three.<sup>81</sup> In her will, she left the entirety of her estate—save for the contents of the bedroom, tap room, and cellar of the inn—to her five daughters.<sup>82</sup> The rest remained for her husband, Samuel, who would outlive her by three short years. In the end, Thirza was a woman able to rally a community in her favour—though her late husband was undoubtedly influential in this aspect, I am certain she has more of a story to tell.

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<sup>79</sup> “England and Wales Census, 1881,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:Q27H-81ZC>; 11 December 2017), Thirza Maynard in household of Thomas Maynard, Stratton, Cornwall, England; from “1881 England, Scotland and Wales Census,” database and images, *findmypast* (<http://www.findmypast.com> : n.d.); citing p. 5, Piece/Folio 2270/46, The National Archives, Kew, Surrey; FHL microfilm 101,774,190.

<sup>80</sup> “S. Wonnacott, London Inn,” *Cornish & Devon Post*, August 15, 1896. Newspaper advertisement mentions that the inn has “Accommodation for Picnic Parties” and “Well Air’d Beds.”

<sup>81</sup> “Petty Sessions,” *Cornish & Devon Post*, October 2, 1891. While Samuel’s name came to be associated with the London Inn, it was Thirza who managed the business behind the scenes. In this article, detailing a court summons for the “landlord of the London Inn, Bude” for permitting drunkenness on the premises, Thirza appeared in her husband’s place. The Cornish archives of Kresen Kernow do not have the petty session records that would have described the “considerable” hearing, meaning this aspect of Thirza’s life has unfortunately been lost to time.

<sup>82</sup> District Probate Registry at Bodmin (Cornwall, England), The Grants of Probate and Letters of Administration made in the Probate Registries of the High Court of Justice in England, Thirza Wonnacott Estate, Letters of Administration, 2 March 1911; Principal Probate Registry, London, England; temporary digital image provided by “Find a Will,” Gov.uk (<https://probatesearch.service.gov.uk/>; February 22, 2021).

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