

## Welsh Wreck Web Research Project (North Cardigan Bay)

### On-line research into the wreck of the:

**MADU Ref No. 302, vessel incorrectly listed as *Arabella*; the incident involved the *Margaret* and the *Jane***



**Figure 1: View Between Barmouth and Dolgellau.<sup>1</sup>**

There are no images available of the boats concerned, however, this image provides an artistic interpretation of a similar outing involving a rowing boat in the Mawddach estuary.

<sup>1</sup> 'View between Barmouth and Dolgellau' (E. Williams, London, 1813) <<http://hdl.handle.net/10107/1132866>> [accessed 10 November 2020]. Also available at

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:View\\_between\\_Barmouth\\_%26\\_Dolgellau.jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:View_between_Barmouth_%26_Dolgellau.jpeg) [accessed 10 November 2020].

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Report Title:

**Welsh Wreck Web Research Project  
(North Cardigan Bay)  
On-line research into the wreck of the:  
MADU Ref No. 302 vessel wrongly listed as *Arabella*,  
the incident involved the *Margaret* and the *Jane*.**

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## 1.0 Abstract

This research was conducted as part of the www Research Project, which was organised to maintain people's interest in maritime archaeology during the pandemic of 2020. This report investigates an incident listed in the MADU database detailing the drowning of ten members of a bible study group in the pleasure boat *Arabella* at Barmouth on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 1894. These details proved to be inaccurate. The drowning of ten holiday makers on that date occurred in the Mawddach estuary east of Barmouth. A party of several holiday makers had taken 3 rowing boats up the estuary from Barmouth. Two of these boats were swamped: the *Margaret* and the *Jane*. A third boat, the *Rosa*, was safely landed with its passengers. The incident was widely reported in the press of the time and more recently an article by Douglas G. Hope has been published about it.

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### 3.0 Introduction

I selected this wreck to research as I was intrigued by the details listed; how did a bible study group come to be on a pleasure boat? I was also interested to learn more about the interactions between people and the landscape here due to my family connections with the area.

### 4.0 Background

The information available at the start of this research was a database entry detailing the drowning of ten members of a bible study group on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 1894 in the pleasure boat *Arabella*. This information appears to derive from an entry in Ivor Wynne Jones *Shipwrecks of North Wales* which refers to 'the loss of the pleasure boat *Arabella* on 1 August 1894, when ten members of a Bible study group were drowned'.<sup>2</sup> The same source shows the wreck of the *Arabella* located in the Mawddach estuary near to Barmouth.<sup>3</sup> This location is shown below.

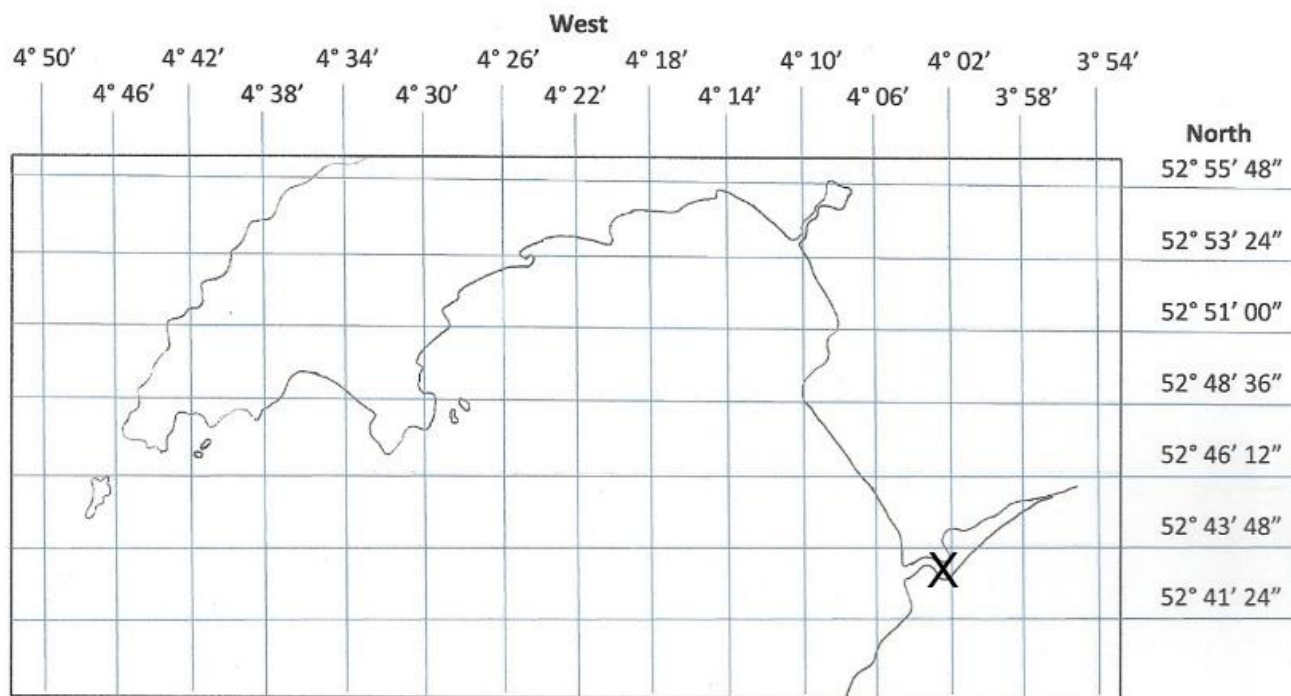


Figure 2: Chart (© MADU) with the location of *Arabella* as indicated by Ivor Wynne Jones

<sup>2</sup> Ivor Wynne Jones, *Shipwrecks of North Wales* (Plymouth: Latimer Trend and Company Ltd, 1973), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Jones, p. 28.

## 5.0 Research Methodology

Research took the form of internet research and personal correspondence.

Coflein returns no result for *Arabella* and lists no wreck in the area of Barmouth with details which match those under investigation.<sup>4</sup>

A search of the database of Welsh Newspapers at the National Library of Wales did not yield any information about the wrecking of the *Arabella* at Barmouth.<sup>5</sup> However, reports of the drowning of ten people on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 1894 at Barmouth were discovered by searching the database with the terms 'drowning' and 'Barmouth' filtered by the year 1894. The press reported the incident under various headings including 'The Barmouth Boating Disaster'. Further searches using the Google search engine with this term revealed a page of a website entitled 'Barmouth Disaster 1894' which was written by Douglas G. Hope, a historical researcher.<sup>6</sup> His other publications include 'A Boating Disaster on the Mawddach Estuary in 1894' published in the *Journal of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society*, in 2019.<sup>7</sup> As I have no access to this journal, I contacted Douglas G Hope and he kindly sent me a pdf of this article by email.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Coflein' <<https://www.coflein.gov.uk/>> [accessed 14 October 2020].

<sup>5</sup> The National Library of Wales, 'Welsh Newspapers Online'.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas G Hope, 'Barmouth Disaster 1894' <<https://douglasshope.co.uk/barmouth-disaster-1894/>> [accessed 16 October 2020].

<sup>7</sup> Douglas G Hope, 'A Boating Disaster on the Mawddach Estuary in 1894', *The Journal of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society*, 2019.

## 6.0 Results

I was unable to find any record of the wrecking of the *Arabella* at Barmouth. As Hope had researched the press reports about the Barmouth Boating Disaster at some length I took the opportunity to ask him if he had any information about the *Arabella* which was said to have been wrecked on the same day, with ten people drowned in the same location. Personal correspondence with him indicated that despite months of research he had come across no other incident with similar details at this time and place. Additionally, whilst the people drowned in this incident had been holiday makers rather than members of a bible study group, he noted that some sources had inaccurately referred to them as a bible study group.

The holiday makers involved in the Barmouth Boating disaster belonged to the 'National Home Reading Union' and they were holidaying in Barmouth with the Co-operative Holidays Association (CHA) which had been recently formed. Hope's research indicates that 350 members had visited Barmouth in 1894 during July and August. The CHA rented properties at Hendre Villas and on Marine Parade and the holiday makers took part in organised walks and talks. During the week of the boat trip there were sixty guests in Barmouth and as there was no walk arranged for the Wednesday some of the guests planned to take rowing boats up the River Mawddach.<sup>8</sup>

Although the official report of the inquest has been lost, it was reported in much detail in the Cambrian News Supplement dated 10<sup>th</sup> August 1894.<sup>9</sup> On the day in question, 20 or 30 of the holidaymakers went to the quay between 6 and 7 pm where they engaged three boats to take them up the estuary. The high tide was due at 7.30 pm and there was a fresh wind from the south-west blowing up the estuary. There is a suggestion that some of the boatmen refused to take the party due to the conditions and a few of the party decided not to go.

The boats *Margaret* and *Jane* belonged to William Jones, Master Mariner, who took charge of the *Jane* and they landed at Bontddu without incident. However, while the rowing boats went up the estuary calmly, during the return they were against the wind and met heavy waves.

The *Jane* was swamped about eight to ten yards offshore, near Caerdeon coalhouse, also known as Mr Jelf's Boathouse. William Jones believed the boat was swamped due to people at the stern moving. One of them had lost their hat and their movement caused the boat to list. However, other witnesses claim the water entered at the bow and was due to large waves. After the boat was swamped, Jones swam to shore, found another boat, and took it out in order to rescue the holidaymakers. The *Jane* was bottom up with its anchor down and Jones reported that 'the boat had capsized between the tide and the eddy'. The *Jane* was 18 foot by 4 and a half. It carried 7 passengers and despite the rescue efforts of William Jones, 4 of them were drowned.

The *Margaret* had continued up the estuary to Penmaenpool, where it was calm, but on returning they also hit big waves which swamped them. There was no boatman with the *Margaret*. The holiday makers had not wanted one because of one of their number was 'an Oxford man who was accustomed to rowing'. The *Margaret* was of similar size to the *Jane*. Reports of what happened are sketchy as only one of the occupants survived and she had spent some considerable time in the water before being rescued. The *Margaret* was found about 150 yards upstream of the *Jane*. Six of her occupants were drowned.

The third boat, *Rosa*, was in the charge of Lewis Edwards, Master Mariner. It was 17 feet by 4 and a half and took out 6 passengers. After visiting Bontddu, they returned towards Barmouth; however, at Farchynys the water became choppy. Edwards reported that they steered near to

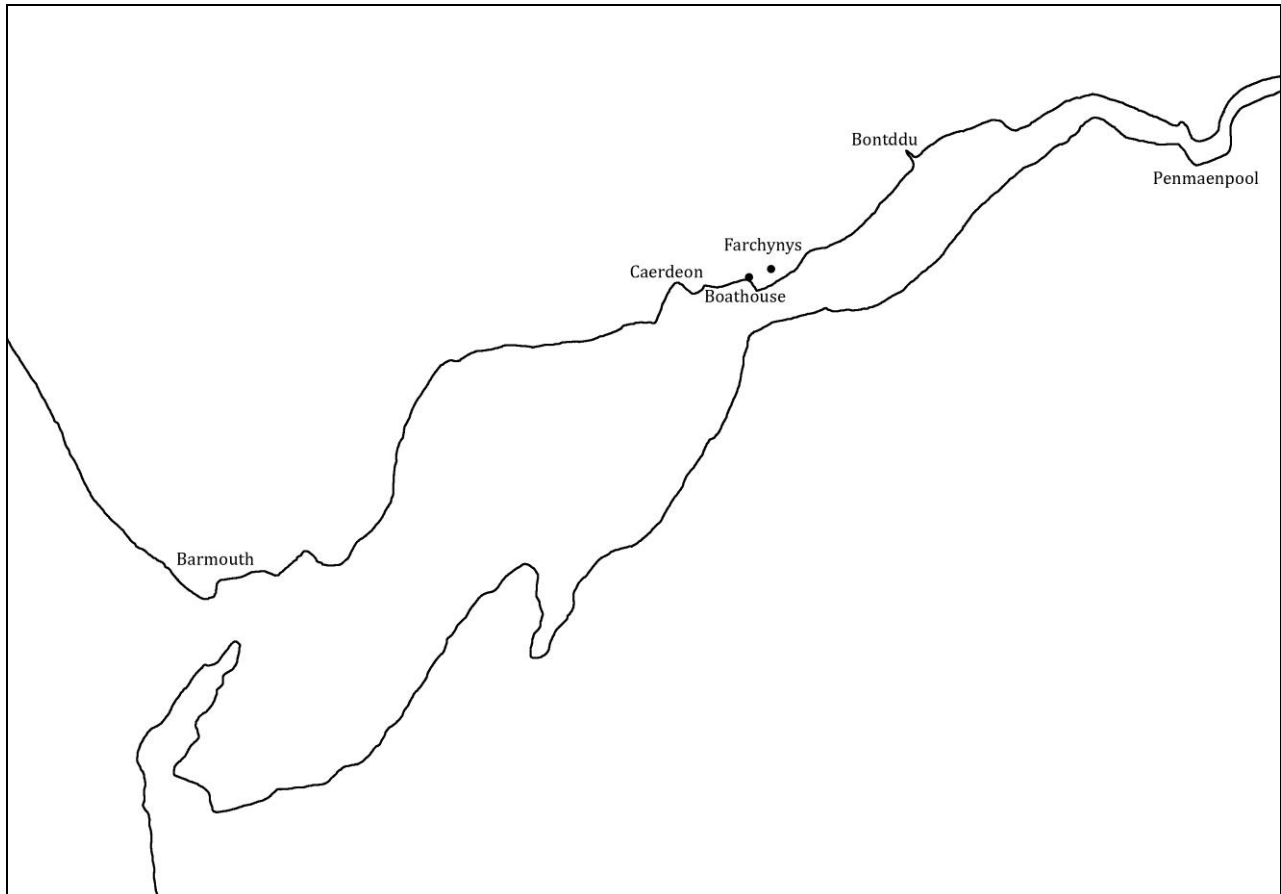
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<sup>8</sup> Hope, 'A Boating Disaster on the Mawddach Estuary in 1894'.

<sup>9</sup> 'Appalling Disaster at Barmouth', *Supplement to the Cambrian News*  
<<https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3314115/3314116>>.

the shore, and shipped a little water rounding the point. Edwards gave instructions to steer slantwise, and they were able to land safely near Caerdeon. Five of the holiday makers returned to Barmouth by road. The sixth who was lame was to return to Barmouth with Lewis Edwards in the boat. However, they then found the *Jane* capsized and helped with the rescue attempt.

The verdict of the Inquest was that the holiday makers had 'accidentally drowned by the swamping of boats whilst boating in the River Mawddach' with no blame attached to the boatmen. The drowned people were all single and were between 17 and 32 years of age.



**Figure 3: Map showing locations mentioned**



## 7.0 Analysis

There was no record found of the wrecking of the *Arabella* on the 1<sup>st</sup> August 1894 at Barmouth with the drowning of ten people, but there was a similar disaster on the same date with the drowning of ten people in the Mawddach estuary near Barmouth. This strongly suggests that the details on the database are incorrect as it seems inconceivable that two drownings of ten people on the same date occurred at Barmouth, one of which was widely reported in the press and the other of which received no mention. There may have been a second incident involving the *Arabella*, at some other date and location but this is yet to be uncovered.

The two rowing boats in question, the *Margaret* and the *Jane* were swamped by waves as they travelled into the wind down the estuary towards Barmouth. The map of the estuary shows that it narrows significantly at the headland of Farchynys and the three boats all encountered difficulties at this location. The narrowing of the estuary may have funnelled the wind and water such that the water conditions at this point worsened significantly from those further upstream. The rowing boats were swamped and capsized but do not appear to have been wrecked. This led to the ten drownings.

## 8.0 Conclusions & Recommendations

It seems likely that the record of the drowning of ten members of a bible study group on the pleasure boat *Arabella* near Barmouth on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 1894 is an error which should be corrected to the drowning of four holidaymakers on the *Jane* and six holidaymakers on the *Margaret* near Farchynys on the Mawddach estuary on that date.

It seems probable that the rowing boats involved were recovered rather than wrecked.

## 9.0 References

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