

# THE LANCASTRIA STORY



# LANCASTRIA

## The Lancastria - The story

The 16,243 ton Cunard liner was built by William Beardmore & Company, Dalmuir, Glasgow, making her maiden voyage under the name of *Tyrrhenia*, from Glasgow to Montreal on 13 June 1922.

Refitted just two years later with a plush new interior and a new name, *Lancastria*, she spent many years leisurely cruising the world's oceans. Her final peace-time cruise in the idyllic waters of the Bahamas was made in September 1939, and ended with the ship docked in New York, and the world at war.

Here she underwent a radical change - her portholes were blacked out, drab grey military paint daubed all over her and guns mounted near to the once slender swimming pool. Her cruising days were over forever as she took on the role of Her Majesty's troopships.

After successfully dodging Luftwaffe bombs in the North Sea while helping with the evacuation of troops from Norway, the *Lancastria* then took part in Operation Aerial where she was required in St. Nazaire, France to evacuate more troops.

## CAPTAIN RUDOLP SHARP



Captain Rudolph Sharp, OBE, RD, RNVR, who survived the sinking of the *Lancastria* also survived the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1914, but was lost in the *Laconia* on 12th September 1942, when she was torpedoed by U-156.



# SCOUTS PILGRIMAGE

## To Rome in '34

In 1934, the luxury liner *Lancastria* was chartered to convey a huge Scout pilgrimage to Rome. It was led by his Eminence Cardinal McRory, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All-Ireland. The pilgrims included William T Cosgrave T.D. who has been President of the Executive Council of the Irish Free State for ten years and was a personal friend of our Chief Scout. Prof. Whelehan.

The highlight of the Scouts' stay in Rome was the memorable audience with Pope Pius XI during which he blessed their troop flags and spoke in high praise of Scouting and of Ireland.

Among the young boys listening to him that day was one from a CO. Tipperary troop. His name was Pat Hogan, and thirty- six years later he would become the fourth Chief Scout of C.B.S.I.

The cruise has great importance in the development of Scouting In Ireland. It represented a major project and international experience in 1934.

The *Lancastria* embodies the links and shared history between Britain and Ireland.

The *Lancastria* project is a powerful symbol of the coming together of two Scouting traditions in Ireland.

*This project gives us the opportunity to record the experiences of the veterans of the Lancastria, such as that of Nicholas Donegan, a young Irish Scout Leader and later as a defender of Europe with the Irish Guards at Dunkirk.*

## LARCH HILL

In 1937-38, CBSI was preoccupied with the need for a national campsite. The search eventually narrowed down to two possible locations - part of Santry Park, north of Dublin city, and an estate near Tibbradden called Larch Hill on the foothills of the Dublin Mountains, not far from the border with Co. Wicklow. Larch Hill was duly purchased, largely through the profits which the association made on the fares of non-scouts pilgrims to Rome in 1934. Its formal opening took place on Whit Sunday 1938.



## THE STORY OF A YOUNG SCOUT LEADER

"1934 started with excitement...going to Rome on a pilgrimage for a fifteen - day cruise with 15 scouts of the 35th Dublin, Donore Avenue taking part and Willie Reel S.M. and myself as A.S.M. The date arrived for the cruise ship *Lancastria* to dock at the North wall and receive her excited passengers..."

"We headed out and set sail for Naples where we were to use the *Lancastria* as our hotel during our stay in Naples. After breakfast each morning we left for Rome and visited the different main churches of Rome including St. Peter's and of course the Sistine Chapel,... a visit to the ruins of Pompeii and Mount Vesuvius...we had our audience with His Holiness Pope Pius XI in the Vatican. The Scouts...were up front with the troop flags lined up at the sides and back of the Room which made for a very colourful sight. The Pope finally came in, raised high on his chair..."

"The Throne Room burst into cheering and clapping by the Scouts. His Holiness looked startled for a moment as Irish Scouts can really make it like the Croke Park roar on such an occasion. But the Pope's expression quickly turned into a smile and waved his hands as he was born on to the throne. He spoke in English of the ties between Ireland and the Vatican."

"We left Naples the next day, homeward bound, but on the way we first put in to Cut, a Spanish Moroccan port for a day's sightseeing....next stop was Gibraltar for some more sight seeing and shopping, then on to Dublin Port and home."



## MELVIN TROPHY



Sir Martin Melvin, took great interest in this pilgrimage, which he accompanied. He had decided to present a costly trophy to C.B.S.I. for inter - troop competitions and had commissioned the leading silversmith of the time, Miss Mia Cranwell, to produce it. In a ceremony on board the *Lancastria* on the way to Rome, he formally presented the handsome silver trophy to the Chief Scout.

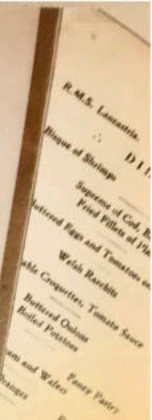
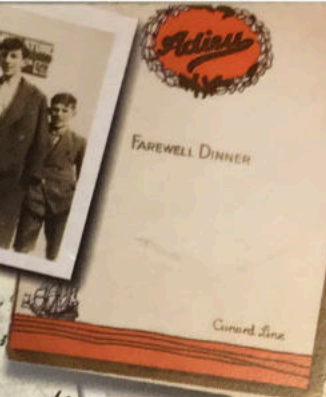
"...on reaching Dublin, we said goodbye to the crew of the *Lancastria*, who had been very helpful to us during the cruise..."

"...As we looked back for a last wave to the crew of the *Lancastria* which has been our home for the cruise, we felt happy for the care they had taken of us and happy, too , to be home"

Nicholas Donegan  
Assistant Scout Master, 35th Dublin, Donore Avenue.

*Nicholas went on to serve with the Irish Guards in the defence of France and was evacuated from Dunkirk in 1940. The Lancastria was lost on 17 June 1940 evacuating British Troops from France. Nicholas is alive and well in his 90th year.*

*"To give you some idea of how precious these memories are, I have saved this letter on my computer under the name "Rome in '34. They broke the mold after they made that lot"*



"Dad would say in a rather grandiose voice ( and he was not a bit grandiose), "Well, you know, I was in Rome in '34". It became a catch phrase which was part and parcel of growing up in our family"

"My dad often talked about his pocket money. He was given £1, and he handed 10 shillings back to his parents when he returned."

**John Meehan - memories of his late father Liam, who was a Scout in the 1st Dublin Troop Fairview.**

I had a great chat with a cardinal and he gave me a medal. Later he became Pope Pius XII

" His Holiness Pope Pius XI walked down the ranks of flags until he saw my flag. He asked me who the saint was on our flag and I said St. Kevin. He was able to tell me all about him"

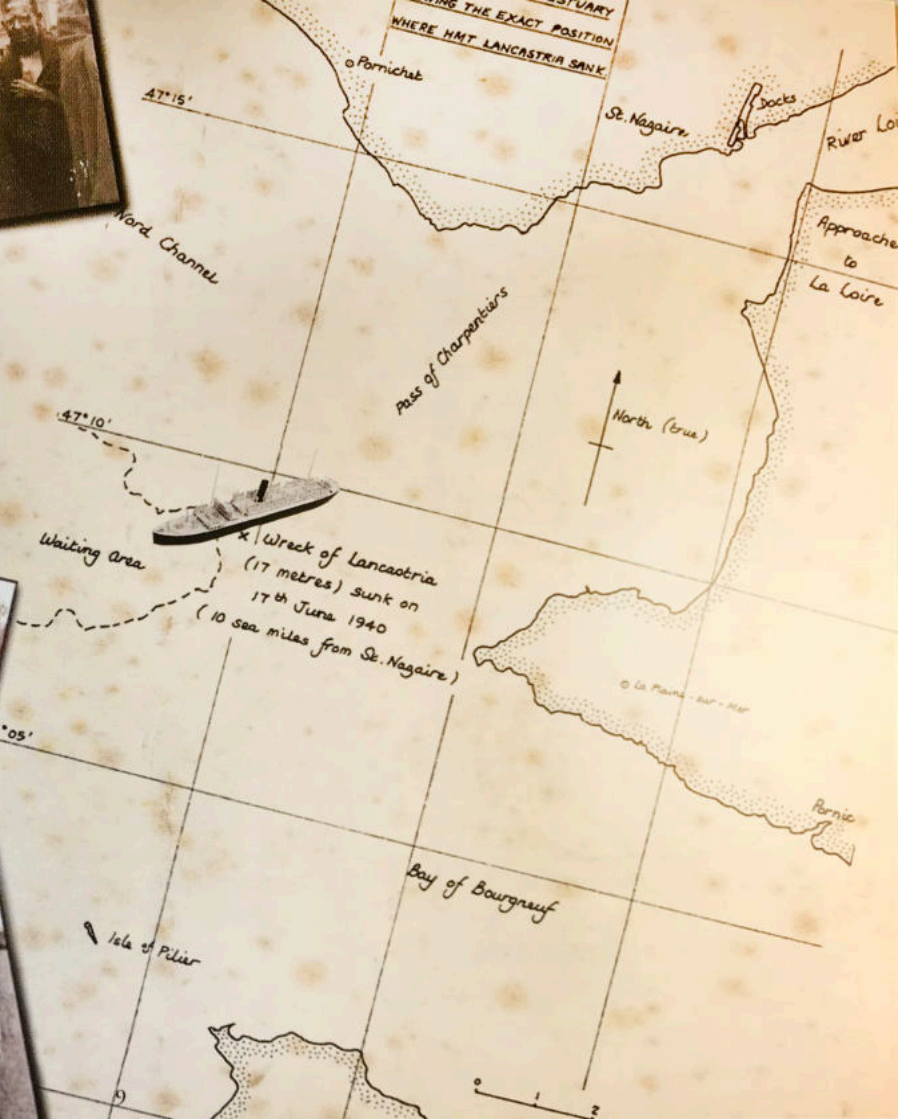
"We had some important lads in our Troop. Liam Cosgrave, who later became Taoiseach and Con Ryan who wrote the two books, 'The Longest Day' and 'A Bridge too far'"

**Joseph Roche Scout 52nd Harrington Street, 35th Donore Avenue and 20th Rathmines.**

147a St. Columba's  
Drumcondra,  
12.3.1938

My dear Jack  
Hello what news it feel  
like to be sea-side? Well, I hope  
you are having a nice time. I see  
by the news that you are enjoying  
yourself that's good for that.  
We haven't heard from you since.  
I send you  
I am  
and  
sincerely  
yours  
Joe







# SINKING OF THE LANCASTRIA

At 04.00h on the 17 June 1940 she anchored slightly off St. Nazaire at Charpentier Road and began evacuating soldiers from the British Expeditionary Force along with some RAF men and a few civilians.

There is no accurate figure for the number aboard but it is estimated that there were over 7,000 people. The *Lancastria* was literally overflowing.

Then the bombing began. Four bombs hit in total - one was a bull's eye, dropping straight down the funnel and exploding in the engine room. At 16h15, less than 20 minutes later, the *Lancastria* rolled over onto her port side and made her way bow first to her grave on the seabed.

The crew and passengers appeared not to panic while abandoning the sinking liner and incredibly singing was heard as the ship went down ('Roll Out the Barrel' and 'There will always be an England') Many people perished but there were some survivors.

Estimates are that approximately 4500-5000 people died. Thankfully, around 2500 were rescued.

A reason that the *Lancastria* history is not well known is that Winston Churchill felt the country's moral could not bear the burden of such a terrible news, and newspapers were ordered not to print the story.

In St. Katherines Cree church in Leadenhall Street, London, there is a permanent memorial on one of the windows.

The *Lancastria* Association (UK) continue to cherish the memory of those lost on the ship.

The *Lancastria* lies in 26 meters of water off St. Nazaire.

