

CHRIS SPURR



Memorial Cross, near Mount Stewart, Co Down

A short distance north from the main visitor entrance to the National Trust property at Mount Stewart, a small wooded promontory juts out into Strangford Lough. If you follow the wide but muddy track leading from the gate, you will discover a memorial cross, positioned so it looks out across the waters of the lough. The memorial marks a tragic multiple death by drowning in April 1895.

The inscription reads: *This Monument erected by the Marquis and Marchioness of Londonderry in affectionate remembrance of Eliza Taunt Dougal, Joseph Grange, William Rowe, William and Robert Hagan, their very faithful servants who were drowned in Strangford Lough on 11 April 1895*

Several of the dead persons were 'upper' servants, those who had positions such as butler, steward, footman, governess, skilled cook, housekeeper, senior parlour-maid, head housemaid and lady's maid. The popular TV series *Downton Abbey* casts a light on how the class system was applied amongst the servants in a large household.

On April 13th 1895, *The Times* in London published a report on the tragedy:

SUPPOSED LOSS OF A BOAT AND EIGHT LIVES

What may prove to be a sad boating disaster is reported from Mount Stewart, county Down, the seat of the Marquis of Londonderry. While Lord and Lady Londonderry were in Belfast on Thursday, at the opening of the Belfast Exhibition, a party, consisting of the housekeeper at Mount Stewart, the cook, the house steward, Lord Londonderry's valet, Lord Enniskillen's valet, a lady's maid, and two seamen in Lord Londonderry's employment, went out on a boating excursion on Strangford Lough, and they have not since been heard of. It is feared that they have been drowned. A maroon basket, which they had with them, has been discovered at Portaferry, several miles further along the coast. Search parties have been out since Thursday evening, and Lord Londonderry is taking all possible steps to obtain information as to the fate of the missing persons. Up to a late hour last night no intelligence regarding their whereabouts had been received. Portions of the sail of the boat have been found on one of the islands of the lough.

It appears that since Lord and Lady Londonderry were spending the day in Belfast, they had given some of their upper household staff the day off, and these servants went for a sail and a picnic on the lough. Tragically, they were never to return. A mysterious element to the story is that their bodies were never either found in the water, or washed up later on the lough shore. The sad incident became known as the *Vanishing Day*, and some years ago BBC Radio Ulster broadcast a documentary feature on the tragedy, with that same title.