



CAPTAIN ROBERT HALPIN (1836 – 1894) WICKLOW

Robert Halpin was born on 16th February 1836 at the Bridge Tavern adjacent to the big bridge across the river Leitrim in Wicklow Town. He was the youngest of thirteen children of James and Anne Halpin. He received his early education at a private school on nearby Leitrim Place. However, he had no interest in formal education and having fallen in love with the sea at a very young age he left home, aged ten, to become a sailor aboard the brig *Briton* which traded with North America. He was at sea in 1847 when his father died and again in 1849 when his mother passed away. So before he reached the age of fourteen both his parents were deceased. In 1851 the *Briton* was shipwrecked off the coast of Cornwall but luckily Halpin survived.

After the *Briton* disaster he became involved with steamships and was promoted to captain of the *SS Propellor* and later joined the *SS Circassian*. Halpin's chief claim to fame lies in his association with Brunel's *SS Great Eastern* and the role she and he played in laying the first submarine, transatlantic, telegraph cable between Europe and North America. Although reputed to be one of the most important mariners of the 19th century, he appears to be largely forgotten in modern times, outside his home town and county.

The *Great Eastern* was launched in January 1858. She was over 200 metres in length, weighed 22,500 tons and could accommodate 3000 passengers. In June 1860 she made her maiden voyage across the Atlantic but she was never a success as a passenger ship. She lost money continuously and eventually was converted from a passenger ship to a cable-laying ship. She was the only ship at the time which was big enough to carry the huge spools of cable that were needed to connect Europe and America by submarine telegraph across the Atlantic. In 1864 Robert Halpin joined the crew of the *Great Eastern* and in 1865 she was chartered to lay the first transatlantic telegraph cable between Valentia Island, Ireland and Newfoundland. The cable was 2600 miles long and weighed 6000 tons. Unfortunately, this first attempt failed: 1800 miles out from Valentia the cable was severed and the *Great Eastern* had no option but to abandon the attempt. In 1866 with Halpin promoted to First Officer the *Great Eastern* returned to the spot where the cable was lost; found it and repaired and extended it as well as successfully laying a new cable. In 1868 Halpin became captain of the *Great Eastern* and before his 40th birthday he had connected several of the world's continents by telegraph, laying an estimated 26,000 miles of underwater cable.

He met his wife Jessie Munn in Newfoundland, married her there in 1873 and returned to his native Wicklow Town to settle down, a relatively young man. After retiring from the sea Halpin got involved in the social and political life of Wicklow and built a magnificent mansion, Tinakilly House, on the edge of the town at a cost of £40,000 in 1876. He died at the young age of 58 on 20th January 1894 of gangrene resulting from a wound sustained when he accidentally cut his toe as he was trimming his toenails. An obelisk was erected to his memory in 1897, in Fitzwilliam Square, Wicklow Town.