



**Sue Gresham Research**

## **THE FATE OF THE ST. FRANÇOIS**



**Researched  
Updated**

**June 2025  
August 2025**

## FOREWORD

The "Eastern Daily Press" (EDP) in March 2016 carried a report describing that the then Sheringham Town Crier and his wife, the late Tony Nelson and Hilary, were intrigued by their discovery in the churchyard at Upper Sheringham of a small cross marking the grave of four French seamen who lost their lives in 1916 when their ship the *St. François* of the port of Gravelines was lost off Sheringham. The newspaper suggested that the crew had drowned in "mysterious circumstances".

Tony began to try to find out more and was reported at the time as saying, "It is a fascinating story and the more you look into it, the more questions there are".

Nearly three years later, in January 2019, the EDP reported that Raphaël Chambert, then aged 15, a descendant of one of the men lost, had seen the original article and contacted the newspaper. Raphaël described how the fate of the ship had always haunted his grandfather, Eloi Fournier, who had wondered "ever since he was a boy" about the fate of the ship and of his grandfather, Louis Vasseur.



The Port - Gravelines

My similar quest began when I came across the original EDP article and, nearly ten years later, decided to try to discover more and to find some of the elusive answers. In doing so, I have been able to trace and contact Raphaël and am very pleased to give him, his grandfather and his family the information I have found about their ancestor and the circumstances of his death at sea.

The year 2026 will mark the one hundred and tenth anniversary of the loss of the *St. François* and it seems appropriate to mark it by being able to discover more about the circumstances that brought her crew to Sheringham and the possible reasons for her loss.

**CONTENTS**

**1916 – Tragedy off Weybourne**

|                      |       |   |
|----------------------|-------|---|
| Blizzards and Storms | ..... | 1 |
|----------------------|-------|---|

**St. François**

|          |       |   |
|----------|-------|---|
| The Ship | ..... | 2 |
|----------|-------|---|

|                  |       |   |
|------------------|-------|---|
| The Last Sailing | ..... | 5 |
|------------------|-------|---|

|          |       |   |
|----------|-------|---|
| The Loss | ..... | 6 |
|----------|-------|---|

|          |       |   |
|----------|-------|---|
| The Crew | ..... | 9 |
|----------|-------|---|

|                    |       |    |
|--------------------|-------|----|
| Timeline of Events | ..... | 10 |
|--------------------|-------|----|

|                           |       |    |
|---------------------------|-------|----|
| 1908 – An Earlier Tragedy | ..... | 11 |
|---------------------------|-------|----|

|                      |       |    |
|----------------------|-------|----|
| A Different Outcome? | ..... | 13 |
|----------------------|-------|----|

|                           |       |    |
|---------------------------|-------|----|
| The Condition of the Ship | ..... | 13 |
|---------------------------|-------|----|

|                |       |    |
|----------------|-------|----|
| A Ship’s Boat? | ..... | 13 |
|----------------|-------|----|

|                            |       |    |
|----------------------------|-------|----|
| The Number of Crew Members | ..... | 13 |
|----------------------------|-------|----|

|                    |       |    |
|--------------------|-------|----|
| The Sad Conclusion | ..... | 14 |
|--------------------|-------|----|

## 1916 – TRAGEDY OFF WEYBOURNE

### Blizzards and Storms

Newspaper reports in March 1916 described how wild storms had affected the whole of the country and caused great disruption on land and sea.

Blizzards resulted in communications being cut off in Leicester and Northampton. In Northamptonshire too, villages were completely isolated, with snowdrifts 20 feet deep. Road routes were badly affected as were rail routes, with delays in service of between five and eight hours between London and Manchester.

The Scottish train service through Carlisle on both the London and North-Western and Midland routes was maintained only with difficulty, with all trains on both routes from London reaching Carlisle between five and eight hours behind schedule.

Lloyd's of London reported that many vessels were ashore along the coast, listing a number of ketches either lost or ashore on the Kent coast, and one vessel was stranded on the beach south of Yarmouth and set to become a total wreck.

One of the ships wrecked, but the only ship from which crew members' lives were lost, was a French vessel, the *St. François* of Gravelines.

#### **TERRIBLE EFFECT OF THE STORM**

##### **Many Vessels Wrecked**

Owing to the breakdown in telegraphic communication delay has occurred in ascertaining the effect of the gale on the coast. Lloyd's telegrams now received indicate that the weather must have been very wild. Many vessels were driven ashore on the south-east coast, but excepting in one case, no lives appear to have been lost. The exception is that of the ketch *St. Francois*, which was wrecked near Great Yarmouth. She would have a crew of probably four hands, none of whom were saved.

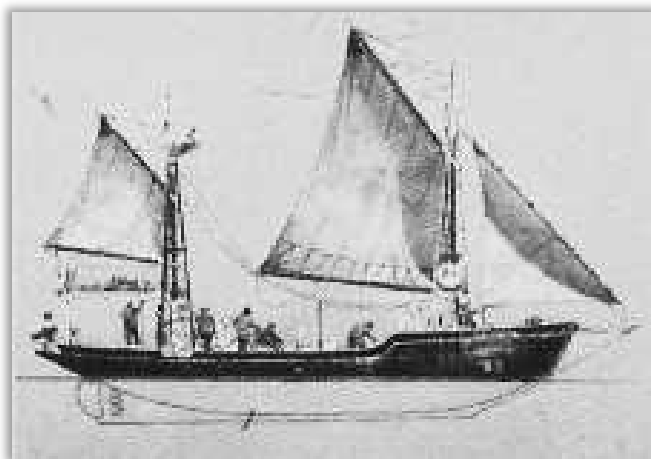
Two vessels drove ashore near Lowestoft – the Swedish steamer *Hamburgsund* and the Norwegian steamer *Noris*, which was from Burntisland for Dieppe with coal. Salvage is probable in the case of the *Hamburgsund*, the crew of which have all been landed except the captain, who remained on board. The *Noris* has eight feet of water in the forehold.

Near Margate no fewer than six vessels were driven ashore. These were the ketch *Britannic*, the barquentine *Faithlie*, the ketches *Lord Dufferin*, *Medina*, *Rosie*, and *Tartar*. The *Faithlie* is a total loss.

Dundee Evening Telegraph – Glasgow Herald – Sheffield Daily Telegraph  
Friday 31st March 1916

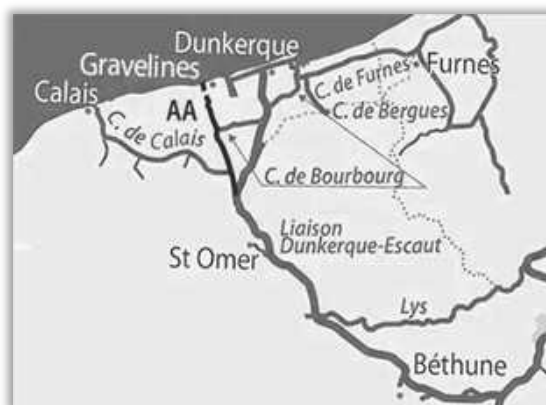
## ST. FRANÇOIS – The Ship

The *St. François* was a "Dundee" – a French corruption of 'Dandy' – the name given by British East Coast fishermen in the 1860s to a new type of ketch later adopted by the Fécamp yard in Normandy. A "Dundee" was a fishing vessel of 50–60 tons, rigged with a mainsail and a topsail, and a mizzen just forward of the rudder; its length and beam 50 feet and 16 feet respectively; she was used in the Icelandic cod fishing trade.



Example of a Dundee

The *St. François* was registered to the port of Gravelines, an old fishing port lying between Calais to the West and Dunkirk to the East at the mouth of the river Aa on the north coast of France.



Iceland fishing was at its peak during the 17th and 18th Centuries and many French vessels – in particular from Dunkirk and later Gravelines – sailed to Iceland to fish cod. While this was largely over by the end of the 19th Century, it remained very important in and around Dunkirk.

These fishing boats were usually divided by bulkheads into three compartments: the forecastle forward, with bunks for the crew; in the centre the holds for the cargo (for cod and for salt); and the cabin or cabins of the Captain and the Mate(s) aft. On the deck, aft of each mast, was a "park" or frame (similar to the sides of a shallow box), into which newly caught fish would be thrown. Cod was caught with a handline consisting of a line made from hemp wire with a cylindrical piece of lead weighing about 2.5 kg. and one or two side bars of about 2 metres with a hook at the end. In Icelandic waters, the size of the cod was between 50–100 cm and the weight between 2–3 kg.

At the time the *St. François* was fishing (and until 1918), the cod would have the heads and intestines removed, before being cleaned and washed, and then thrown into the hold where it was sized and kept in barrels with salt. The barrels were filled, covered and placed in the hold. They would be returned to the deck a few days later and the cod cleaned and washed once more. The fish was then put into barrels and salted again, and the barrels boarded up and placed in the hold.

The *St. François* is shown in a photograph taken in 1910 in the Nordfjord, a small bay located in the far east of Iceland; it shows five Captains – and their two dogs – from the port of Gravelines posed in front of three ships.



St. François – 1910

The description given below the photograph says: “Five Captains from Gravelines pose proudly in front of several ships. The white-hulled schooner is the *Fregate*, whose Captain, Charles Wadoux is second from the left. The two-masted *St. François* is on the right”. The Captain was possibly Charles Jean Baptiste Wadoux who was born in Gravelines in November 1883. Charles Wadoux, described as a Sailor, lost his life in December 1911 when he was shipwrecked.

The *Fregate* was a topsail schooner, her size about 25 to 30 metres long, which gives an idea of the size and scale of the *St. François*. A faster and larger sailing vessel, with a larger crew than the *St. François*, the schooner had two living quarters, one at the front for the crew, one at the rear for Captain, Lieutenant, salter etc. The fish hold was located between the living quarters, and there was also space to store fishing equipment, coal, water and victuals.

A postcard dated 1918 entitled “The Icelandic Flotilla – General View” shows a collection of fishing vessels, including similar, two-masted vessels to the *St. François*, whose trade destination was Iceland. Other images of ships in port at Gravelines also show their destination as Iceland and also bear out that the *St. François* was involved in the fishing trade and was transporting cod from Iceland.



The Icelandic Flotilla – Gravelines

A second photograph shows the same scene at Gravelines but from a different, central view of fishing boats in port.



Icelandic Boats departing - Gravelines

## ST. FRANÇOIS – The Last Sailing

Fishing vessels from the ports of Dunkirk and Gravelines would sail along the English coast, through the strait between the Orkney Islands and the Shetland Islands, then past the Faroe Islands, to the cod fishing grounds around Iceland.

Conditions could be very rough, with strong winds and calm seas very quickly becoming extremely choppy and turbulent. Icy gales caused waves several metres high.



The *St. François*' destination port in Iceland is not known but was possibly Fáskrúðsfjörður in Iceland's East fjords, which was and still is the sister town of Gravelines. Founded in 1880 and developed by the French as a trading post and fishing village, Fáskrúðsfjörður was the main hub for French fishermen off the East of Iceland until 1935 and the region still retains a strong French tradition.

In March 1916, the *St. François* was presumably navigating her return journey from Iceland to Gravelines – an approximate distance of 1,850 nautical miles – for shipping reports for Newcastle show that the *St. François* of Gravelines sailed from Newcastle on Saturday 25th March 1916. The assumption is that Newcastle would have been a logical, intermediate "stopping off" point on her return to her home port.

It was on this leg of her passage back to Gravelines that the *St. François* encountered the severe storms off the coast of England. Four days after leaving Newcastle, a Lloyd's Great Yarmouth message dated Wednesday 29th March 1916 reported "... the ketch *St. François* has been lost" and subsequently "... the ketch *St. François* has been wrecked on Weybourne beach. All hands were lost."

The *St. François* was the only ship wrecked whose crew members lost their lives.

## ST. FRANÇOIS – The Loss

At about 5.15 in the morning of Wednesday 29th March, one of the Weybourne Coastguards, Henry Satterly, saw wreckage floating in the surf near the Coastguard Station. A body was found washed up on Sheringham beach later the same day, followed the next morning by three other deceased crew members.

The sequence of events following the loss of the *St. François* was described at the Inquest on the four unidentified bodies.

### **WRECKED OFF WEYBOURNE AN UNSEAWORTHY VESSEL IN THE BLIZZARD INQUEST ON FOUR UNIDENTIFIED BODIES**

"Drowned at sea" was the verdict returned at an inquest held on Saturday at the Council Offices, Sheringham, by Mr. R.H. Vores, Deputy Coroner, on four bodies washed ashore on Sheringham Beach as the result of the wreck of the ketch *St. Francois* at Weybourne during the blizzard last week.

Evidence was given by Henry Satterly, a member of the Weybourne Coastguard, to the effect that at about a quarter past five o'clock on Wednesday morning, he saw some wreckage in the surf about 200 yards east of the Coastguard Station. When the tide receded and witness could approach the wreckage, he found it was apparently part of a ketch. A nameboard, "*St. Francois, Gravelines*", was also found among a small quantity of wreckage. Witness added that he had been on duty since shortly after midnight, and had not heard or seen anything at sea. He considered the vessel turned turtle a good distance off the coast. Everything that came ashore belonging to it was in a very bad condition, including two lifebuoys, which were decayed and in pieces.

The Foreman (Mr. J. Lovett): I quite agree with your opinion of the vessel. I have seen the wreckage, and the ketch must have been quite unseaworthy.

John Thomas Bond, Coastguard Station officer at Weybourne, stated that the watchman on duty on Tuesday night reported having seen about nine o'clock a masthead light. It could only be observed for a few minutes. On Wednesday witness was handed by a Sea Scout an alien's registration certificate, bearing a photograph and thumb print, which was evidently that of one of the men washed ashore. It was picked up on the beach, and a French 5-franc note was also found.

Evidence as to the finding of the bodies, one on Wednesday evening and the others the following morning, was given by Arthur Knowles, general labourer, of Sheringham; Lance-Sergeant William Baker, Corporal Ernest Mackenzie Willis, and Lance-Corporal Herbert Edward Bollard.

P.C. George Oliver, speaking from a superficial examination of the bodies, said one of the men was apparently aged 50, another 50 to 60, a third about 21, and the other a lad of 16 or 17. They were seemingly foreign seamen, and nothing was found on the clothing to assist in identification. The alien's registration form, he felt certain, referred to the one aged about 21. It was issued by the Newcastle-on-Tyne police on March 13th and described the holder as Joseph Minne, of French nationality.

Norfolk Chronicle and Post – Friday 7th April 1916

The "Thetford and Watton Times" carried a similar report the following day, on Saturday 8th April 1916.

An early 20th Century photograph shows the Coastguard Cottages on the beach at Weybourne.



Beach and Coastguard Cottages - Weybourne

Another photograph gives a different view and shows, at the end of the track to the left, the windmill at Weybourne. Outside one of the cottages, a Coastguard is practising semaphore; in the foreground at the centre, a sign with an anchor is visible on the perimeter wall.

The Coastguard moved to this location in about 1913 from its original base on the beach. The station was manned by a chief officer and four men and was provided with signal flags, a telegraph system and a Board of Trade life-saving rocket apparatus.



Coastguard Cottages - Weybourne

The Coastguard Henry James Satterly, who first saw the wreckage of the *St. François*, was born in Devon in 1874; he died in Devon in 1929, aged 55. The 1891 Census shows him, aged 16, as a crew member on the *H.M.S. Impregnable*, a training establishment begun at Devonport in 1862 and active until 1929. As training ships were replaced or added to the establishment, each one, when she took on the role, was renamed *Impregnable*.

The UK Royal Navy Registers of Seamen's Services detail the ships Henry Satterly served on from December 1892 until April 1919 as an Ordinary Seaman, then Able Seaman and including service as a Diver. The record shows him as being transferred subsequently to what is assumed to be the Coastguard Service for the Eastern Region, firstly in Mablethorpe, and subsequently in Weybourne from May 1911 to September 1916.

Henry Satterly's Service Record shows that he was stationed at Weybourne from May 1911 to September 1916 and from October 1916 to April 1919 on the *President IV* – the London accounting base handling the accounts of the commands of the Coastguard ships and the Reserves – from October 1916 to April 1919 before being transferred to the service of H.M. Coastguard in May 1919.

The 1921 Census shows Henry Satterly, a Petty Officer, serving with the Royal Navy (Armed Forces Overseas) as a Coastguard at the Coastguard Station in Dingle, County Kerry, Ireland.

At the Inquest into the deaths of the four men from the *St. François*, the Foreman of the Inquest Jury, a Mr J. Lovett, concurred with observations and comments made by the Coastguard, agreeing with his opinion about the ship probably overturning. This Mr Lovett had seen the wreckage of the *St. François* and considered that "the ketch must have been quite unseaworthy".

The evidence given at the Inquest suggests that the first body was found on Wednesday morning by Arthur Knowles, aged 27, a General Labourer of Woodhouse Yard, Lower Sheringham.

The three soldiers who found the bodies of the three other men from the *St. François* the following morning were all members of the Northamptonshire Regiment. This Regiment had a significant presence in Norfolk during World War I and men from the county were serving with Territorial Force battalions, formed from local volunteers, which were raised to supplement the regular army. The 9th Battalion (Territorial Force) was based initially at Cley and from the summer of 1918 in Sheringham.

Military Service records for 1919 show that Ernest MacKenzie Willis (1884-1970) was a Sergeant with the 6th Battalion, the Northamptonshire Regiment, and was released from active service in March 1919. He had been a Postman in Cambridge before the war, an occupation and location he subsequently returned to.

Herbert Edward Bollard (1876-1953), of Rushden, Northamptonshire, was working in the shoemaking industry, a major manufacturing industry and employer in the county. He enlisted as a Private with the 4th Battalion, the Northamptonshire Regiment in May 1908 for a period of four years. Records in 1917 show him still serving as an Acting Lance Corporal in 1917 but wounded in November of that year. He was medically discharged from service in March 1919.

The four men who lost their lives were buried at All Saints' Church in the churchyard in Upper Sheringham. The memorial cross on their grave shows the date of Monday 3rd April which is assumed to be the date of their burial. Their place of burial suggests that the four men were found on the coast midway between Weybourne and Sheringham, but probably closer to Sheringham.



All Saints' Church – Upper Sheringham

## ST. FRANÇOIS – The Crew

The Civil Registration Death Index for England & Wales records the deaths of the four French crew members of the *St. François* but their birth years and ages are approximate.

Captain Charles Merlen's birth year is given as circa 1868, his age 48; the Lieutenant, Louis Vasseur's as circa 1858, his age 58; two records for Joseph Minne show different birth years, one 1871, another 1895, but the alien's registration form evidence given at the Inquest suggests that Joseph Minne was aged 21. The youngest crew member was François Agez, born circa 1901, his age 15. Given his age, Agez was likely to have been the *mousse*, the name given to apprentices, usually aged 12–16, who carried out the chores such as cooking meals for the crew, sweeping the deck, and scrambling up the rigging whenever the sails had to be trimmed.

While not an "exact science", the facial characteristics of one of the sailors photographed in the Nordfjord in 1910 seem to resemble a man whose photograph appears on his "Certificate of Registration of an Alien" dated 15th September 1915. He was Louis Vasseur, the Lieutenant on the *St. François*, whose descendants are certain that the sailor in the 1910 photograph is indeed their ancestor.



1915 – Louis Vasseur



1910 – St. François Sailor

The four men were buried, apparently together, in the churchyard of All Saints' Church, Upper Sheringham. The names of men on the memorial are: Charles MERLEN, Louis VASSEUR, François AGEZ, and Joseph MINNE. The plaque on the simple memorial cross reads:

**MERLEN CHARLES    CAPITAINE  
VASSEUR LOUIS    LIEUTENANT  
    < S<sup>T</sup> FRANCIS >  
MORTS POUR LA FRANCE    3-4-1916  
AGEZ FRANCOIS & MINNE JOSEPH  
    MATELOTS < S<sup>T</sup> FRANCIS >  
MORTS POUR LA FRANCE  
    3 – 4 – 1916**

The memorial carries the wording "Mort pour la France" (translated as "Died for France"), a legal expression in France and an honour awarded to people who died in conflict, usually in the service of their country.

The most likely explanation for this choice of wording is that people within the local community in Sheringham assumed that the four men and their ship had been lost off the North Norfolk coast as the result of enemy action during wartime.

In this context, the same newspapers that described the loss of the *St. François* also carried reports of air raids in which five Zeppelin airships and "hostile aircraft" had carried out attacks on the North-East coast and Eastern counties resulting in a significant number of deaths and injuries.

## ST. FRANÇOIS – Timeline of Events

Information from newspaper reports gives the sequence of events relating to the loss of the *St. François*.

|                                                                |                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>St. François</i> sailed from Iceland                        | Mid March 1916 – exact date unknown |
| <i>St. François</i> sailed from Newcastle                      | Saturday 25th March                 |
| Coastguard sighted a masthead light                            | Tuesday 28th March – 9.00 p.m.      |
| Coastguard sighted wreckage                                    | Wednesday 29th March – 5.15 a.m.    |
| First body found by Arthur Knowles                             | Wednesday 29th March – evening      |
| Three bodies found by members of the Northamptonshire Regiment | Thursday 30th March – morning       |
| Inquest held                                                   | Saturday 1st April                  |
| Burials at Upper Sheringham Church                             | Monday 3rd April                    |

## ST. FRANÇOIS – An Earlier Tragedy

An earlier incident involving the *St. François* occurred in 1908, eight years before the tragedy off Weybourne.

The *St. François* was on voyage from Gravelines to Iceland for fish and a few miles north-east of Flamborough Head when, at about five o'clock on Sunday evening 5th April 1908, one of her crew members, Auguste Lundy was accidentally knocked overboard either by some of the gearing or by a sail. He managed to clutch a line thrown to him from the ship and the crew got him on board but he was then in a state of collapse. The Captain headed immediately for Bridlington to seek medical assistance but Lundy died a quarter of an hour after being brought aboard.

An Inquest was held the next day, on Monday 6th April, at which the French Consul at Hull was represented and one of the Masters of the Grammar School interpreted. The Inquest heard that Auguste Lundy had gone to the wrong side of the jib when in stays (the act of going about) and was knocked overboard by the jibsheet.

The Captain of the *St. François* said in evidence that Auguste Lundy was managing the jib sheet when it swung round, his feet became entangled in the rope and he was dragged overboard. Lundy could not swim and two lifebelts were thrown to him but he was unable to take hold of either of them.

The ship's boat was then launched and although the sea was choppy, Auguste Lundy was brought aboard, but twenty minutes had elapsed by that time and he was dead. A local Doctor who examined his body said his opinion – based on his examination of the deceased and what he had learned from the seamen – was that the cause of Auguste Lundy's death was exhaustion due to prolonged immersion in the sea.

The Inquest jury found that Auguste Lundy was "Accidentally drowned" and added a rider that the crew did everything possible to save his life, a comment that was appreciated by the seamen.

Auguste Lundy, aged 33, was a married man with two children. His funeral was held on Wednesday 8th April.

### THE INTERMENT – A SAD SCENE

On Wednesday afternoon the interment of the remains of the deceased took place at Bridlington Cemetery. A deep feeling of sympathy had arisen for the comrades of the deceased fisherman and still more for the young widow in France with her two young children. The coffin lay at the town's mortuary and from Portland-place at two o'clock the cortege started for the cemetery. On the coffin was placed a beautiful floral cross and before the coffin was placed in the hearse a young woman stepped forward and placed upon it a bunch of narcissi. The incident was noticed by the mourners and the public and by the former especially the thoughtful act of sympathy seemed to be very much appreciated. The comrades of the deceased, in their rough ship's clothing, marched behind the hearse followed by a large company of Bridlington fishermen and boatmen. There was also a large and representative attendance of the public.

The coffin was borne from the hearse to the grave by four Bridlington fishermen – Jack Champlin, Harry Hopper, J. Newbie and E. Newbie – the public respectfully uncovering as the coffin passed along the centre walk to the appointed resting place. The service was conducted by the Rev. V.O. Calvert, the reverend gentleman in charge of the Catholic mission in Bridlington, many around the grave being deeply affected.

The mourners were: Captain Louis Wissocq, second mate, Eugene Lemaire, Pierre Brunet, Jules Tournier, Pierre Tournier, Leon Tournier, Joseph Palliard, and Mons. Auguste Lemaire, all of Gravelines, France.

We are requested by the French Consul, Hull, to express the thanks of Captain Wissocq and his men for the kindness and sympathy shown to them in their trouble by the fishermen and the public. And the fishermen of the Quay desire to express their sympathy with the bereaved and especially with the widow and little children of Auguste Lundy in their distant French home.

Bridlington Free Press – Friday 10th April 1908

The newspaper "The Hull Daily Mail" carried a report on Wednesday 8th April, the day of Auguste Lundy's funeral, which described that "a stirring scene was witnessed in Bridlington this afternoon when the fishermen turned out en masse to attend the funeral of Auguste Lundy, the French fisherman who was drowned from the French fishing smack St. Francois".

The same newspaper reported that "The members of the crew of the St. Francois, eight men and a boy ... formed up behind the hearse, on either side of which walked the bearers". A representative of the French Consulate at Hull, the Harbour Master, representatives of the Lifeboat Association and "nearly half a hundred fishermen" formed a procession to the cemetery.

The mourners included the ship's Captain, Captain Louis Wissocq, the Second Mate Eugene Lemaire, and Seamen Pierre Brunet, Jules Tournier, Pierre Tournier, Leon Tournier - who were possibly related - and Joseph Palliard (or Palliard), all from Gravelines in France. Another mourner was Monsignor Auguste Lemaire, priest, also from Gravelines, and perhaps from the same Catholic mission in Bridlington as the priest, the Reverend Calvert who conducted Auguste Lundy's funeral service.

Louis Wissocq was born in Gravelines in 1883 and lived in Gravelines; three of the other men were all born in Grand-Fort-Phillipe, Second Mate Eugène Lemaire in 1887, Pierre Brunet in 1893, and Auguste Lemaire in 1895. Eugène and Auguste Lemaire were both living in Grand-Fort-Phillipe at the time of the 1906 Census.

There was probably an error, mishearing or misunderstanding on the part of the newspaper for no men with the surnames Tournier/Tourier and Palliard/Palliard have been found in Gravelines at the time. However, there were men with the surname Fournier and Paillard/Paillard living in Gravelines in the mid-19th and early 20th Centuries.

Crew members Leon, Louis and Pierre Fournier (Tournier) were presumably related; no trace has been found of them, nor of Joseph Palliard, but records do show a Francois Joseph Paillard in Gravelines.



Channel of Petit Fort and Grand-Fort Philippe - Gravelines (North)

## ST. FRANÇOIS – A Different Outcome?

Newspapers described the extreme weather conditions on the night the *St. François* was lost. Many other vessels succumbed to the storm. Some stayed in or returned to harbour. Some went ashore, some stranded, some were damaged, some were able to be salvaged, but no crew members were lost from other ships.

What made circumstances for the *St. François* different and why, despite the extreme weather conditions, was there not a better outcome for this ship and her crew?

### The Condition of the Ship

The Inquest recorded that everything belonging to the *St. François* that came ashore was in a very bad condition; the lifebuoys were decayed and broken in pieces. The ship herself was described by the Inquest Jury Foreman as “quite unseaworthy”.

The crew members – in a small ship, being buffeted by the gale, with its life-saving equipment effectively useless – probably stood no chance of saving themselves in the wild sea conditions.

- Would the crew members have survived if the ship herself and the equipment on board had been in better, more serviceable and seaworthy condition?

The report of Auguste Lundy’s death in 1908 stated that he could not swim.

- Might this have been the case too for some of the crew members in 1916?
- As with the unseaworthy condition of the ship herself, did the ship’s owner also risk lives by not requiring or ensuring that crew members were able to swim?

### A Ship’s Boat?

Information from the Inquest into Auguste Lundy’s death in 1908 raises other questions about the disaster in 1916. “The Driffield Times” of Saturday 11th April 1908 reported that when Lundy had failed to take hold of the lifebelts thrown to him, “the ship’s boat was then launched”. This is assumed to have been a small tender or similar.

- Did the *St. François* have such a boat in 1916? And if so, did some or all of her crew members – due to circumstance or decision – either remain on the ship herself or take to the ship’s boat?

### The Number of Crew Members

Information about the number of crew members in 1908 and 1916 varies; some reports support there having been four, others suggest that there were more than four men on the *St. François*.

- In 1908, newspaper reports of Auguste Lundy’s death described the ship as having a crew of seven not including the deceased, so a crew of eight.

In 1916, the *St. François* was described as having a crew of four and one newspaper also surmised that “She would have a crew of probably four hands ...”.

- The four men found off Sheringham were seemingly assumed to have been the only crew members of the *St. François*. However, if – as suggested in 1908 – the *St. François* did have a larger number of crew members, was it perhaps the case in 1916 that the crew also numbered more than just the four men whose bodies were recovered and that they were separated from each other in whatever circumstances?

- The Weybourne Coastguard surmised that the *St. François* had turned turtle a good distance off the coast.

It seems feasible that, on a stormy night, in dreadful weather conditions, the *St. François* overturned and all her (possibly larger) crew might have entered the water and were drowned but the bodies of only four men were found washed ashore.

- One of the men who lost his life was aged 15. He was probably the *mousse* and not an experienced crew member. If this was the case, the crew would have had only (assumed) three more experienced men. Was this a factor?
- The most likely explanation for the ship (possibly) having a crew of only four men in 1916 rather than the eight in 1908 is that the loss of the *St. François* occurred during World War I when men were called up for military service.

In France during World War I, the initial age range for conscription was 20 to 40 but this was subsequently widened in order to meet the requirements of war; specifically, the Military Service Act passed in January 1916 made all single men between 18 and 41 liable for conscription. In addition, the Territorial Army and its reserves were mobilised and included men up to 45 years old who had completed their peacetime (national) service.

The crew members of *St. François* in January 1916 were aged (approximately) 58, 48, 21 and 15. The two older and youngest crew members would not have been eligible for conscription and the twenty-one-year-old would have been ineligible if he was a married man.

### **The Sad Conclusion**

All these considerations, albeit speculations, sadly suggest that the loss of the crew of the *St. François* was very possibly a tragedy that should not have happened or could have been mitigated.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank:

- Linda Nelson for sharing information about her and her late husband's quest to find out more information about the loss of the *St. François*.
- Raphaël Chombart for sharing information about his family.
- Simon Gresham for proofreading drafts of this report as it progressed.

## REFERENCE SOURCES

- British Newspaper Archive (The British Library Board)
- Genealogical records – Ancestry, Family Search, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- Geneanet – website
- Iceland Fishing – Willem Lanzsweert, National Fisheries Museum of Oostduinkerke
- Norwich Heritage Projects – Michael and Frances Holmes
- The Association of Dunkirk Little Ships – website
- The Imperial War Museum – website
- The North Norfolk Coast – Neil R. Storey

## NOTE

- Extracts from newspapers either reproduced or transcribed in this research are from records held by, and are the Copyright of, the British Library Board, © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD.

## DISSEMINATION

This research may be used free of charge for academic or other not-for-profit purposes but the material must be acknowledged as the work of the author.