

Report on an investigation
of the loss of the skipper from
Girl Alice (LH523)
1.5 miles south-east of Burnmouth
19 November 2000

Marine Accident Investigation Branch
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Report No 17/2001

Extract from
The Merchant Shipping
(Accident Reporting and Investigation)
Regulations 1999

The fundamental purpose of investigating an accident under these Regulations is to determine its circumstances and the causes with the aim of improving the safety of life at sea and the avoidance of accidents in the future. It is not the purpose to apportion liability, nor, except so far as is necessary to achieve the fundamental purpose, to apportion blame.

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GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

C	Celsius
CWBE	Constant Wear Buoyancy Equipment
GRP	Glass Reinforced Plastic
knot	nautical mile per hour
kW	Kilowatt
m	metre
MAIB	Marine Accident Investigation Branch
MCA	Maritime and Coastguard Agency
MGN	Marine Guidance Note
mm	millimetre
MRSC	Maritime Rescue Sub-Centre
UTC	Universal Co-ordinated Time
VHF	Very High Frequency

SYNOPSIS



On Sunday 19 November 2000, the skipper/owner of the 6.24m fishing vessel, *Girl Alice*, was lost overboard while operating the vessel alone, in good visibility, off the south-east coast of Scotland. The accident was reported to the MAIB the next day, and on Wednesday 22 November an investigation began.

The alarm was raised in the early evening when the vessel failed to return to port as expected. Forth Coastguard immediately launched a rescue operation. *Girl Alice* was seen about a mile offshore between Burnmouth and Berwick-Upon-Tweed, but there was no sign of her skipper.

Although the precise cause of the accident is unknown, it is assumed that the skipper:

- Lost his balance or slipped and fell over the side;
- Was knocked over by a pot out of sequence while shooting; or
- Caught his foot in a bight of rope and was dragged over the side.

This report recommends that if the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) reprints its leaflet entitled *Single Handed Operation*, it includes the recommendation that boats, similar to this one, are fitted with engine and steering controls at, or near, the pot hauling controls.

DETAILS OF THE VESSEL AND ACCIDENT

Name	:	<i>Girl Alice</i>
Type	:	Fishing vessel (potter)
Port of registry	:	Leith
Fishing number	:	LH 523
Fishing Licence number	:	30551
Built	:	1990
Registry of Shipping and Seamen No	:	C16059
Construction	:	GRP
Owner/skipper	:	Mr P Aitchison 20 Brierydene St Abbs Berwickshire TD15 5PQ
Gross tonnage	:	1.35
Length overall	:	6.24m
Length registered	:	5.64m
Breadth	:	2.49m
Depth	:	0.6m
Propulsion	:	BMC Diesel 18.42kW
Crew	:	One
Position of accident	:	55° 49.6´ north 002° 01.2´ west
Date	:	19 November 2000
Injuries	:	One fatality
Damage	:	None



Girl Alice

SECTION 1 - FACTUAL ACCOUNT

1.1 DESCRIPTION OF VESSEL (Figure 1 and 2)

Girl Alice was built in 1990 as a glass reinforced plastic (GRP) open boat, with a non-watertight working deck.

The wheelhouse was situated aft with access via a door in the rear. The steering wheel was extended through to the forward side of the wheelhouse; however, there were no engine controls or emergency stops placed outside it. The pot hauler and pot hauling area were on the port forward side of the vessel.

The main engine, incorporating a wet exhaust, was fitted on engine beds attached to the hull framing of the vessel forward of the wheelhouse, and protruded through the main deck with a rigid covering.

The bulwarks surrounding the main deck area were 670mm high.

The vessel carried a VHF radio, and the skipper also had a mobile phone. Navigation lights were fitted, and the skipper tended to switch these on while fishing during the day.

Figure 2a



Girl Alice - views of the working deck



1.2 BACKGROUND TO VOYAGE AND TYPE OF FISHING

Girl Alice was owned by the skipper and operated daily from St Abbs harbour, north of Burnmouth on the Berwickshire coast, working the local inshore fishing grounds off the south-east coast of Scotland. He normally operated the vessel single-handedly, and had been doing so for some years.

On 19 November 2000, *Girl Alice* was engaged in potting for crabs and lobsters; a method using static holding pots (creels) which are baited and shot in a fleet or string of several pots. On this occasion 20 pots were used. A marker buoy on the sea surface is attached to each end of the fleet to identify the position of the pots.

Normally the pots are baited and shot from the vessel during one day and hauled back on a later day. The catch is removed and the pots are then rebaited and shot again.

The pots are hauled aboard the boat using a conventional pot hauler, which provides an automatic feed for the back rope (the line attaching the pots together) when power to the hauler is applied. Each pot is connected to the back rope by a 2m length of rope, commonly known as a tow. When each tow is reached, power to the hauler is switched off and the pot is lifted on board manually.

After the removal of the catch the pots are rebaited and stacked on deck in

sequence ready for shooting. The pots are shot straight over the side while the boat travels steadily in the desired direction. Pots go over in sequence as stacked, but it is not uncommon for the pots to become entangled when hauling or shooting.

1.3 THE CREW

The skipper was the only person on board *Girl Alice*. He had had at least 17 years experience in this type of fishing, and had undergone training in basic sea survival and the use of VHF radio.

Under *The Fishing Vessel (Certification of Deck Officers and Engineer Officers) Regulations 1984*, *Girl Alice* was not required to have any certificated persons on board.

1.4 ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

The wind was from the west at 10 knots. Visibility was good, with a slight sea and swell, and the sea temperature was approximately 10°C.

1.5 EVENTS SURROUNDING THE VOYAGE

The skipper of *Girl Alice* left home at around 0630 on Sunday 19 November. He is believed to have left St Abbs harbour at approximately 0730. An eye-witness saw the boat passing Eyemouth between 0800 and 0830. Between then and when the vessel was found that evening, nothing of *Girl Alice*'s movements were known, except that at about 0930 the skipper called his wife on the VHF radio. This was the last known contact with the skipper.

When the vessel was eventually boarded, there was no sign of the skipper, but most of the bait for the pots was found on board, together with eight crabs and his untouched vacuum flask. Not having returned to St Abbs by late afternoon, his wife phoned an Eyemouth fisherman at approximately 1700 to ask if *Girl Alice* had been in contact by radio or telephone. As she had not, the fisherman went to Eyemouth Harbour to see if she was berthed there.

1.6 SEARCH

Not finding *Girl Alice* in harbour, the Eyemouth fisherman phoned a colleague in Burnmouth to learn that she was not there either. After trying to raise *Girl Alice* on VHF radio channels 6, 14 and 15 (channels used by local boats), and several times on his mobile phone, the Eyemouth fisherman contacted the coastguard at the Forth Maritime Rescue Sub-Centre (MRSC) on channel 16 at 1720. He told them that *Girl Alice* was overdue, and gave her likely fishing area.

Meanwhile the Burnmouth fisherman phoned Eyemouth again, to say that he had spotted a small light to the east of Burnmouth which he was going to investigate with his son. This information was immediately passed to the Eyemouth lifeboat, which proceeded in that direction.

On leaving Burnmouth, the fisherman and his son saw an echo on their radar screen 1.5 miles south-east of them. It proved to be *Girl Alice*. When they went alongside they found no sign of the skipper. A few minutes later the Eyemouth lifeboat arrived. Two lifeboatmen boarded her and confirmed that there was no one on board.

When *Girl Alice* was found, she was anchored by a pot jammed in the port gunwale forward of the wheelhouse. The rope attached to the pot led down into the water to the back rope, which was attached to the rest of the string of pots. This rope was passed to the Burnmouth fishermen who hauled in the remaining 17 pots. Most of the bait for the pots was found on board, together with a catch of eight crabs and the skipper's untouched vacuum flask.

Girl Alice was taken to Burnmouth by two lifeboatmen accompanied by the Burnmouth fishing boat. They then returned to sea to assist in the search for the missing skipper.

At the start of the search Eyemouth lifeboat, St Abbs inshore lifeboat, and Berwick lifeboat and inshore lifeboat were launched in conjunction with a coastguard rescue helicopter and rescue teams. A grid search, which included 15 local fishing boats, continued until 2300 and resumed again at 0800 the next day until, having been unsuccessful in finding the skipper, it was terminated at 1602.

At the time of writing the report, the skipper's body had not been found.

1.7 SINGLE-HANDED OPERATION (FISHING VESSELS)

Single Handed Operation, a safety leaflet published by the MCA, contains the following safety precautions:

- *Tell someone ashore where you intend to operate and when you intend to return.*
- *Wear a flotation garment (buoyancy aid, lifejacket or survival suit) at all times.*
- *Consider using a safety harness while you are working on deck.*
- *Consider wearing a personal locator and carrying mini flares.*
- *Do not take unnecessary risks. There will be no one to help you if you make a mistake.*

1.8 LIFESAVING APPLIANCES

As an under-12m fishing boat, *Girl Alice*, in accordance with *The Fishing Vessel (Safety Provisions) Rules 1975* and *The Fishing Vessel (Life Saving Appliances) Regulations 1988*, was required to be equipped with a lifejacket, two lifebuoys and six distress flares.

Although she was equipped with these items, the lifejacket found on board, following the accident, was not of an approved type, and the three distress flares: hand-held, parachute and smoke canister, were inadequate in number and past their expiry date.

Marine Guidance Note MGN 155(F) entitled *Buoyancy Equipment for Fishermen at Work* published by the MCA, strongly recommends that:

- sufficient quantity of suitable CWBE is carried on board every fishing vessel to ensure that one device is available, at all times, for each person working on deck;*
- all fishermen wear suitable CWBE whilst working on deck.*

SECTION 2 - ANALYSIS

2.1 GENERAL

The MAIB has received a number of reports of accidents involving single-handed fishing operations. Once again, this accident highlights the dangers involved.

2.2 AVAILABLE EVIDENCE

The vessel was still attached to a fleet of 20 pots with her engine running in the ahead position.

Three pots were found inboard, including the pot jammed in the port gunwale, indicating that *Girl Alice* had been shooting her pots. Most of the bait for the pots was found on board, together with eight crabs and the skipper's untouched vacuum flask. This indicated that he went overboard shortly after his wife had spoken to him at 0930, and he was in the process of shooting his first fleet of the day after removing the catch.

2.3 ACCIDENT HYPOTHESIS

There were no witnesses to the accident so the precise circumstances surrounding the loss of the skipper will never be known. However, a hypothesis is suggested which fits the known facts.

Girl Alice left her moorings in St Abbs Harbour between 0700 and 0730 on Sunday 19 November 2000 for the fishing grounds off Burnmouth, where the skipper had previously laid his pots. An eye-witness saw the boat passing Eyemouth between 0800 and 0830 that day.

After hauling the first fleet of pots, the skipper was coming to the end of shooting them when either he lost his balance, or slipped and fell over the side, or was knocked over by a pot out of sequence which then became jammed in the gunwale. It is also possible that he caught his foot in a bight of rope and the pull of the 17 pots on the seabed and forward motion of the boat dragged him over the side.

2.4 SINGLE-HANDED OPERATION

Since the skipper was alone there was no one to assist or raise the alarm when the accident happened.

The skipper's movements were sometimes unpredictable, so the alarm was not raised until much later in the day.

Appropriate advice is provided in *Single Handed Operation* (1.7)

2.5 LIFEJACKET

It cannot be confirmed what the skipper was wearing at the time of the accident. However, had he been wearing suitable CWBE he might have survived.

Appropriate advice is provided in Marine Guidance Note MGN 155(F).

SECTION 3 - CONCLUSIONS

3.1 CAUSE

The cause of the accident, which resulted in the loss of *Girl Alice's* skipper cannot be established precisely. However, it would seem that since the sea was fairly calm, he either:

- lost his balance or slipped and fell over the side;
- was knocked by a pot out of sequence; or
- caught his foot in a bight of rope while shooting. (2.3)

3.2 OTHER FINDINGS

Since there were no engine controls or emergency stops at the working position on deck, the skipper had to go into the wheelhouse from the after end to slow or stop the vessel in the event of gear becoming snagged or other emergency.

The skipper's chances of survival were impaired by:

- his possible decision not to wear CWBE (1.8), or carry mini flares or a personal locator (1.7);
- his lone operation of the vessel (2.4);
- his unpredictable movements (2.4).

SECTION 4 - RECOMMENDATION

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency is recommended to:

1. Include the recommendation that such boats be fitted with engine and steering controls at, or near, the pot hauling controls, in any reprint of its leaflet entitled *Single Handed Operation*.

**Marine Accident Investigation Branch
May 2001**