

## [A Harpoon and the \*Nova Zembla\*](#)

Since Captain Lionel Hall brought the harpoon into the club at the end of August 2019, it has caught the imagination of a number of us in the club.

The harpoon is about six feet in length and has a ‘two-flued’ head attached to a wooden handle.

The inscription provided further interest, especially for me and our Boatsteerer and from our research have found various records relating to the Dundee Whaler *Nova Zembla*. The first clue was that the wreck had been found recently in 2018 after an investigation by researchers from Calgary. Records show the vessel sank in 1902. More than 200 ships from British whaling fleets are thought to have perished in the Canadian Arctic and the wreck of the *Nova Zembla* is the first of these to be discovered. It is believed forty Dundee whalers lie beneath the Arctic whaling grounds, crushed by ice.

The *Nova Zembla* departed Dundee on March 31st, 1902 bound for the whaling fields of the Davis Strait in the Canadian Arctic. On November 3rd, 1902, The Dundee Courier reported the crew and cargo of the *Nova Zembla* had been rescued by other ships, after striking a reef during a storm in the Davis Straits on September 18th of that year.

The report read: “Great storms have raged in the far north and as a result of one of these the *Nova Zembla* – one of the five vessels which formed the Dundee Whaling Fleet – ran aground on the evening of September 18th and became a total wreck. “This occurred about a mile to the south of Dexterity fjord, which is on the west side of the Davis straits.

“Fortunately, no lives were lost, but many of the crew had narrow escapes.

“The Master at the time was Captain John Cooney, who had been the ship’s mate for the previous nine years under Captain William Guy, who had been Master of the vessel in 1882, 1893, 1894 and 1902.

“In fact, had it not been for the assistance obtained by the whalers *Diana* and the *Eclipse*, who were only about six miles from the scene of the wreck, every man on board the ill-fated *Nova Zembla* must have perished.”

A report the following day updated the city, which said: “A boat was sent once to the ill-fated ship (the *Nova Zembla*). “It was thought at first that she had been abandoned, but boarding the vessel the captain, mate, and chief engineer were still standing by. The crew had got ashore in the boats but had been unable to return.

“The ship was doomed, but the *Diana*’s crew risked much in rescuing the whalebone secured by the unfortunate whaler. Much difficulty attended the task, but it was ultimately all hooked from the hold and transferred to the *Diana*.

“Despite being lost, because of the actions of the other ships the crew was still able to turn a profit, after selling the single black whale it had caught days before.”

### ***Information found about the design of hand-held harpoons indicated:***

The two-flue harpoon was the primary weapon used in whaling around the world, but it tended to penetrate no deeper than the soft outer layer of blubber. Thus, it was often possible for the whale to escape by struggling or swimming away forcefully enough to pull the shallowly embedded barbs out backwards. This flaw was corrected in the early nineteenth century with the creation of the one flue harpoon; by removing one of the flues, the head of the harpoon was narrowed, making it easier for it to penetrate deep enough to hold fast.

### ***The *Nova Zembla****

Ken Dagnall provided a record from the Lloyds Register Books 1899-1900

Whaler ‘NOVA ZEMBLA’ of Dundee Wood – beech (timber), Screw Propeller.

Official No. 72541, Call Letters PJGF, Capt. W. Guy since 1893

375 gross tons, 346 tons under deck, 255 net tons.

Built 1873 by Wenclose, Bremerhaven

Owners W.O. Taylor & Co., Dundee

Length 140.7 ft, breadth 27.8 ft, depth 15.7 ft.

Compound Steam Engine 2 cylinders 21” and 36” diam. with 23” stroke, built by Hansa Co., Rostock, nominal horsepower

58, new boiler 1893

Class not stated

From 1902 the Registered Owners also owned/managed Dundee Shipping Co. Ltd. which had 8 ships all with ‘Glenxxxx’ names.

Photographs are scarce but the one on the right, from the Kenn Harper collection, is noted as being the *Nova Zembla*.



### ***Captain William Guy (Extract from his obituary and other sources)***

Captain Guy belonged to Larne, and his early connection with Tayside was formed in the days when he made his first voyage to the Arctic in 1866 in the *Camperdown* along with the late Captain Alex Fairweather. He was appointed first mate on the *Jan Mayen* in 1875. His career in command of whaling vessels began in 1878, and in the best years of the Dundee whalers he captained first the *Nova Zembla*, and later the *Arctic*, the *Polynia*, and *Hope*, of Peterhead.

Captain Guy had several exciting experiences in the Far North. Undoubtedly the most serious was that in 1891, when the *Polynia*, of which he was in command, was crushed in the ice in Lancaster Sound. The whaler made water so rapidly that she had to be abandoned, the crew having to take refuge on an icefloe. For three days and three nights the men were adrift on the floe, and some of them were very exhausted before they were rescued by two other Dundee whalers.

He retired as the senior captain of the fleet in 1901, after 50 years at sea, nearly 35 years at whaling, 23 as master.

With all the bluff ways of the sailor the captain combined genial kindness and the Irishman's inborn love of humour, and he had many friends ashore and afloat. On retirement he settled down at Woodhaven, his home commanding a fine view of the training ship Mars, in which he took keen and hopeful interest.

### ***W.R. Spence***

**William Robert Locke Spence**, CBE, (9 October 1875 - 3 March 1954) was a British politician.

Born in Cockpen in Midlothian, Spence was educated at the Royal High School, Edinburgh. When he was fifteen, he became an apprentice sailor, and joined the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union (NSFU). He served in the Merchant Navy for many years, becoming an officer.

In 1911, Spence began working full-time as an official of the NSFU, based on shore, initially in South Shields, and later in various ports in the south of England. In 1928, he was elected as the union's general secretary, and from 1931 to 1941, he additionally served on the General Council of the Trades Union Congress.

Spence was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1937. During World War II, he was a member of the Advisory Council to the Ministry of Shipping. He retired in 1942, settling in Shoreham-by-Sea.

The author has gathered information which is freely available on the internet of things and acknowledges the web pages of the following, with thanks;

The Courier of Dundee

The Evening telegraph of Dundee

Whale Captains from [www.explorenorth.com/whalers/features](http://www.explorenorth.com/whalers/features)

Captain Robin Plumley MBE

Ken Dagnall MBE

**VETERAN DUNDEE WHALER  
DEAD.  
CAPTAIN OF MANY FAMOUS  
VESSELS.**

