

HULL FOLK WHO MADE THEIR MARK**LILLIAN (BIG LIL) BILOCCA, CAMPAIGNER**

Image courtesy of Hull Live

The triple trawler tragedy

Ernie Bilocca, a 21 year old deckhand, saw the tragedy unfold from the wheelhouse of the Hull trawler *Kingston Andalusite* where he was battling one of the worst Icelandic storms in living memory alongside his skipper, Len Whur. Whur and his cousin - Phil Gay, skipper of the nearby vessel the *Ross Cleveland* - were attempting to shelter from the storm in a fjord. The wind speed was around 70 knots; the air temperature around minus eight degrees Celsius. Both skippers were fighting the deadly build up of ice on their vessels which would make them top heavy and unstable. Whur and the crew

of the *Kingston Andalusite* made it to safety, but there was to be no elation as they picked up a last desperate radio message from Gay on the *Ross Cleveland*. 'I am going over. We are laying over. Help us, Len, she's going. Give my love and the crew's love to the wives and families.' It was in the early hours of Sunday 4th February 1968 when Bilocca saw the trawler sink with the loss of 18 lives. One man survived. It was the third such loss in a matter of weeks – the *St Romanus* and the *Kingston Peridot* had also perished with the loss of all hands – a further forty men in total. But these 58 deaths were only an extreme example of the tragedies which had haunted the Hull fishing community for generations. From the late 19th Century on some 6000 Hull trawlermen – and boys – had lost their lives at sea.

By today's standards, safety arrangements on the trawlers were hopelessly inadequate. There was no requirement to carry a qualified radio operator other than the skipper, there were no lifelines or adequate safety rails on the three ships that were lost and if the men wanted specialist protective clothing they had to buy it themselves. Part of the reason was that safety measures cost money, eating into profits and earnings.

But the loss of 58 men in such a short time proved to be a turning point. Everybody in the tightly knit fishing community who lived in the Hessle Road area of Hull was related to or knew one or more of the victims. A wave of revulsion and protest swept the City, and the name of Bilocca was at the heart of it. But it wasn't Ernie who inspired the protest. It was his mother, Lillian Bilocca, who was the powerhouse behind it and who rallied the mothers, wives, sisters and girlfriends of the trawlermen to rise up in protest. Dubbed the Headscarf Revolutionaries because of their custom of wearing headscarves, Lillian and her supporters were to achieve more in a few weeks than politicians, trade unionists and the industry itself had in decades.



Image courtesy of Getty images

*The Headscarf Revolutionaries (l to r) :
Yvonne Blenkinsop, Mary Denness,
Lillian Bilocca, Christine Smallbone*

Lillian was born in 1929 in the Hessle Road area to Harriet and Ernest Marshall, who worked as a seaman in both the merchant navy and on trawlers. She left school at the age of 14 to work as a cod skinner in a fish processing factory, and later met and married a Maltese sailor called Carmelo 'Charlie' Bilocca who also worked on board both merchant ships and trawlers. Thus her father, husband and son all went to sea in one of the most brutally dangerous industries in the world, statistically much more dangerous even than coalmining.

Even before the loss of the *Ross Cleveland*, Lillian, known as Big Lil because of her formidable personality as well as her imposing frame, had joined with three other women to form the Hessle Road Women's Committee and called a meeting at the Victoria Hall on Hessle Road. Lil was joined on stage by Christine Smallbone and Yvonne Blenkinsop, but there was some booing when they were joined by Mary Denness, a skipper's wife. Lil silenced objections by asserting bluntly that the skippers hadn't come home to their wives and families either. Tragically Christine Smallbone was to lose her brother, Phil Gay, skipper of the *Ross Cleveland*, just a couple of days after that first meeting. A young union man called John Prescott spoke at the meeting, but the women weren't particularly interested in hearing from trade unionists or politicians. This was the moment for them to take direct action. A huge petition which eventually garnered 10,000 signatures was launched, a Fishermen's Charter demanding action on safety was drawn up and presented to trawler owners, attempts were made to prevent trawlers from sailing at all if they didn't have a radio operator and a deputation went to London to meet with two ministers in Harold Wilson's government including JPW Mallalieu, Secretary of State at the Board of Trade. Years later, Yvonne Blenkinsop recalled asking Mallalieu – educated at Trinity College Oxford and the University of Chicago and a onetime President of the Oxford Union - 'are you actually going to do something, petal?' 'Yes, my dear,' 'petal' replied, 'we are.' Harold Wilson, who was in America at the time, had left instructions that the women were to be helped as much as possible. It was unnecessary for Lil to carry out her threat to march on Downing Street or 'that Harold Wilson's private house until I do get satisfaction in some shape or form' if she was ignored.

Lil's passion and drive was soon to bear fruit. A committee of enquiry into trawler safety was set up, and its recommendations included a ban on fishing off the North Cape of Iceland in winter, a requirement for radio contact with trawlers every day during the worst months and the provision of a 'mother' ship. And action followed – within weeks, for example, the *Orsino* was sent to serve as a hospital ship off Iceland.

But never in her lifetime was Lil to receive the admiration, respect and gratitude that her success deserved – quite the opposite. An unintended consequence of the North Cape winter fishing ban meant that for a time only Icelandic trawlers could land fish in Hull. She was accused of putting men's jobs at risk by – as Len Whur put it – 'interfering in something she knew nowt about.' She received poison pen letters – even death threats. 'Madam,' one letter read 'why don't the people of Hull kidnap you, tie some bricks round your neck and drop you in the Humber?' She was forced out of her fish processing job, never worked in the industry again, and found it nigh on impossible to obtain even the most menial employment thereafter. When she died of cancer in 1988, aged just 59, only a handful of people attended her funeral. There should have been thousands.

It wasn't until 1990 that Hull City Council placed a plaque on the site of the old Victoria Hall reading 'In recognition of the contributions to the fishing industry by the women of Hessle Road, led by Lillian Bilocca, who successfully campaigned for better safety measures following the loss of three Hull trawlers in 1968.' Then in 2016 a huge mural honouring Lillian and her colleagues appeared on Anlaby Road, and in 2017 a play *The Last Testament of Lillian Bilocca* by Maxine Peake was performed at the Hull Guildhall. In 2021 she came third in a Hull Daily Mail readers' poll of the greatest Hullensians of all time, behind only William Wilberforce and Clive Sullivan. Recognition came late, but was never more richly deserved.

The maritime historian Dr Brian W Lavery sums up the women's achievements in his book *The Headscarf Revolutionaries* (it was Lavery who coined the term.) He writes 'For me, their true legacy is the innumerable people here today who might not have been but for their campaign. Their story, like their legacy, now belongs to the world.'