

Weather watch



Fishing fleets rely on the Shipping Forecast

Tragedy that gave us our beloved Shipping Forecast

By Joe Shute

ON OCT 25 1859, a sudden squall whipped up across the Irish Sea battering the west coast.

By midnight the storm had reached near hurricane proportions with wind speeds of 100mph being recorded. In total 133 ships were sunk, many of them dashed against the jagged rocks that litter our coastline.

The largest of the stricken vessels was the steamer Royal Charter, driven on to the rocks at Pont Lynas off the coast of Anglesey. Some 465 passengers were lost (out of 800 killed that night).

The ship was en route to Liverpool from Australia and many of those on board were reputedly prospectors from the country's newly discovered gold fields. There are apocryphal stories of passengers leaping overboard with their pockets weighed down by gold.

That tragedy, which came to be known as the Royal Charter Storm, marked the beginning of the development of the Shipping Forecast which turned 150 this week.

Following the storm, Vice Admiral Robert Fitzroy, the founder of the Met Office, ordered the development of a gale warning system which came into being in 1867. Today it continues to be updated four times a day. The names "Dogger, Fisher, Forties and German Bight" are as rhythmic as breakers on the sand and evocative enough for Seamus Heaney to turn them into a poem: *The Shipping Forecast*.

Heaney called it "North Atlantic flux" and no institution better reflects the wonderfully precocious nature of our weather than the Shipping Forecast.

This weekend, though, things are more in the doldrums. That is not meant in a disparaging manner, rather that the weather is simply staying very much as it is. And for most of us that means a warm and sunny bank holiday of the sort the tail end of August rarely brings. Further north and west things get wetter and windier. Not enough to strike fear into the hearts of mariners, but perhaps enough to dampen a hopeful holiday barbecue.