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Bryan Lavery: Lilian Bilocca (Vignette).

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Lillian Bilocca (1929-1988)

Lillian Bilocca was a seafarer's daughter who became a seafarer's wife and then a seafarer's mother. She had two children—Ernest in 1946, and Virginia in 1950—with Carmelo 'Charlie' Bilocca (b.1904), a Maltese sailor who later worked as a trawlerman. They lived in Coltman Street, Hull, and Lillian ended her days alone in a council flat after Charlie's death in 1981. Dubbed 'Big Lil' by the media, she became a household name when she and her 'headscarf protestors' highlighted the harsh conditions suffered by Hull's fishing community in the wake of the tragic events of the 'Dark Winter' of 1968. Their campaign led to changes in trawler safety that saved countless lives.

The 'headscarf protests' were precipitated by the loss of three Hull trawlers in atrocious weather in North Atlantic waters in the space of three weeks. Fifty-eight Hull trawlermen perished in the 'Triple Trawler Tragedy' of 1968, the biggest peacetime fishing disaster of the twentieth century. The *St Romanus* sank with all hands on 11 January, and then on 26 January the *Kingston Peridot* met the same fate. On 4 February, only one man (the mate, Harry Eddom) survived the sinking of the *Ross Cleveland*, whose skipper sent a last desperate, poignant radio message: '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 heard by Skipper Len Whur of the *Kingston Andalusite*, who saw his friend's ship sink. Coincidentally, stood next to Whur in the wheelhouse was Lillian's son, Ernie, a 21-year-old deckhand. Incredibly, one of the three ships (the *St Romanus*) had no radio operator. There were no lifelines or adequate safety rails on the three trawlers and any protective clothing had to be bought by the men themselves. Remarkably, such limited safety provisions were within the law.

After the *Kingston Peridot* had been declared lost, Lillian gathered thousands of signatures demanding better safety at sea and she and her fellow 'fishwives' organised a meeting at the shack that was the Victoria Hall on Hessle Road. The women, with local union men, families and politicians addressed an overflowing hall. The *Hessle Road Women's Committee*, comprising Lillian, Mrs Mary Denness, Mrs Yvonne Blenkinsop and Mrs Christine Smallbone (née Gay, sister of the *Ross Cleveland's* skipper) was born. 'Big Lil' and her women's committee became household names as they travelled to Westminster to put their case for safety improvements to the government. Multiple changes were enacted in weeks. Their fame put the spotlight on an industry in which trawlermen died at sea at the rate of more than one a week, with over 6,000 lost since the late nineteenth century. Their successful struggle is remembered in a plaque on the site of the old Victoria Hall that reads: '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'.

In 2015, four further plaques in honour of the women, two of whom are still alive, were unveiled in Hull's Maritime Museum.

Brian W. Lavery

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