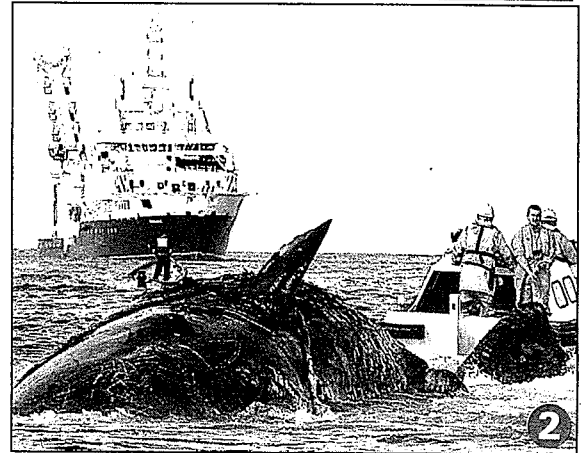


Funeral for a whale: The Gránuaile arrives to tow the sperm whale's 40-tonne carcass out to sea

# First, locals mourned the HOW DO



Roped in: Crewmen from the Irish Lights vessel attempt to attach lines

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Monday to Friday

THEY kept vigil as the gentle giant of the deep spent his last agonising hours on their windswept beach, then gathered to pay their sad respects.



by Kate Chambré

But that was Tuesday. Yesterday, the 46ft sperm whale that died four days ago while stranded on a sandbank at Culleenamore Beach was causing no end of bother.

The whale had been spotted by a surfer early on Tuesday, before it ran aground. Experts from the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group arrived to examine the beached animal and declared that there was little hope. The animal had probably been sick when it entered Ballsodare Bay and futile attempts to refloat it would only cause it further stress, the experts said.

Initially, Sligo County Council had hoped to bury the whale in the soft sand near where it had died - normal practice in beachings such as this.

But the sandbank lay between two deep channels and neither small boats nor diggers were able to get to the site.

Officials also toyed with chopping the animal up by hand and taking the parts to a landfill site, but this was dismissed as too big a job.

Meanwhile, hundreds of curious sightseers visited the beach this week to get a glimpse of the body - leading to health concerns. Sligo County Council officials issued repeated warnings to stay away from the whale for fear of disease.

There were also concerns that some people would try to take grisly souvenirs from the deceased mammal.

With the whale rapidly beginning to decompose and attract vermin - not to mention the fact that it was beginning to give off a whale-sized pong - the County Council had no option but to call upon the Irish Lights ship, the Gránuaile, for assistance.

The Gránuaile, which maintains lighthouses around the coast, was en route from the Inishkeas, off Mayo, to Tory Island in Donegal, and made a special detour into Sligo Bay to attempt to tow the 40-tonne leviathan out to sea and sink it in deep water.

Two rigs from the Irish Lights Vessel were deployed to help manoeuvre the colossal creature away from the beach before it became a health and safety nightmare.

A RNLI crew onboard a B-class Atlantic 75 lifeboat from Rosses Point also assisted with the operation.

The plan was put into action at break of day - and almost immedi-

ately ran into trouble. 'The vessel deployed two launches to take up the tow-lines to the dead whale in order to pull it off the sandbank and into deeper water for disposal. At first, the whale was moving off the sandbank, but then it got stuck and it eventually took over 40 minutes and three vessels to tow the carcass free,' said Siobhán Ryan, Heritage Officer for Sligo County Council.

The carcass was eventually towed some 10 miles - but that wasn't the end of the saga.

As if mourning one of its children, the sea began to protest, churning and molling in an alarming way.

Finally, due to 'difficult sea conditions and a high swell', the idea of proceeding further into deep water was abandoned amid concerns for the safety of the crews.

The captain of the Gránuaile, Dermot Gray, announced it would be much safer to anchor the whale on the uninhabited island of Inishmurray and leave it to rot there, safely away from human habitation.

'The captain of the Gránuaile has advised Sligo County Council that, due to difficult sea conditions and high swell, that it has been necessary to attempt to beach and anchor the whale on Inishmurray island. This course of action has been undertaken in the interests of the safety of the ship and crew,' said Miss Ryan.

The attempt to re-beach the whale - albeit on a different beach - was being undertaken last night and officials were confident of the success of their latest plan. But there was no guarantee that the whale - a male aged between 40 and 50 years - would be any more co-operative this time...

Earlier this year, the body of a whale that beached in Co. Antrim was removed from the shoreline by crane. The fin whale had been stranded for three days at Larne Lough in July before it was put down with a series of high-strength barbiturates.

The whale could not be buried on site due to concerns that barbiturates could have got into the food chain.

Larne Borough Council removed the remains of the whale by crane in a mammoth operation. The remains of the 30ft whale, which weighed over 10 tonnes, was taken to a rendering plant in Lisburn where it was disposed of.

