

Courage is timeless



A brief history of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution



...THOSE IN PERIL ON THE SEA

Nine years after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 one visionary man, Sir William Hillary, founded a charity dedicated to 'the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck'. From that small seed grew the Royal National Lifeboat Institution – the RNLI – which today operates over 400 high-powered craft from more than 230 lifeboat stations.

The RNLI still relies, as it has from the very beginning, on the courage of volunteer lifeboat crews: ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Because it is still a charity, and gets no financial support from

the UK Government, the RNLI still depends for its continuance on the generosity of members of the public.

Since those first days, the courage of our volunteer lifeboat crews has never been in doubt. Men, for instance, like Coxswain Henry Blogg – pictured opposite guiding his crew to the rescue of the *SS Fernebo* in 1917. In his 53 years of voluntary service, Henry Blogg was awarded the RNLI's Gold Medal for Gallantry three times, the Silver Medal four times, as well as the British Empire Medal. It is to the courage of our crews that we dedicate the following pages.



PAINTING: TIM THOMPSON

THE EARLY YEARS 1824–1859



The *St George* rescue 1830

In 1830 a storm is breaking the paddle steamer *St George* on the rocks near Douglas, Isle of Man. The old lifeboat is damaged, but 59-year-old William Hillary finds a boat, gathers a crew and braves the

seas. A massive wave smashes their rudder and ten oars, breaking six of Hillary's ribs and crushing his breastbone. Yet he continues supervising the rescue for two more hours. The paddle steamer's crew of 22 people comes out of that maelstrom alive, thankful for the RNLi founder's family motto: 'With courage, nothing is impossible.'

No 'weaker' sex

In 1838 Grace Darling's courage makes her 'the first national heroine'. This 22-year-old woman rows over a mile through mountainous seas with her lighthouse-keeper father to where the paddle steamer



Forfarshire is helplessly broken on the rocks off the Farne Islands. Nine survivors are still clinging to the wreck in gale force winds. Grace and her father rescue five and row them back to the lighthouse. Her father and another man then go back for the rest. Grace reacts with modesty to a national outbreak of hero-worship. Sadly she dies of consumption only a few years later, in 1842.

Critical times

In 1849 comes a tragic loss. Going to a vessel's aid, the South Shields lifeboat is overturned by huge seas. Twenty of the 24 volunteer crew are drowned. In the same year the Institution's total income amounts to just £354-17-6d.

The first lifejackets

These bulky lifejackets – cork sewn onto a canvas vest – are in use by 1855. Their buoyancy proves popular with crews.



FROM OARS TO STEAM (1860-early 1900s)



PHOTO: MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY

Try, and try again

In 1868, trying to rescue the crew of the foundering *North Britain*, the Penzance lifeboat *Richard Lewis* is overturned by huge seas. The new design rights herself quickly, but returns to shore with cox and three crew members badly injured. One oarsman offers to try again, inspiring a second crew to volunteer. Amazingly, they snatch the last sailors from the stricken ship minutes before she breaks up.

The price of courage

Over two terrible days – 9-10 December 1886 – two lifeboats are lost trying to save the lives on board the barque *Mexico*, which has run aground in a gale. Although the Lytham lifeboat *Charles Biggs* carries out a magnificent and heroic rescue, the Southport lifeboat *Eliza Fernley* and St Anne's lifeboat *Laura Janet* capsizes: 27 lives are lost.

Five thousand pounds

In response to the loss of two lifeboats (see above), on 10 October 1891 in Manchester, the first RNLI Lifeboat Day raises over £5,000 (more than £2M in today's money).



PHOTO: ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS



The Lynmouth haul

In January 1899 a terrific gale on the North Devon coast makes it impossible for the Lynmouth lifeboat to fight out of the harbour and save the stricken *Forest Hall*. So the townspeople haul the ten-ton lifeboat a distance of nine miles over Exmoor to Porlock. It takes ten and a half hours, but the casualty is saved.

In 1999 this amazing feat was re-enacted.

The power to save lives

On 22 February 1908 the stricken *SS Harold* is poised 100m off the rocky fangs of Anglesey's

Stacks. The waves are steeple high, the wind gusting to 100mph. Miraculously the steam-driven lifeboat *Duke of Northumberland* powers through the storm to the rescue. No other lifeboat of its time could have coped.



A SERVICE FIT FOR HEROES (WWI)

Petrol engines to the rescue

In 1914 a blackout causes the converted hospital ship *Rohilla* to strike a reef during a gale. Five oared lifeboats struggle to help. One snatches a few people off, but is badly holed. Others are driven back. Then the petrol driven lifeboat *Henry Vernon* arrives from Tynemouth and proves without doubt the superiority of the new craft. 146 lives are saved.



The Salcombe tragedy

In 1916 the Salcombe lifeboat *William and Emma* is returning after giving assistance to a ship in difficulties. As the boat is rowed across the dangerous waters of Salcombe bar a huge wave overturns her, and 13 of the 15 crew are drowned.



Unequalled service

Henry Blogg holds a special place in the annals of the RNLI. During 53 years of voluntary service, he was awarded the RNLI's Gold Medal for Gallantry three times and the Silver Medal four times. In 1917 the Swedish vessel *SS Fernebo* is split in half by a mine off the Norfolk coast, and Coxswain Blogg's ageing volunteer crew rescues everyone on board.

Veterans of fortitude

In September 1918 the Lowestoft lifeboat *Kentwell* undertakes a five hour rescue of the gale-stricken *Pomona*. Four of the volunteers are aged over 50, twelve over 60, and two in their 70s. Throughout the First World War a total of 1,866 launches are crewed by heroic veterans.

AN ERA OF CHANGE (1920-1945)



Good and faithful servants

From 1920 tractors gradually take over hauling lifeboats into the surf. The last ever horse-drawn beach launch is in 1934. The onward march of technology sees radio telephones introduced in 1929 and the first diesel engines in 1932.

'Always ready'

During a rescue in 1934, Robert Patton, the Coxswain of the Runswick lifeboat, clings onto a terrified man. Both are washed overboard and, caught between the two vessels, the Coxswain's ribs and pelvis are crushed. Four thousand people attend his funeral. The new Runswick lifeboat carries his name: *Robert Patton 'Always Ready'*.

The little boats

In 1940 the Ramsgate and Margate lifeboats, the *Prudential* and *Lord Southborough*, help in the evacuation from Dunkirk.



PAINTING: TIM THOMPSON

Every last ounce

A hurricane causes havoc off the Scottish coast in January 1942. Peterhead's *Julia Park Barry of Glasgow* is in service for 52 hours, saving 106 lives. The exhausted crew have to be helped off the lifeboat.



PHOTO: RNLI



PAINTING: TIM THOMPSON

An old enemy conquered

The rocks of Port Talbot bar form a notorious deathtrap, having claimed two lifeboats. In October 1944 a hurricane drives the already torpedoed frigate *Chebogue* stern first onto the bar. In a superb piece of seamanship Coxswain William Gammon makes twelve successive approaches before getting the 42 crew off. The average age of the Mumbles lifeboat crew is over 55.

THE MODERN WORLD (post WWII to present day)

Rapid rescues, faster technology

During the 1950s diesel engines come into general use, as they are safer and more efficient. 1956 sees VHF radio arrive, and in 1963, radar.



180° turn

In 1969 the lifeboat *TGB* leaves the Orkney village of Longhope in a severe storm, to rescue a tanker

out of control. Next morning the lifeboat is found capsized. In one tragic moment seven women have been widowed; eight children made fatherless. It is one of a series of losses which prompt a return to the principle of self-righting lifeboats.

Where the action is

With increased leisure use of coastal waters, rigid inflatable lifeboats capable of operating in shallow waters are needed. The impressively seaworthy Atlantic 21, capable of 30 knots, is introduced in 1970, and goes on to save around 5,000 lives.



Penlee: a nation grieves

As Christmas 1981 approaches, the whole country mourns the loss, with all hands, of the Penlee lifeboat *Solomon Browne*. The names of the brave crew are added to the long roll of volunteers who gave their lives 'for those in peril on the sea'.



Tamar class continues the tradition

Introduced in 2005, this latest addition to the RNLI's fleet can achieve 25 knots and handle the roughest seas. Packed full of communication equipment, it enables the seven crew members to do, with maximum speed, efficiency and safety, the job that lifeboat crews have always done: save lives at sea.

A TIMELESS LEGACY OF COURAGE

From the earliest days, the lifeboat volunteers came from sea-faring families. They knew the dangers, and were prepared to face them. In a small community just a few families would share the risks.

The Cocking family, pictured opposite, represents six generations of service. Today, Tommy Cocking is the Coxswain of the St Ives all weather lifeboat. His father was Coxswain for 22 years before him. And in the tragedy of 1939, when the St Ives all weather lifeboat capsized, three members of the Cocking family drowned. Tommy's great great grandfather was the first Cocking to row in the St Ives lifeboat.

Now Tommy's daughter Tricia drives the tractor that launches the lifeboat. Whether her children, Mason and Britney will follow the family tradition, who knows? But if they do so, it will be the gifts and mentions in the Wills of today's RNLI supporters which provide the equipment and training to help them pluck threatened lives from the fury of the waves. Six out of ten lifeboat launches are only possible because of gifts people leave in their Wills.

Nowadays fewer than one in ten lifeboat volunteers come from a professional seagoing background. But one thing never changes. The courage that can be depended upon when things go wrong at sea in the middle of a stormy night, and the shout goes up for a crew.



Photo: Derek Hall



FRONT COVER PAINTING: TIM THOMPSON
BACK COVER PHOTO: NIGEL MILLS/ROYAL NATIONAL LIFEBOAT INSTITUTION

Royal National Lifeboat Institution

West Quay Road, Poole, Dorset BH15 1HZ

Tel 0845 121 4999 Fax 0845 126 1999

rnli.org.uk

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Lifeboats