

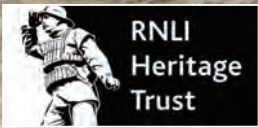
# HISTORY OF THE RNLI



## Lifeboats



Fanny Harriet, Dunmore East, 1914



## Early lifesavers

The islands of Britain and Ireland have always been at the mercy of the sea. In the early 19th century, there was an average of 1,800 shipwrecks a year around our coasts, and this danger was an accepted part of life onboard. Coastal communities often watched helplessly as vessels foundered.

Rescue services did exist in some places – there are records of a rescue boat stationed in Liverpool from 1776. In Bamburgh, Northumberland, men from the local castle patrolled the shore on horseback, ready to go to sea in their 'unimmergible' coble – the first purpose-built lifeboat, designed by

Lionel Lukin and patented in 1785.

A 1789 competition, run by a group of businessmen from Tyne and Wear, sought designs for rescue boats. One of the entries, from William Wouldhave, was designed to self right. Boatbuilder Henry Greathead was asked to build a lifeboat combining the best features of Lukin's and Wouldhave's designs, and came up with a vessel that became known as the *Original*. Within 20 years, he had built more than 30 of these lifeboats, and they were saving lives around the UK and its islands, from St Andrews to St Peter Port.



Sir William Hillary

## RNLI founded

Sir William Hillary is credited with founding the National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck, later renamed the Royal National Lifeboat Institution.

After witnessing the destruction of dozens of ships from his home on the Isle of Man, and getting involved in rescue attempts himself, Hillary appealed to the Navy, the government and other 'eminent characters' for help in forming 'a national institution for the preservation of lives and property from shipwreck'. With the support of London MP Thomas Wilson and West India Merchants Chairman George Hibbert, the Institution was founded as a charity on 4 March 1824. The name was changed to RNLI in 1854.

## KEY FACTS

- The RNLI's lifeboat crews and lifeguards have saved more than 139,000 lives since the charity's foundation in 1824.
- The biggest single rescue was in 1907, when lifeboats from Cadgwith, Coverack, the Lizard and Porthleven rescued 456 people from the liner *Suevic*.





## Henry Blogg

Cromer's Henry Blogg is the RNLI's most decorated lifeboatman. He was Coxswain at the Norfolk station for almost 40 years.

During his 53 years of service, Blogg was awarded three Gold and four Silver RNLI Medals for Gallantry, as well as the George Cross and British Empire Medal.

With his dedicated crew, he launched 387 times and helped to save 873 lives around the Cromer coast. The RNLI's Henry Blogg Museum in Cromer tells his story.



## Grace Darling

A lighthouse keeper's daughter from Northumberland became a national heroine in 1838 for her part in the rescue of passengers from the wrecked steamship *Forfarshire*.

Grace Darling was 22 when she and her father took their small fishing boat out in a fierce storm to reach a group of survivors, who had been stranded on rocks for hours. After rowing together for nearly a mile, they reached the rocks. Mr Darling leapt out of the boat and onto the rocks, to check the situation. It was up to Grace to keep the boat under control in the swirling water, rowing backwards and forwards, trying to keep it from being smashed to pieces on the reef.

On the rocks, her father found eight men, including one who was badly injured. There was also a woman holding two children, both of whom had died. Mr Darling and three of the men rowed the boat back to the lighthouse, taking with them Grace, the injured man and the woman.

Grace looked after the survivors while her father and two of the *Forfarshire* crew returned for the other four men.

Although she wasn't on a lifeboat crew, Grace was awarded the RNLI's Silver Medal for Gallantry. She was the Institution's first female medallist and remains a lifeboating icon. The RNLI Heritage Trust manages a museum in her honour in Bamburgh, Northumberland.



Henry Freeman

## Lifejacket development

- **Cork** – In 1854 the RNLI inspector, Captain Ward, invented a cork lifejacket. Narrow strips of cork were sewn onto a canvas vest, so the lifejacket was flexible enough to move with the body. In 1861, when one of Whitby's lifeboats capsized on a service, just one crew member survived. Henry Freeman was the only one wearing a cork lifejacket, and went on to become Coxswain at Whitby.
- **Kapok** – In 1904, the kapok lifejacket was introduced. Kapok is a vegetable fibre that doesn't absorb water and is much more buoyant than cork. The first kapok lifejackets proved unpopular due to their bulk, but improvements were made and they became the standard for nearly 70 years.
- **Beaufort** – The Beaufort lifejacket was introduced to the RNLI in 1970, after the development of synthetic foams in the 1960s. Extra buoyancy around the neck made sure that the crew member would float face upwards in the water should he or she be knocked unconscious. But one disadvantage was its bulk, which often made it difficult to move around the wheelhouses of the latest classes of lifeboat.
- **Modern lifejackets** – Today's RNLI crew members wear lifejackets developed in the 1990s for maximum comfort and safety. There are two styles – one for use on all-weather lifeboats and one for use on inshore lifeboats.





Petrol-driven lifeboat trialled at Tynemouth



B class Atlantic 21



Watson class



## Lifeboat development

Greathead's Original and similar **rowing lifeboats** set the standard until the 1850s. One Original, the *Zetland*, saved hundreds of lives from her station in Redcar, Yorkshire. Built in 1802, she is the oldest lifeboat still in existence, and can be seen at the RNLI Zetland museum.

**Sailing lifeboats** were introduced in the 1850s, with different types issued to different stations, according to their needs. The most successful were the Beechings, the Peakes, the Richardson tubulars, the Norfolk and Suffolks and, in later years, the Watsons.

**Steam-powered lifeboats** were introduced to the fleet in 1890, when the *Duke of Northumberland* went on station in Harwich. Six steam-driven lifeboats

were built before their development was abandoned in favour of petrol.

In the early 1900s, the RNLI began to experiment with putting engines on its lifeboats. The first **motor-driven lifeboat** to be sent to a station was the *J McConnel Hussey*, which went to Tynemouth in 1905. Early lifeboat engines could be unreliable, so sail rigging was also prominent on these boats.

The small **D class** inflatable lifeboat was introduced in 1963 to deal with rescues closer to the shore. 1972 saw the debut of the **B class** rigid inflatable lifeboat, the first of which was the Atlantic 21. Today's B and D class lifeboats are direct descendants, making up the bulk of the RNLI fleet.

Meanwhile, larger **all-weather lifeboats**

were being developed. Each new incarnation was faster and safer than its predecessor. There are now five classes of all-weather lifeboat in the RNLI fleet, with a variety of sizes, draughts and launch and recovery methods, suitable for all areas of the British and Irish coastlines. They are the Tyne (introduced in 1982), the Mersey (1988), the Severn (1996), the Trent (1996) and the Tamar (2006).

The **E class** lifeboat, a waterjet-propelled rigid inflatable, is the RNLI's fastest lifeboat. It was introduced in 2002 at the RNLI's four new lifeboat stations along the River Thames.

**Other craft** in the RNLI fleet include the hovercraft, used for rescues in very shallow waters or mud, and the lifeguards' inshore rescue boats and rescue watercraft.

## Launch and recovery

For the RNLI's first 100 years or so, lifeboats were mostly launched and recovered from their local beaches. In many communities, hauling the lifeboat during launch and recovery was done by women, as most of the men were onboard. Often, farmers loaned their horses to help bear the weight.

Lifeboats were often dragged for long distances before launching, to minimise the time at sea in rough conditions. In 1899, the Lynmouth, Devon, lifeboat was hauled across Exmoor by a team of 50–60 people and 18 horses, to go to the aid of a vessel in distress in another bay 10 miles away. During the journey, which lasted over 10 hours, the team had to knock down walls and other obstacles, take the boat off her carriage to get her through gates, and deal with gale-force conditions. The casualty vessel, *Forest Hall*, and those aboard were saved.

These days, most large, all-weather lifeboats are designed to be launched from a slipway, or to lie afloat. But beach launches are still common, especially with the smaller, inshore lifeboats. Specially adapted tractors are now used to do the hauling.



## A changing service

The way in which people use the sea has changed dramatically since the RNLI's foundation. More people are using the water for leisure, and the lifesaving service the RNLI provides has had to change accordingly.

In 2001, the charity's lifeguards began patrols on some of the most popular beaches in Dorset and Cornwall. RNLI lifeguards are now present on more than 160 beaches around England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and rescue thousands of people every year, as well as providing essential first aid and safety advice. This 'prevention-rather-than-cure' approach is also helping the RNLI's Beach Safety, Sea Safety and Education teams save lives by preventing people from getting into danger in the first place.

Also in 2001, the RNLI's first station on an inland waterway was established, at Enniskillen in County Fermanagh. A year later, four lifeboat stations were set up on the River Thames. Stations followed on Lough Derg, the South Broads and Loch Ness.







Patrick Sliney

## Gallantry

The RNLI rewards rescues of special merit with Medals for Gallantry in Bronze, Silver or Gold. In 1824, Navy Captain Charles Fremantle was awarded the Institution's first Gold Medal for his attempts to rescue the crew of the *Carl Jean* off the Hampshire coast.

The **youngest medallist** was Frederick Carter who was awarded a Silver Medal at the age of 11 for his part in an 1890 rescue in Dorset. He and another boy, 16-year-old Frank Perry, rowed through heavy surf to save two men whose boat had capsized. Frank was also awarded a Silver Medal.

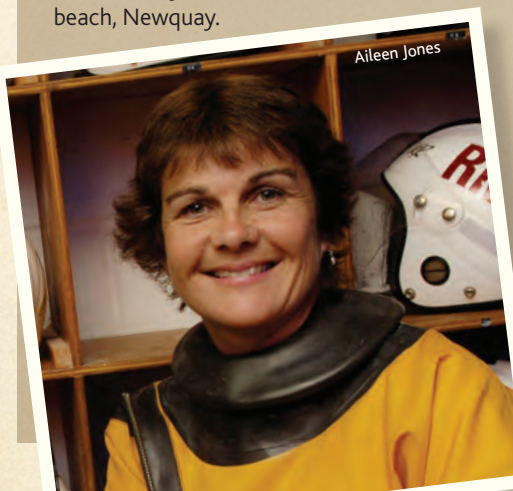
The **most recent Gold Medal** to be awarded by the RNLI went to Coxswain/Mechanic Hewitt Clark of Lerwick for his part in the gale force rescue of the crew of the *Green Lily* in 1997.

Aileen Jones from Porthcawl became the **first female crew member** to be awarded a Medal (Bronze) in 2005, for her part in rescuing the fishing vessel *Gower Pride* and her crew.

In 1936, the crew of the Ballycotton lifeboat were awarded one Gold (Coxswain Patrick Sliney), two Silver and four Bronze medals for rescuing the crew of the **Daunt Rock lightship** in hurricane conditions. They had been on call for 76 hours, on service for 63 hours and at sea for 49 hours.

Brian Bevan became the first crew member to be awarded the Bronze, Silver and Gold Medals for Gallantry in the **same year** in 1979, for rescues to the *Savinesti*, the *Diana V* and the *Revi* respectively.

Rod MacDonald was the **first RNLI lifeguard medallist**, being awarded the Bronze Medal in 2003 for helping save the life of a bodyboarder off Fistral beach, Newquay.



Aileen Jones



Early fundraising in Manchester

## Fundraising

When Sir William Hillary first issued his appeal to the British nation in 1823, he sent it out to the Navy and Government, to great sympathy but not much cash! It was MP Thomas Wilson who suggested asking wealthy philanthropists to support the fledgling lifeboat service. Fundraising in 1824 was very successful, bringing in almost £10,000. But the impetus soon stagnated and by 1849 income had dropped to £354.

Fundraising efforts in the mid 19th century were focused on the wealthy, and it wasn't until the late 1880s that the RNLI saw how generous the general public could be. Unfortunately, this swell of support was prompted by one of the saddest occasions in RNLI history.

On 9 December 1886, 27 lifeboat crew members from Southport and St Annes lost

their lives while trying to rescue the crew of the barque *Mexico*. A public appeal was launched, and local man Charles Macara took the cause to heart. An 1891 appeal, supported by the press in the north east of England, raised £10,000 in 2 weeks. On 10 October of the same year, Charles and his wife Marion organised the first Lifeboat Saturday. Bands, floats and lifeboats paraded through the streets of Manchester, followed by volunteers with collecting buckets and purses on poles. More than £5,000 was taken on the day, which was the first recorded example of a charity street collection.

Marion Macara formed a Ladies' Guild to help organise the street collection and, within 10 years, more than 50 Ladies' Guilds had sprung up around Britain and Ireland, and the RNLI's income had doubled.

## Wartime

RNLI lifeboat crews continued saving lives at sea throughout both World Wars.

When the First World War broke out, many lifeboatmen were called away to fight. The average age of the lifeboat crews left at home increased to over 50. During the war years (1914–18), RNLI lifeboats were launched 1,808 times, saving 5,332 lives.

In 1939, young lifeboat volunteers were again called away to war. Nevertheless, by the end of the Second World War in 1945, RNLI crews had saved 6,376 lives around the coasts of Britain and Ireland.

In 1940, 19 RNLI lifeboats were used to evacuate Allied troops from Dunkirk, northern



The evacuation of Dunkirk

France. Two had RNLI crews onboard, while the others were manned by the Royal Navy. The lifeboats and their stand-in crews saved thousands of lives while being shelled and bombed for days.



The RNLI Heritage Trust is a subsidiary charity of the RNLI, established in 2004 to care for the conservation of the charity's historic collections and the running of its museums.

The Trust relies on heritage grants and voluntary contributions for its support.

[rnli.org.uk/heritage](http://rnli.org.uk/heritage)

RNLI, West Quay Road, Dorset, BH15 1HZ  
0845 122 6999

**The RNLI is the charity that saves lives at sea**

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