

# LIFEJACKETS FOR LIFESAVERS

Walk into any lifeboat station kit room today and you'll see row upon row of brightly coloured clothing hanging up. For over 4,000 lifeboat crew members this is more than just a uniform. One day it might just save their lives.

In the early nineteenth century lifeboat volunteers wore their own clothes at sea or improvised ways to keep afloat. Most crew could not swim and drownings were common. It was clear that the brave volunteer crews needed lifesaving clothing to protect them as they saved lives at sea, often in dangerous conditions.

Today, the lifeboat crews' personal protective equipment, or PPE, has developed to the specialised kit of today.

It all started with the lifejacket ...



Synthetic foams, developed in the 1960s, led to the Beaufort lifejacket. Foam buoyancy could support both the wearer and casualty and ensured that crew floated face upwards in the water should they be knocked unconscious. The bright orange colour made it far more visible at sea and the lifejacket also had a light, recovery loop, buddy line and safety line.

*'My gear kept me alive during the longest 35 minutes of my life.'*  
Hartlepool Coxswain Robbie Maiden, 1993, after being washed overboard in a lifeboat capsize. The light on his lifejacket was eventually seen by an RAF helicopter crew.

1972



Today's RNLI crew members wear lifejackets developed for maximum comfort and safety. The two styles give easy movement for the arms and the head is kept well clear of the water. Both have lights, flare pockets, spray hoods, whistles to attract attention and safety lines to attach them to the lifeboat.

*'Today's lifejackets come from over 160 years of development and it's wonderful to see these innovative designs in use by our extraordinary lifesaving volunteers.'*  
Allen Stevens, Senior Engineer

2014

1854

In 1854, RNLI Inspector Captain Ward invented a cork lifebelt. Narrow strips of cork were sewn onto a canvas vest. They were flexible to move with the body but were very bulky and crew didn't always wear them.



1861

In 1861, when Whitby's lifeboat capsized on a service, Crew Member Henry Freeman was the sole survivor as he was the only one wearing a cork lifebelt. He went on to become Coxswain at Whitby saving many lives over a long career.

*'A cork jacket, even when a man stands upright, isn't calculated to improve his figure.'*  
Ramsgate Coxswain, 1881



1904

The kapok lifejacket was introduced. Kapok is a fibre of the silk-cotton tree, does not absorb water and is three times more buoyant than cork.

Some lifeboatmen found them uncomfortable and refused to wear them, but later the design was improved and these brown lifejackets were used for nearly 70 years.



1990

Separate lifejackets were developed for the different rescues by all-weather and inshore lifeboats.

The lifejacket for all-weather crews was more compact and inflated automatically using gas.

As inshore crews often enter the water to rescue casualties, these lifejackets had built-in buoyancy.



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