

## **A Brief History of Cornish Lifeboats**

*John White, July 2015*

As John began his presentation, he started by describing the moods of the sea. Those who live at the edge of the sea are constantly aware of its uncontrollable temperament. A calm sea can be reassuring and sometimes beautiful, but it can also be cruel and unrelentingly violent. One is reminded of the words of Psalm 107 about those who go down to the sea in ships and do business in great waters and continuing in paraphrase “the stormy wind lifts them up to heaven and to the lowest depths”. In more recent times, in fact in 1860, William Whiting, a master at Winchester College, sent a hymn to the editors of the new “Hymns, Ancient and Modern” for inclusions; with a few small changes it was accepted and we all know the last two lines:

“O hear us when we cry to thee,  
for those in peril on the sea.”

A number of slides were presented showing seas in their various states. He went on to say how ships were most in danger of being wrecked when close to the shoreline. The Cornish coast was long and parts of it have proved particularly dangerous. He gave a few examples of wrecks along the Cornish coast. Shipwrecks have occurred throughout history and there are many examples of people offering help to shipwrecks. The reputation of the Cornish as ship wreckers is very much exaggerated, as Sue Cox had pointed out in her talk on Cornish wreckers. The Cornish have benefitted from the cargoes of wrecked ships but there are many examples of where they offered help to shipwrecked sailors.

John continued by describing how boats, specifically dedicated to saving life at sea started to be developed by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The development of the first lifeboat is generally attributed to Lionel Lukin although others were also developing lifeboats at around the time. The epitaph on Lukin’s gravestone in Kent reads, he “was the first person who built a lifeboat and was the original inventor of that principle of safety by which many lives and property have been preserved from shipwrecks. A Henry Greathead from the North East of England also built a number of lifeboats. A Cornishman Sir Thomas Graves (1725-1801) was given to credit for building a lifeboat. The first lifeboat in Cornwall was stationed at Penzance in 1803. In the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century a number of lifeboats had been established around the coast of Britain.

In 1808 a gentleman, Sir William Hillary, came to live on the Isle of Man. Being aware of the treacherous nature of the Irish Sea, with many ships being wrecked around the Manx coast; he drew up plans for a national lifeboat service manned by trained crews. Initially he received little response from the Admiralty. However, on appealing to the more philanthropic members of London society, including two Members of Parliament (Thomas Wilson, MP for Southwark, and George Hibbert, chairman of the West Indies Merchants), the plans were enthusiastically adopted and the *National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck* was founded on 4 March 1824 at a meeting in The Tavern, Bishopsgate Street, London.

The RNLI now has 236 lifeboat stations and operates 444 lifeboats. Crews rescued on average 23 people a day in 2013. RNLI Lifeguards operate on more than 200 beaches. They are paid by local authorities, while the RNLI provides equipment and training. Lifeboat crews are all volunteers. The biggest rescue in the RNLI's history was on 17 March 1907 when the 12,000-tonne liner *SS Suevic* hit the Maenheere Reef near Lizard Point in Cornwall. In a strong gale and dense fog, RNLI lifeboat volunteers rescued 456 passengers, including 70 babies. Crews from The Lizard, Cadgwith, Coverack and Porthleven rowed out repeatedly for 16 hours to rescue all of the people on board. Six silver RNLI medals were later awarded, two to *Suevic* crew members.

So this is an appropriate lead into Cornish Lifeboats in general. You will see from the *Suevic* rescue the lifeboat crews had rowed out repeatedly in strong gales and heavy fog. It is important to remember these rescues were not being made with the modern all-weather lifeboats we are familiar with today. In 1907, rescues were being made in open boats having to be rowed. Perhaps this is the moment to tell you not all rescues were as successful as the *SS Suevic*; in 1900 the first of Cornwall's total loss capsizes occurred at Padstow when 8 lifeboat crew lives were lost. The heroism of lifeboat crews has always been remarkable and will remain so, but these early lifeboat crews also required remarkable physical effort to save lives.

As previously mentioned, the first Cornish Lifeboat was established at Penzance in 1803, (21 years before the RNLI was founded). Over the years since then there have been lifeboats located at as many as 35 places around the Cornish coast. Now there are 14 places where lifeboats are located, several of these only have inshore lifeboats. Only 8 Locations have all weather boats; it is probably worth mentioning the different types of lifeboats:

### **All-weather lifeboats (ALB)**

Large boats with enclosed wheelhouses and survivor spaces below deck, which are self-righting and can go out in all weather conditions. There are six classes of ALB motor lifeboats, with speeds ranging from 17 to 25 knots. The RNLI's aim is to provide a 25 knot lifeboat to every all-weather crew.

### **Inshore lifeboats (ILB)**

Smaller boats that operate closer to the shore and in shallower waters than ALBs. There are two classes, inflatables and RIBs, capable of 25-40 knots. The RNLI's Inshore Lifeboat Centre at Cowes, Isle of Wight, has been building lifeboats since the 1960s. Obviously, until the advent of motorized lifeboats, manually rowed lifeboats had to be located much closer together. There were a few steam driven life boats before the beginning of motor driven life boats. As far as Cornwall's lifeboats are concerned, since 1803 they have saved over 6,300 lives, but with the loss of 33 lifeboat crew. from which it could be seen there have been two losses of an entire lifeboat crew of 8 (Padstow in 1900 and Penlee in 1981) and the St Ives lifeboat incurred a loss of 7 men with one man surviving after three capsizes of the lifeboat before it was totally wrecked near Godrevy (1939). So, 23 men lost their lives in three tragic events.

The presentation gave some details of each these lifeboat disasters. Some further information was given about the St Ives lifeboats attendance to the wreck of the SS Alba at the East end of Porthmeor beach in 1938; that lifeboat capsized and was wrecked but without the loss of any of her crew; although there was some loss of life of the Alba crew. Some slides were shown of the St Ives lifeboat being launched and of the new Shannon Class lifeboat scheduled for St Ives being tested at Hayle.

In conclusion John said, whilst he had spent time talking of lifeboat disasters, there were far more occasions when lifeboats had gone to the rescue of vessels in distress in force 9 and 10 gales and returned safely. He mentioned such an example by referring to the launch of the Sennen Cove lifeboat in November 1977 in severely atrocious weather to the aid of a coaster off Cape Cornwall., against all odds the lifeboat eventually returned safely to Sennen. Lifeboats have saved over 6,300 lives from around our Cornish Coast over the years. Seamen, fishermen, yachtsmen, and bathers have all been pleased to see a lifeboat turn up, whatever the weather, season or time of day or night.

**Note:** A tribute to the loss of the Penlee Lifeboat can be seen at:  
**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vZH6wnWOWQ>**