

JANUARY MEETING

Dover Royal Lifeboat Institution (RNLI)

A talk by Andy Milton

Reported by Alan Lee

After introducing himself and the other members of the Dover RNLI present Andy informed the audience that there has been a lifeboat stationed at Dover for over 165 years. Over that time crew members have been presented with over thirty awards. The Dover station guards the straits from Folkestone to the South Goodwin lightvessel.

Andy then played a short recording showing seven rescues that had been carried out by the Severn class lifeboat. This included Lerwick (Shetland), Torbay (Devon), Rosslare (County Wexford), Arranmore (County Donegal), Dover (Kent) (aided by Walmer), Tynemouth (Tyne and Wear) and Holyhead (Anglesey).

The earliest record of a boat kept specifically for rescuing the shipwrecked was at Formby, Lancashire, in 1777. A London coachbuilder, Lionel Lukin, designed the world's first 'unimmegible' boat and patented it on 2nd November 1785, the forerunner of the lifeboat. In 1786 he converted a coble, a type of fishing boat, into an unsinkable lifeboat for Bamburgh. Making it the first known unsinkable



Model of the 'Original'

lifeboat and Bamburgh Castle the first lifeboat station of the time. In 1789 Henry Francis Greathead was asked to build a purpose-built lifeboat, from a design by South Shield's private Law House committee. To this he added his own modifications, named the design 'Original', and became known as the inventor of the lifeboat. This first lifeboat remained in service until 1830. The only surviving 'Original' class lifeboat is the *Zetland*, built in 1802 and operational until 1880, she saved over 500 lives.

Sir William Hillary's vision for a service dedicated to saving lives at sea became a reality in Bishopsgate's trendy London Tavern on 4th March 1824. King George IV granted the Royal prefix to the Institution's name, making it the Royal National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck. On 5th October 1854, the name changed to the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI). The same year the first cork lifejacket was invented and issued to RNLI crews. In 1904 this was replaced by the Kapak lifejacket, then in 1972 by the modern Beaufort lifejacket.

The first Dover station was established in September 1837 by the by the Dover Humane and Shipwreck Institution. The Royal National Lifeboat Institution contributed towards the cost of the next boat, built in 1853 from its plans. In 1857 the RNLI took over operational control from the Dover Humane and Shipwreck Institution using the same type of lifeboats. In 1864 they introduced a slightly larger

lifeboat, the *Royal Wiltshire*, the first Dover lifeboat to be named, and the first to save lives in the harbour. This was followed, in 1878, by the *Henry William Pickersgill*, 1888 the *Lewis Morice* and from 1901 to 1914 the *Mary Hamer Hoyle*.

Dover's station closed in 1914 owing to difficulties in recruiting crew during the war years. It briefly reopened as a steam lifeboat station between 1919 and 1922, operating with the *James Stevens No 3*, and did not reopen until 1930. From 1930 to 1940 the *Sir William Hillary* was in service. This was Dover's first motor powered lifeboat and cost £18,446. Named and launched from the Wellington dock slipway, by HRH Edward Prince of Wales, on 10th July 1930, it was in service until taken over by the Admiralty and re-fitted. A relief lifeboat the *Agnes Cross* was used until 1941 when the station closed owing to WWII. Dover re-opened in 1949 with the *South Africa* being on station, replaced by the Waveney class *Faithful Forrester* in 1967. On 25th November 1956, the Dover lifeboat made history. With a BBC team on board, they had been filming on the South Goodwin lightship, the lifeboat received a distress signal from a fishing boat. The lifeboat answered the call, and the BBC crew filmed the rescue. That Sunday the BBC broke into their transmission and viewers were able to watch a real live rescue taking place, in high winds and heavy seas, in the Channel.



1985 *Princess Margaret* hovercraft after hitting Dover's southern breakwater

Another notable rescue took place when, at 4.26pm on 30th March 1985. The hovercraft, *Princess Margaret*, carrying 370 passengers and 18 crew, was entering the port through the western entrance, in high seas, heavy drizzle and a force 7 south-westerly wind. She hit the southern breakwater and ripped a 50-foot hole in her starboard side. The Dover relief lifeboat, the A.J.R. and L.G. Uridge, attended, saving many passengers.

On 15th March 1997, the Severn class 17-09 *City of London II* arrived, the largest class in the fleet, and remains on station to this day. It can self-right in six seconds, has a crew of seven and can carry over 100 rescued people. It takes, on average, two years to train a crew member. The coxswain and mechanic are the only paid members, the remainder of the crew are volunteers. Another thirty, important, volunteers keep the station running, raise funds and organise the shop.

The audience were then shown a recent rescue, recorded on body cams, of a family of five being rescued from a small inflatable. They were all hyperthermic, with the father and eighteen-year-old daughter the most affected. At one stage she was in danger of dying. They were all safely landed at Dover and later all made a full recovery.

During the question-and-answer session it emerged that crew had been insulted and threatened because they have been called out to rescue illegal immigrants. These 'idiots' should be reminded that the lifeboat will rescue anyone who is in a dangerous situation at sea. No matter what age or colour they are the crew will risk their lives to save all. All lifeboat crews and volunteers should be congratulated for the tremendous service they provide.