

# Lancashire & North West magazine

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# The RNLI Story

by Andrew Harris

The story of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution is a story of courage, skill and sacrifice. Founded by Sir William Hillary in 1824 it has saved more than 140,000 lives in 195 years. It is amazing.

Hillary moved to the Isle of Man in 1808 when he was 37. He was so distressed by the number of ships and lives lost to the steep waves and treacherous currents of the relatively shallow Irish Sea that in 1823 he wrote "An Appeal to the British Nation on the Humanity and Policy of Forming a National Institution for the Preservation of Lives and Property From Shipwreck". His proposal for a national and voluntary organisation attracted interest from a number of philanthropists and the National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck was formed on the 4th March 1824 with King George IV as

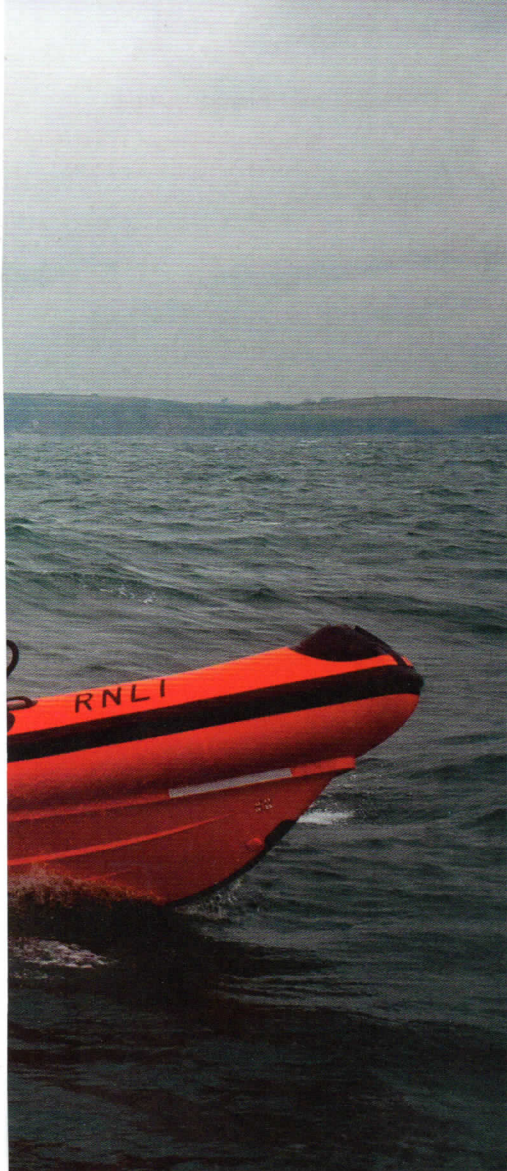
Patron. In 1854 the name was changed and shortened to the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. Nowadays most people know it as simply the RNLI: hence the title of this article.

The early years were financially difficult so the new organisation accepted a government subsidy. This caused the organisation to become too bureaucratic and voluntary donations reduced so this arrangement was terminated in 1869. Financial difficulties continued until solved 17 years later – by a tragedy off the Lancashire coast.

On the night of the 9th December 1886 the Hamburg-registered barque *Mexico* (a large sailing vessel with 2 square-rigged masts and a fore-and-aft rigged mizzenmast) was driven aground off Southport in the Ribble Estuary by a north westerly gale gusting to force 9. The first lifeboat to respond to the

distress signals was the Lytham lifeboat *Charles Biggs* which launched about 2200 hours. The St Annes lifeboat *Laura Janet* launched with 13 crew about 2225 hours followed by the Southport lifeboat *Eliza Fernley* which launched from Ainsdale with 16 crew shortly after 2300 hours. The wind combined with the ebb tide to create a wicked sea in the shallow waters. Conditions were made worse by rain, sleet and snow that winter night and none of the lifeboats knew what the others were doing.

After nearly capsizing and with some oars broken, the *Charles Biggs* reached the *Mexico* and succeeded in taking off all 12 crew sometime after midnight and returned safely to Lytham at 0315 in the morning. The *Eliza Fernley* tried to approach the *Mexico* but was caught by a huge breaking wave and capsized. Some crew managed to stay with the boat which couldn't be righted as the



**MAIN:** The RNLI Severn Class All Weather and the B class Inshore lifeboats at sea. Picture by RNLI/Simon Culliford. **TOP RIGHT:** The former Douglas IoM Tyne Class lifeboat towing a fishing vessel with engine failure in a lumpy sea. Picture by RNLI/Mike Howland. **MIDDLE RIGHT:** Even launching can be a challenge. Picture by RNLI. **ABOVE:** Hovercraft fulfil a special need from Hoylake and Morecambe. Picture by RNLI. **RIGHT:** RNLI Lifeguards place warning flags when needed. This is New Brighton beach. Picture by RNLI/Callum Robinson.





**1 Severn**  
 Length: 17.3m  
 Max speed: 25 knots  
 Range: 250 nmiles  
 Crew: 6-7



**2 Tamar**  
 Length: 16.3m  
 Max speed: 25 knots  
 Range: 250 nmiles  
 Crew: 6-7



**3 Tyne**  
 Length: 14.3m  
 Max speed: 18 knots  
 Range: 240 nmiles  
 Crew: 6



**4 Trent**  
 Length: 14.3m  
 Max speed: 25 knots  
 Range: 250 nmiles  
 Crew: 6



**5 Shannon**  
 Length: 13.6m  
 Max speed: 25 knots  
 Range: 250 nmiles  
 Crew: 6



**6 Mersey**  
 Length: 11.6m  
 Max speed: 17 knots  
 Range: 140 nmiles  
 Crew: 6



**Type B Flood Team**  
 Response: 6hrs  
 Crew: 7  
 Crew endurance: 4 days

**RNLI lifesaving locations**

- All-weather lifeboat station (ALB)
- Inshore lifeboat station (ILB)
- ALB and ILB station
- Lifeguard support centre
- RNLI offices
- △ Flood rescue asset
- RNLI Headquarters
- Lifesaving regions

There are two new divisions which cross regional boundaries. Stations are still supported by the region that they fall inside.



**7 E class**  
 Length: 10.5m  
 Max speed: 40 knots  
 Endurance: 4hrs at max speed  
 Crew: 3-4



**8 B class (Atlantic 75, 85)**  
 Length: 7.4-8.5m  
 Max speed: 32-35 knots  
 Endurance: 2.5hrs at max speed  
 Crew: 3-4



**9 D class**  
 Length: 5m  
 Max speed: 25 knots  
 Endurance: 3hrs at max speed  
 Crew: 2-3



**10 Hovercraft**  
 Length: 8m  
 Max speed: 30 knots  
 Endurance: 3hrs at max speed  
 Crew: 2-4



**11 Inshore rescue boat**  
 Length: 3.9m  
 Max speed: 26 knots  
 Endurance: 2hrs at max speed  
 Crew: 2



**12 Rescue watercraft**  
 Length: 3.3m  
 Max speed: 48 knots  
 Endurance: 1.5hrs at max speed  
 Crew: 1-2



**The Hoylake Shannon Class Lifeboat helps with much-needed fundraising. Picture by RNLI/Sian Holmes.**

anchor was hanging below. 11 of the crew died at sea. 3 were found alive by search parties but 2 of them died quickly and the last died later in hospital of what we now call hypothermia. Only 2 of the crew of the *Eliza Fernley* survived.

Many hours passed with no sign of the St Annes lifeboat *Laura Janet* so the *Charles Biggs* launched again in rough seas at 1030 hours that morning. At 1300 hours that day the capsized *Laura Janet* was found off Birkdale by a shore party. All her 13 crew were lost.

27 lifeboatmen died that terrible night to save 12 strangers. 16 women were widowed and 50 children lost their fathers. This tragedy so touched the heart of the nation that donations flowed and kept flowing. Queen Victoria and the German Kaiser were among many who provided money for the bereaved.



**The Lytham St Annes Shannon Class Lifeboat Barbara Anne at sea. Picture by Martin Fish of Lower Darwen.**

The *Mexico* rescue was the worst disaster suffered by the RNLI but there have been many others. During the Great Storm of November 1901 the lifeboat *Beauchamp* from Caister in Norfolk responded to distress flares from a stricken vessel but capsized herself in the heavy swell and was washed ashore. 9 died and only 2 survived. In April 1947 the lifeboat *Edward, Prince of Wales* from Mumbles in South Wales was launched to assist a vessel broken into 3 parts in gale conditions but was herself overwhelmed by the sea with the loss of all 8 of her crew. As recently as December 1981 the lifeboat *Solomon Brown* from Penlee in Cornwall launched to assist the *Union Star* after its engines failed in heavy seas. After the lifeboat had rescued 4 people both vessels were lost with all hands. In all, 16 people

died including all 8 volunteer lifeboatmen. More than 600 people have lost their lives in the service of the RNLI.

Lifeboats in the 1800s were large rowing boats. Since then they have become bigger and better and designed for all-weather use or inshore use with shallow draughts. The modern RNLI serves Great Britain, Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man in 6 ways –



**The Mexico rescue by the Charles Biggs is remembered in the Lytham station. Picture by Andrew Harris**

- All Weather Lifeboats are big, powerful and self-righting. There are currently 6 types – the Severn, Tamar, Trent, Shannon, Mersey and the Tyne which is now being phased out. They all have an enclosed wheelhouse and space below for survivors. The RNLI aim to provide a 25-knot lifeboat to every



**The Lifeboat Station at St Annes showing the launching tractor with the Shannon Class lifeboat behind. Picture by Andrew Harris**



**ABOVE: The crew room at St Annes. All-weather rescues start here. Picture by Andrew Harris.**



**LEFT: The arrival of the historic 1901 lifeboat Chapman at the Lytham Heritage Group's Lifeboat Museum on Lytham Green. Picture by RNLI/ David Forshaw.**

all-weather crew and is constructing an All-Weather Lifeboat Centre at its base in Poole, Dorset. It has just become fully operational and will produce 6 Shannon-class lifeboats a year to achieve an annual saving of £3million.

- Inshore Lifeboats are able to operate in shallow coastal waters and rivers as they are smaller with little draught. The RNLI has had an Inshore Lifeboat Centre at Cowes in the Isle of Wight since the 1960s. It has produced more than 1600 boats since then in 2 main types – Rigid Inflatable Boats or RIBs capable of

20-40 knots and inflatables.

- The RNLI has specialist craft for special roles. These include hovercraft for places like Morecambe Bay where it is vital to operate over sea and sand plus Rescue Watercraft which is the RNLI name for jet skis – ideal for reaching swimmers swept away from beaches by currents.

- Our changing climate is increasing the risk of flooding. The RNLI response is to have a 100 Flood Rescue volunteers with boats, support transport and equipment located at 6 centres. The nearest to the north west is at Rhyl

in North Wales. About 50 flood rescue volunteers can be deployed world-wide.

- 1,500 RNLI Lifeguards are located at 249 beaches around the UK and Channel Islands. Each year they help about 24,000 people and cope with more than 15,500 incidents. They are funded by local authorities but trained and equipped by the RNLI.

- The RNLI also promotes safety by education. Something like 6,000 children a week are taught about sea and beach safety by education volunteers – and more than 800 children a week receive training.

Other RNLI statistics are impressive. It operates from 238 coastal and 8 inland lifeboats stations in the Britain Isles and Ireland. It has 162 All-weather Lifeboats, 253 Inshore Lifeboats. In 2017 – the latest year for such statistics – lifeboats were launched on 8,436 occasions and aided 8,072 people.



**ABOVE: The Lytham St Annes Lifeboat Station: the people and the boats. Picture by Martin Fish of Lower Darwen.**

On average 22 people were helped each day.

95% of RNLI people are unpaid volunteers. There are 4,966 male and female volunteer lifeboat crew, 1,217 volunteer shore crew and more than 23,000 volunteer community fundraisers. 3,677 people left gifts in their wills in 2017 and RNLI runners ran more than 3,200 miles in the London Marathon and the Great North Run.

There are 11 RNLI lifeboat stations in our region – Barrow, Blackpool, Fleetwood, Hoylake, Lytham St Annes, Morecambe, New Brighton, Silloth, St Bees, West Kirby and Workington – plus 2 Lifeguard Support Centres. They all do amazing work but your columnist visited the Lytham St Annes station to provide a focus on the people and equipment of a lifeboat station and the challenge they both face. 133 years ago 2 of the lifeboats they had then launched to assist the *Mexico* and the station now has a Shannon All-weather Lifeboat and a D Class inshore Lifeboat. The station has 2 shops and a museum – operated by the Lytham Heritage Group – dedicated in part to the history of the local lifeboats. The Lytham St Annes lifeboat station is special in some ways and typical in others.

David Forshaw is the Press Officer for the Lytham and St Annes Lifeboat Station. The title of his books – published in 1992 and 2006 – is “On

*Those Infernal Ribble Banks*” which says it all. The sand banks and channels in the Ribble Estuary keep changing and are a trap for the unwary. The Gut Channel was created by training walls and perches so that ships could sail safely through the estuary to access the Port of Preston – opened in 1892 – about 10 miles up the tidal River Ribble. For many years this channel silted up so a hole was pierced in the wall and vessels sailed a dog-leg route from the offshore Gut Buoy. For unknown reasons this channel has become self-scouring again. Such are the mysteries of the Ribble Estuary.

The Coxswain of the Lytham and St Annes Shannon Class All Weather Lifeboat *Barbara Anne* is Gary Bird. He and his crew must have a detailed and up to date knowledge of the perils of the estuary. Rescues in very shallow waters and the river can be undertaken by the station’s D Class Inshore Lifeboat *MOAM*. Both lifeboats are pictured with the station’s volunteers.

For 19 years the station had the honour of operating the Mersey class lifeboat *Her Majesty the Queen*. She was replaced by the £2.2million Shannon class *Barbara Anne* last year. The new boat is larger, faster and more manoeuvrable than the Mersey class so has the potential to save more lives – and is safer for the crew. With the new water jet drive replacing conventional propellers and rudders, she is ideal for

the relatively shallow waters around the Ribble Estuary.

Since being founded in 1851 the Lytham St Annes lifeboats have – up to last year - been launched on 1,448 occasions, saved 482 lives and had 18 awards for gallantry. After saving life, safety and training their biggest challenge is fundraising. Digby Moulden - the Fundraising Chairman for the station and a crew member – concludes with an appeal. Please visit [www.lythamlifeboats.co.uk](http://www.lythamlifeboats.co.uk) for news and information about their events, shops, lottery and ways to donate. For the RNLI website visit [www.rnli.org](http://www.rnli.org). All our 11 lifeboat stations deserve your support.



**Andrew Harris – [www.andreweharris.co.uk](http://www.andreweharris.co.uk) – gratefully acknowledges the help provided by the RNLI Regional Press Officer Danielle**

**Rush and the Lytham St Annes Lifeboat Press Officer David Forshaw – and his splendid book - in the preparation of this article which is dedicated to Mr Allan Williams, the Chairman of the Lytham St Annes Lifeboat Station, who passed away on the 13th February after 42 years of service with the RNLI.**