

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# The buildings that help save lives at risk

Almost everyone in the island will be familiar with, and proud of, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. They put their own lives at risk to save others and all those who support the seagoing crew, be they shore-launching helpers or fundraisers. This week, **Dave Martin** looks at the slightly less well-known role and evolving lives of the actual lifeboat stations – once just a shelter for the lifeboat, now much more.

**S**eaferers have selflessly tried to save the lives of others, long before any formalised life-saving service was conceived.

They often used their own, or any near-by, craft to effect a rescue, such as when in December 1822 HM Brig 'Racehorse' struck the southern tip of Langness and started to break up.

One shore boat made five trips to the Brig and back to land. After collecting the last of the Racehorse's crew, the rescuing small boat was swamped as she approached the shore.

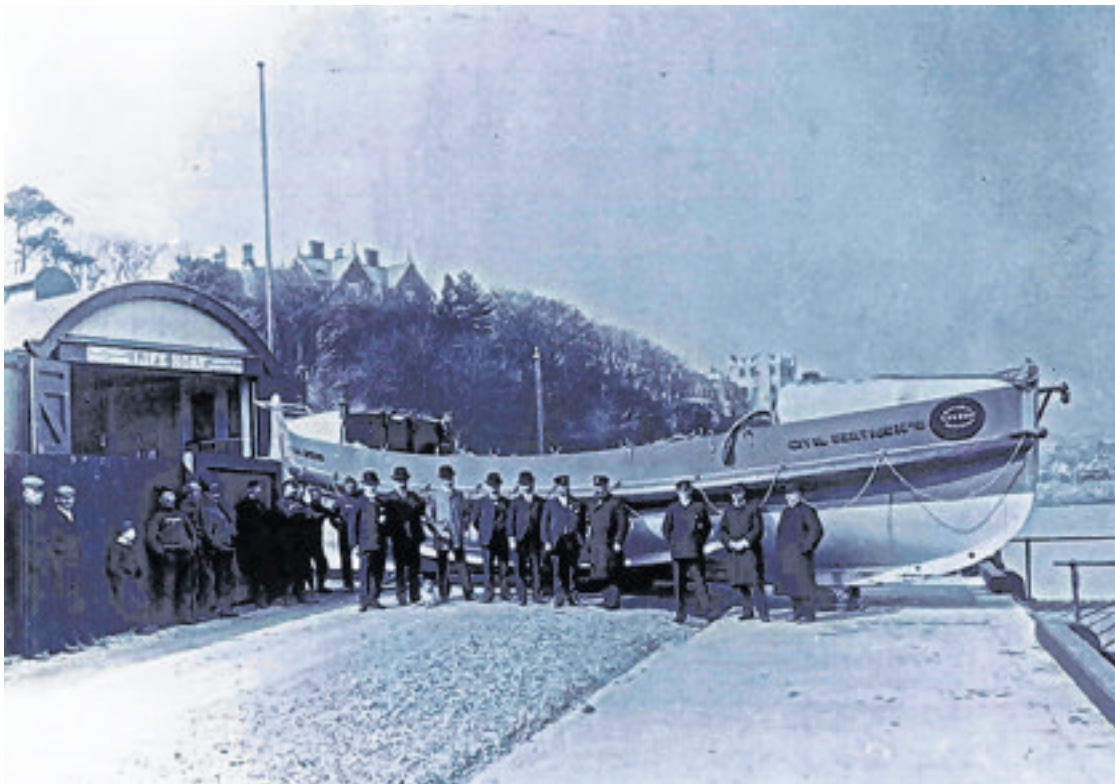
Six members of the Racehorse crew and three of the Castletown rescuers perished; but 100 lives had been saved by their actions.

This tragedy convinced Sir William Hillary that there was an implicit responsibility on society to ensure that those who answer the call of that greater commitment should be amply protected, and ultimately led to the founding of the National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck, later renamed in 1854 the Royal National Lifeboat Institution – the 'RNLI'.

### LIFEBOATS AND BOATHOUSES

The RNLI has always striven to get to casualties in the shortest possible time and with the minimum risk to the volunteer crew.

Small boats used by



The 1896 Douglas boathouse to the left and slipway to the right of the picture – note Sir William Hillary's Fort Anne in the background

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coastal fishermen around the world evolve to match the local conditions. But taking small boats out on errands of mercy in severe weather did at times lead to losses and in the late 1700s various boatbuilders started to experiment with ways to make 'unsinkable' life-saving

boats. Often in response to a local tragedy, there might be a philanthropic donation or a community might raise funds for an 'improved' life-saving boat.

Very few of these locally-purchased boats were housed, most just lay at the head of a beach and as memories and enthusiasm faded, so the boat deteriorated – subject both to ravages of weather and seams drying-out through being seldom launched.

Once founded, the RNLI didn't only provide lifeboats, it tried to ensure the crew were trained and the lifeboats housed and maintained.

The first dedicated structures associated with lifeboat stations were boathouses to protect the lifeboats, then slipways were added to facilitate safe and speedy launching. Especially dur-

ing the 20th century, there were improvements such as self-righting in the event of a capsize, and motorisation allowing lifeboats a greater radius and ability to work to windward; more recently high-speed inshore lifeboats (ILBs) have augmented the conventional all-weather lifeboats (ALBs).

Many of those improvements meant an increase in lifeboat size which neces-

sitated bigger boathouses. Launching facilities were also improved and facilities were added for the volunteer crew – not only their equipment but also for training and welfare.

### LAUNCHING AND RECOVERY

All the early lifeboats were either launched straight off the beach, or via one of the growing number of slipways in and around harbours.

Although occasionally if a normally beach-launched boat such as that at Ramsey was needed in a hurry, the boat was sometimes just slid off the quayside into the water below.

The lifeboats were taken to a beach or other suitable access, or down a slipway, on a launching carriage.

The carriage usually had single big-wheeled axle in the middle and a smaller steerable bogie at one or both ends.

These carriages tended to sink if the carriage was taken across a sandy beach, such as that at Ramsey, leading to the addition of flap-treads around the rim of the wheels. In the modern era, even though often tracked to spread the weight, rather than wheeled, it is still known as the carriage.

At some stations, such as Peel, the boathouse was sufficiently close to the slipway that she could be pulled out and turned for launching by sheer manpower and it was common that when the m-aroons went up for a launch, sufficient able-bodied help was available to at least start getting the boat out even before horses had been brought down – but those horses were inevitably needed to recover the boat up the slipway or beach.

Carriage-launching did have one advantage – the boat could be taken elsewhere to launch.

For example in 1888 when the schooner Lyra was wrecked on the Carrick, both Castletown and Port Erin lifeboats were horse-drawn to be launched in Bay-ny-Carrickey.

With general mechanisation, and the demands of the Great War, horse teams became scarce, so motor lorries and then tractors began to be used in their place.

As boats became bigger and in order to reduce the time from the boathouse to getting under way on the water, where possible boathouses were built around the



When the RNLI lifeboat station moved to the harbour, Douglas Council purchased the Harris Promenade lifeboat house and site and converted them into a shelter for visitors

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The current ingenious mechanism to safely launch and recover the current Port Erin fast ILB

Callum Qualtrough/RNLI



The second Castletown lifeboat house, now sympathetically converted to a dwelling



Port Erin's first lifeboat house in 1906

Ballahane collection

top of a dedicated slipway (such as at Douglas and later Port Erin) and the carriage dispensed with – the lifeboat sliding down a special ‘keelway’ in the centre of the slipway.

Alternatively, if there is a sufficiently sheltered berth with deep water at all states of tide, then the lifeboat can be kept afloat, as now at Port St Mary.

**MANX LIFEBOAT STATIONS**  
Going clockwise round the coast:

● Douglas - the first dedicated lifeboat was purchased in 1802 by the Duke of Atholl.

She was kept afloat in the harbour but broke from her moorings in a south east gale and was dashed to pieces at Douglas Head.

Following the establishment of the Institution, Sir William Hillary procured one of its first lifeboats for Douglas in 1825; it was initially kept on the beach and then at a shipyard at the head of the beach.

The first dedicated life-

boat house was a traditional stone-built building located on the shore at Harris Promenade, roughly in line with where the Sefton now stands.

Launching across the shelving beach in storms was dangerous, not only for the crew – in 1891 a shore helper was injured whilst launching the lifeboat on service and later died from the effects of his injury.

In 1896, to accommodate the new lifeboat ‘Civil Service no. 6’, a new station was built

to the designs of local architect William John Rennison.

It was in two parts – a boathouse on the landward side of the road which leads to the Battery Pier, and a steep slipway set against the harbour wall on the other side of the road.

To launch, the lifeboat – which weighed 11 tons – had to be pulled across the road on a trolley and then lined up with the slipway. When she returned from service it took six pairs of horses to pull her back up.



The first Castletown lifeboat house

F. Cowin

In 1924 a new lifeboat house (the present one) was opened almost directly opposite the 1896 building, with the boathouse integrated into the top of the slip, so the boat was always ready for a swift launch. In 1988 the boathouse was adapted to accommodate the new Tyne class lifeboat.

● Castletown – the architect Thomas Brine (who also designed the two Herring Towers) was a member of the Castletown Committee of the Royal National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck.

The Castletown Committee at their meeting in May 1826 instructed: ‘That a shed be built in the situation already marked out, and now approved of by the Lieut-Governor; and also that a Truck be constructed under the direction of Mr Brine’.

That Lifeboat House abutted the Castle Gate House to the north of the ‘Glue Pot’, and was later demolished and replaced with one on the outer harbour. In 1896 a new boathouse and slipway were built outside the harbour, but closed in 1922 when Port St Mary got its first motor lifeboat.

● Port St Mary – a station was established by the Institution in 1896 in view of the number of shipwrecks in the area.

A lifeboat house (same design as new Castletown) was built, with doors at both ends so the boat could be launched down the dedicated lifeboat slipway over the rocks into the harbour, or taken elsewhere if needed.

As lifeboat sizes grew, and to remove problems with lack of water in front of the lifeboat slip, in 1950 the switch was made to keeping the new Watson-class lifeboat afloat; the boathouse does now house a lifeboat again – a D-class inshore lifeboat.

● Port Erin – station established 1883, first lifeboat house constructed in 1884 at a cost of £250. In 1900 a slipway was constructed at approximate cost of £1,000.



The new boathouse at Peel under construction in 1992, and inset the 2019 extension

John Hall/RNLI

In 1925 a new boathouse and direct-launching slipway was built, which in its day was reputed to be one of the steepest in the RNLI.

In 1992, in a switch of roles with Peel, the all-weather lifeboat was withdrawn, and replaced by a fast Atlantic 21 inshore lifeboat. In 2006, the RNLI spent £304,408 on further work to accommodate and launch the new Atlantic 85 class lifeboat.

● Peel – originally established in 1828 (without a boathouse) then re-established in 1885 with a dedicated lifeboat house under the walls of Peel Castle.

In 1972 the ALB was replaced by a faster Atlantic ILB, but in 1990 it was decided to reinstate an all-weather lifeboat to deal with conditions on the west coast, in conjunction with Port Erin's switch to a fast ILB.

The new Mersey class lifeboat was too big for the existing boathouse which was dismantled and a new portal-frame building erected, clad in the sandstone that had been saved from the 1885 building.

In 2019 Peel was allocated a new faster and more manoeuvrable Shannon class lifeboat, which required improvements to the slipway and a longer boathouse – that work is now almost complete with an extension at the seaward end.



● Ramsey – first RNLI boathouse built in 1869 at a cost of £145.

In 1889 a new, larger, lifeboat forwarded to the station; benefactors Mr and Mrs Norbury paid for a new lifeboat house, with a crew reading room on the first floor (which became the heart of not just the crew but a community) and accommodation for the coxswain on the second floor.

Unfortunately as at Peel, when Ramsey was allocated a new Mersey class lifeboat in 1991, the original ‘Norbury’ boathouse was too small so it was demolished and the ‘New Norbury’ boathouse was erected on the site of the old one.

So, whilst the iconic Tower of Refuge may be the best-known Manx building or structure associated with saving lives at sea, and maybe the only one which can actually save lives by itself, the actual lifeboat stations play a massive role in helping the RNLI's volunteers save lives in our waters.

Further information on the work of the RNLI can be found at [www.rnli.org](http://www.rnli.org)



Ramsey's first RNLI lifeboat, the 'Two Sisters', outside the first boathouse

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