



Weston's Lifeboats

A Lifeboat Service?

In the early 1800s there were about 1,800 shipwrecks a year around our coasts. If you were shipwrecked, you were on your own. Many sailors didn't even learn to swim, believing that if you ended up in the water it was God's will whether you survived or drowned.

Rescue relied on a number of factors. You had a chance if someone saw your ship in trouble from the shore, if locals were prepared to help and if they could get a boat in the water. Many people were not so lucky.

One man, Sir William Hillary, refused to sit by and watch people drown. He grew up on the Isle of Man and knew the treacherous nature of the sea. He witnessed dozens of shipwrecks around the Manx coast and saved many lives with the help of locals.

In 1823 he started a campaign to set up a lifeboat service. This should be '... a large body of men ... in constant readiness to risk their own lives for the preservation of those whom they have never known or seen, perhaps of another nation, merely because they are fellow creatures in extreme peril.'

Hillary first requested help from the British Navy to form a national lifeboat service.

The Navy refused, so in 1824 Hillary resorted to plan B. He focussed his campaign on public spirited citizens in London society. The movement gained Royal approval from George IV and, when Prime Minister Robert Jenkinson agreed to be President, success was guaranteed.

The National Institution for the Preservation of Lives and Property from Shipwreck was established that year. On 5 October 1854, the Institution's name was changed to the Royal National Lifeboat Institution – the RNLI – as it is known today.

The RNLI in Weston

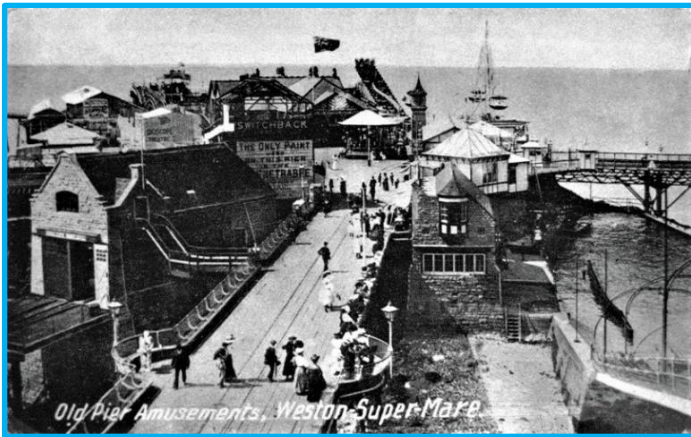
Weston has not always had an operational lifeboat station. The extreme tidal range of the Bristol Channel made it difficult for the RNLI to find a site from which a lifeboat could be launched at all times. In 1882 they installed crane-like devices called davits on Birnbeck Pier. The town's first rescue craft, *The William James Holt* could be dropped from these like a ship's lifeboat into the water below. But this did not solve the problem.

Matters were improved when a 30 metre slipway was created in 1889, along with a new lifeboat house on the north east side of Birnbeck Island.



Launching Weston's first lifeboat 'The William James Holt' from the 1889 boathouse © Geof Sheppard

The delivery of a new lifeboat further improved safety, as did the opening of the next lifeboat house in 1902. This was on the south east side of the island. It required the construction of the longest lifeboat slipway in England, measuring 112 metres (122 yards).



Birnbeck Pier, c. 1910. On the left is the 1902 boathouse © Geof Sheppard

Weston operated both an off-shore and in-shore lifeboat until 1966. On 12 March 1969 the lifeboat, Calouste Gulbenkian, was away for servicing when the temporary lifeboat, the Rachel and Mary Evans, broke away from a mooring off the pier. It was wrecked on Birnbeck Island.

The lifeboat station remained operational on Birnbeck Pier until 2013. The crumbling pier made access to the boathouse increasingly dangerous. Despite attempts to provide a safer route for their volunteers the RNLI was finally forced to move to a new (temporary) shore base at Knightstone Harbour.



The current lifeboats, B-769 Coventry and Warwickshire (left) and D-696 Anna Stock (right) © Geof Sheppard

The new portable HQ is on the promenade next to the Marine Lake; the lifeboat can be launched using the harbour slipway. But it is only possible to launch the larger lifeboat for 2 hours either side of high tide.

To overcome this, the RNLI plans to establish a permanent base in a former restaurant overlooking the lake. From there they hope to construct a slipway giving better access to The Severn Estuary.

Events involving Weston lifeboats

Weston's first lifeboat served for seven years but was only involved in two rescues. One of these involved taking 40 passengers off the SS Welsh Prince, which got into difficulties after leaving Birnbeck Pier on 22 September 1884.

The lifeboats that were stationed during the 51 years from 1882 to 1933 were called out 12 times and rescued 55 people. Over the next 36 years, as more people holidayed at the seaside, our lifeboats were called out 104 times and rescued 89 people.

Weston-super-Mare is the busiest RNLI station on the south side of the Bristol Channel. Many people (and one dog) have been rescued at great personal risk by Weston's volunteers.

Late in the evening of 13 September 1975 Inshore Lifeboat A-504 was launched into a Force 9 gale. Red distress flares had been seen off Brean Down. The crew found a wrecked motor boat below the headland, with people both in the water and on the cliff above. An anchor was dropped, the motors were lifted out of the water, and the lifeboat used the tide to bring it as close as possible to the shore. The people were then hauled through the water attached to a safety line. Helmsman Julian Morris was awarded an RNLI Bronze Medal for his outstanding seamanship, great skill and tremendous courage.

On the afternoon of 20 July 1986 Helmsman Morris took the lifeboat to Brean Down to rescue two young boys trapped by the tide, but Morris could only get to within 37 m of the shore. Life boatman Richard Spindler swam through the 1.5 m high surf several times to take lifejackets to the boys and bring them to safety. For his bravery he was awarded the RNLI's 'Thanks on Velum'.



Weston-super-Mare
Town Council