

THE craft and Lifeboats.

Freemasonry's connection with the RNLI goes back as far as 1871 when the first Masonic lifeboat was purchased at the institution of the Lodge of Faith 147 who had raised £260.00 (£12,203.00 today) and petitioned Grand Lodge via Wbro. J R Stebbing deputy provincial grand master of Hampshire to sanction the extra funding for a lifeboat. The existing boat at North Berwick was due to be replaced due to decay thus presenting the Grand Lodge with an opportunity to provide the lifeboat "Freemasons" a 30 foot long 10 double banked oars state of the art vessel. Added to this was the provision of a lifeboat carriage, she was launched in 1871 and continued in service until 1887 having been launched five times and saving ten lives.

Continuing the tradition is this year's presentation by the Lodge of Harmony number 255 of "Valerie Wilson" to the Lifeboat station at Newquay. This new craft is the 12th. Lifeboat paid for by English Freemasons. The Lodge of Harmony and the chapter of Isis raised the complete funding for the purchase of a new prototype 'D' class inshore rescue boat complete with onboard kit as well as pagers for the station crews. The craft was founded in memory of the late wife of Very Worshipful brother Leslie Wilson DPGM of Middlesex who had spent a happy part of her early youth in Cornwall. Of course substantial individual cash donations from Lodges are still continuing to be made to the RNLI in order to assist them to continue their voluntary work which receives no government funding whatsoever.

In 1876 The Prince of Wales returned safely from his Indian Travels and the Grand Lodge at its Quarterly communication in the June of that year moved the following resolution "That this Grand Lodge desires to return its humble and hearty thanks to the Almighty Architect of the Universe for the safe return to his native land of their beloved Grand Master, His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales..."

A committee was formed to deal with this proposal and reported in the October that "The Sum of £4,000. (Approx £187k today) be voted to the Royal National Lifeboats Institution for the purpose of founding two life boat stations in perpetuity..." The committee had a number of issues to deal with, they desired that the lifeboats be placed in area not already covered by the service, that the location for the stations must prove practicable for efficient operation together with the availability of enough personnel to run the stations. The village of Clacton on Sea had an immense expanse of quicksand in front of it and was subject to regular shipwrecks, the next location was found on the rock bound coast of Devon Hope Cove commanded the storm beaten coast of the west and also had excellent communication links with the Busy lifeboat station at Salcombe. The craft were to be known as "Albert Edward" and "Alexandra" So in June 1878 the official Launching and dedication of "Alexandra" took place at Kingsbridge Devon presided over by the REV J Huyshe PGM watched by some 4,000 spectators. A month later in Clacton the "Albert Edward" was officially launched by the DPGM Lord Skelmersdale to an even larger audience. "Albert Edward" had already proved its value as early on in the morning of the 23rd. May only a few weeks after it had been delivered to the station it was launched in anger. The brig "Garland" on a voyage from Shields to London ran aground on the Gunfleet sands and was seen to be breaking up and filling with water. The Albert Edward took three hours to reach the stricken vessel and rescue the six men and three-boy crew.

A Grand Lodge report of March 1884 contained the following item “ That the Sum of 50 Guineas (£3,056.00 today) be granted to the family of the late James Cross and a similar sum to the family of Thomas Cattermole, two of the crew of the “ Albert Edward” Lifeboat at Clacton on Sea, which boat was presented to the National Life Boat Institution by Grand Lodge. These two men, after having assisted, the first in saving 116 and the second 33 lives having lost their own in the discharge of their duty on the night of the 23rd January last, whilst in their boat endeavouring to rescue the crew of a vessel in Distress, Leaving their families consisting of a widow and Six children and a widow and three children entirely destitute”. A subscription had also been raised locally for these poor unfortunates and the Grand Master presented medals to the crew of the lifeboat.

Freemasons do not only contribute their money to the RNLI but many stations have freemasons among the crews as I discovered when I visited the Southend on Sea Lifeboat station in Essex this summer. This station is peculiar owing to the fact that it is the only one to have three craft and two launch stations, the first one on the shore and the second is actually one mile out to sea! For those who do not know, the Pier at Southend is the worlds longest and the station is right at the end of it.

Of the 80 plus members of the on and offshore crew I found at least three Freemasons. One is a member of the boat crew whose day job is as a supermarket manager, Wbro. Michael Patterson (Evening Star lodge) after 22 years in the networking industry has recently joined as the station training co-ordinator and my Guide Wbro. Jim Mackie is the local press officer for the area. Jim is well known by the freemasons in Southend, as he is a member of St Margaret’s lodge as well as other degrees, his day job was as the foreshore officer for the borough. He was in charge of a seven-mile stretch of the coast and the pier ensuring that local safety byelaws were met. Following his retirement Jim decided to join the shore crew of the lifeboat station and keep his connection with the pier. I assumed that as the pier was the longest in the world that all the crewmembers must be budding Linford Christie’s, it is a long haul to get to the lifeboats when the tide is out. However all was revealed in the transport department, Jim showed me a range of retired Post office cycles as well as the little yellow emergency bus complete with blue lights and sirens for use on the pier. The two craft at the end of the pier can be launched fully manned by a hoist designed to Lloyds of London specifications, Mostly the crews are called out to assist broken down jet skiers or Windsurfers who have been blown out to sea and got caught by the changing winds. There had not been any callouts for two weeks on the day I attended so I was treated to a man over board rescue drill by the team, but true to form the following day the three craft were called out all day long to assist a fleet of racing ships which had been caught by gales. Some of the boats’ masts had broken others had turned over it was a hectic day for these volunteers. Last year some 7,365 people were rescued and in addition the beach rescue teams were called out to 6,528 incidents with 22 lives being saved. The Masonic Lifeboats have launched 652 times and saved in excess of 1037 lives during the 132-year connection between the RNLI and the Craft. For more information on the life boat service and how your lodge can help please contact/ Royal National Lifeboat Institution. West Quay Road. Poole. Dorset BH15 1HZ. Telephone 01202 663000. www.lifeboats.org.uk

Sources.

The Masonic Illustrated. David Peabody photo collection. Freemasonry and Lifeboats Wbro. F E Dean. RNLI Southend Station Press office.