

Bill Blades - Fishermen versus Fireman, Charity Football match on Boxing Day, Scarborough.**Interview and transcription by Huw Roberts.**

130 years ago, in November 1893. The Scarborough fishing vessel Evelyn and Maud was caught in a terrible storm off the Yorkshire coast. Two weeks later in December 1893 the ship's lifebuoy was found washed up at Spurn Point at the mouth of the Humber. It bore these words which had been hurriedly written on it. "Ship going down. Sinking fast. Evelyn and Maud". Five lives were lost in that incident. Five widows were left behind. Thirteen children were made fatherless. All within a few weeks of Christmas, a charity football match was organised to raise money for the families. The football match has been played almost every year since. Today I'm talking to Bill Blades, who is the current organiser of that Fishermen versus Fireman charity football match.

Bill, can you tell us a little bit more about that sad event and the first charity football match that was played?

Yes I can. The Evelyn and Maud was only fishing boat in the Scarborough fishing fleet that didn't get back to harbour during that storm. Following the loss of the fishermen's lives, the fishing community decided to get some money together for the widows and the orphans. So they set up the fishermen and firemen's charity and organised a football match to play on Boxing Day which was on the beach and it was to be played between the fisherman, the lads who catch the fish on the boats and the firemen who stoked the boilers below deck. It has been played every ever since, except under certain circumstances. The original match made around £10 or £11, which was a lot of money in those days and it made quite a big difference for the families. That's why it was repeated and it has gone on and on and become a local tradition and we will help to keep it going on and as long as we can.

Now, as I understand it, over the subsequent years for the football match, there have been some interesting rules introduced. Tell us a little bit about those.

Yes, you can have as many a-side as want to play, but to play in the game, you must wear a top hat and, as the game goes on, if your top hat falls off you get free kick against you and basically that's the only rule. There can be kicking,

gouging and pushing, you name it going on and the referee can lose control but it's when the top hat comes off that's the only time when you'll get a free kick against you.

And what's the role that fancy dress plays in the match?

The players wear fancy dress based on red for the firemen and white for fishermen but the top hat must be worn and those colours have been the same ever since it started.

Has the match always been played on the beach?

Nearly. A couple of years after it started, it went up to North Marine Road and was played on the cricket ground site but they got it back on to the beach because it felt more local to the fishing community and more people came down to support it.

What role does the tide play when it's actually coming in onto the beach?

Well we don't cancel it because the tide's too high and luckily there's always about 30-40 yards of beach to play on. Sometimes we get quite a big football pitch and sometimes we get the smallest pitch in the world. But we always play it and if the tide's up it's a lot easier to chuck the players in the sea after the game. You don't have to run so far. There was one year the match was played in dense fog and we lit flares behind the goal so people could see.

And from what I've seen over the years there are very few people who don't seem to end up in the water.

On your first year if you go down injured and you're like these professional footballers who just lie about it, you'll get picked up and thrown in the sea and that usually ends in making a miraculous recovery with the cold water.

So you say it's being played almost every year. On what occasions was it not played?

In World War II for two years, the military, commandeered the beach to watch and safeguard the country and the other was for one year for COVID, which we felt it was not appropriate to do it with the country in lockdown.

And the method of collecting the charity money. Tell us a little bit about that.

Luckily we've got a comic band and all the players meet at Couplands Corner in the town centre and the band players have tins and buckets to collect cash in and as they walk down through the town they collect as they go. Then the band go round the pubs and they play in all those pubs and they get money from the customers in the pubs and then they play on the foreshore and we have collectors on the sea front. Then there's the mile of pennies. We place the first penny outside the lifeboat house and try to get as far along the pavement as we can. On a good year we can get as far as Corrigans. That's a good method, we can get as much as £200 on a good day.

Of course, the football match is not the only entertainment on that day and you've just referred to the comic band. What else takes place as part of the Boxing Day festivities?

We have the Raft Race which the Scarborough Sub-Aqua Club organise for us and they give any monies they collect to our fund That's held on the Golden Ball pier and it's being going on for about 30 years and it's a good event and it's quite funny because you can go down and take eggs and flour bombs and use them to bomb the crews and they enjoy themselves. Again it's a good money spinner on the day.

And the money that's collected, of course in those first two years, I think it went to the families that were affected at that time. Who does it go to now?

It still goes to people in the fishing community specially if an old fisherman dies and the wife is in need. We give 120 thirty pound vouchers every year to different families so they can have some money to spend at Christmas. The voucher will go to places in the market now. In the olden days, there used to be things like coal vouchers because everybody had coal fires in those days and you could use these with the coal merchants and buy a bag of coal, but now it's just limited to veg, meat and, you know, sweets and things as time has changed. Then we go down after Christmas and pay all the holders of the vouchers that have accumulated.

Of course there is a trophy awarded to the winners of that football match. Tell us a little bit about that.

It's a prestige trophy. There was a tinsmith in Quay St and he made it specially to look like a solid Gold Cup and that's played for every year and it is a great trophy. It usually gets filled up with whatever drink is available at the time, you know the man of the match people, they put in all of their bottles of rum and things. All the players have a drink of that and then they take it down the pubs and fill it up and it's just a long mad pub crawl after that.

There aren't that many stokers around these days. Who plays for the stokers side?

There's still a lot of fishing communities lads who play but there's also a lot from the local football teams as things have progressed. The fishermen have got some good players and have formed the West Pier Football Club. So we've got some of the West Pier lads to play and there's a bit of rivalry with the other teams so it adds a bit of spice to it. They're all mates together and at the end of the day they all go for a massive pub crawl together and enjoy yourselves.

So we're 130 since the first match. How do you see the future for the charity match? Is it going to continue forever?

Yes it is. Myself and Liz and Fred Normandale, been running the committee for the last few years and we've got a lot of younger lads wanting to come in now, so we're going to step back a bit and let them lads take over and we've been showing them over the last two or three years what goes on, how we organise raffles, how to organise presentation night and everything and we now feel they've got there and they're all fishing families, Rowleys, Sheaders and Jenkinsons and they're going to hopefully step in for us and we'll know it in good hands and we can let them get on with it and hopefully be successful as we have.

Bill I'd like to thank you for ensuring that this tradition has carried on to this day and I'm very pleased to hear that the young people are coming in to carry on that tradition. And thank you for talking to me today.

Interview with Bill Blades

Interviewer and transcriber: Huw Roberts - September 2023.