

**Scarborough Sea Wall Heritage Trail Project.
John Porter Interview in February 2024. – The Scarborough Lifeboat Service.**

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Today I'm talking to John Porter. John is the Visitor and Education Officer for the RNLI in Scarborough. He spent 35 years in active service with the lifeboat, during which time he was involved in the saving of 175 lives in peril. The first Scarborough lifeboat was launched in 1801, 23 years before the RNLI was formed, and 60 years before Scarborough's lifeboat service joined the RNLI. The organisation is very much respected in Scarborough and attracts significant donations locally. I want to learn about its early history and how events have shaped it over the last 220 years.

John, Scarborough was one of the first of the East Coast maritime ports to have a lifeboat. Was there a particular event which prompted the building of Scarborough's first lifeboat, launched in 1801?

Not really. For many centuries people had been going out from Scarborough in their own boats, in their normal sea going gear, to save the lives of those in peril on the sea. In 1800 there was a group of people that were getting together to look at the possibility of getting a purpose built lifeboat for Scarborough. There was a gentleman who had a particular interest, Thomas Hinderwell, he was the leader of this group. They met at Trinity House in Scarborough and they then set up a fundraising event to raise the money to buy a lifeboat for Scarborough. They raised over £200 and, as a result of that, a lifeboat was commissioned. It was built locally to plans by a very well known ship builder, Henry Greathead, and they were his plans that were used to build this boat. This boat came on service in 1801 and from then, the lifeboats in Scarborough provided continuous service with varying boats as the years go on from 1801 to today.

There were a number of maritime tragedies which befell the town in eight in the 1800s. One of these was in 1861 and it was in that year that Scarborough officially joined the RNLI. Can you tell us a little bit about that tragedy and was that the reason why they joined the RNLI in 1961?

I don't think that was the reason. The incident you're talking about was the Coupland. She was a vessel, sailing vessel trying to get into Scarborough harbour and in those days they were propelled entirely by the wind. No engines, they hadn't been invented. She got into trouble and wasn't able to get into the harbour. She was blown across the Bay onto the rocks near the Scarborough Spa. The lifeboat was called out, the Amelia. This one had been provided by the RNLI and this was her first shout. She got into difficulties because of the tremendous breaking waves around the Spa. She was dashed against the rocks and she was completely wrecked. Several of the crew were lost and the people on the Coupland were actually rescued by an organisation called the Rocket Apparatus Team. They fired rockets from the shore to the boat and got the people off in that way. To try and rescue the lifeboat crew, several members of the public went into the sea to try and help. One of them is a chap called Lord Charles Beauclerk. He was a Lord of the Realm. He decided that, instead of, as lots of the Lords and Ladies would do in those days, 'Oh, my man will do that', or 'My servants will do this for me', he decided he'd roll the sleeves up and get involved and help. Unfortunately, he paid the ultimate sacrifice and he lost his life. The crew of the Coupland was saved but we lost two of our lifeboat crew and the boat was never to be seen again. It was completely wrecked.

And when this organisation fired rockets onto the boat, this was presumably to fire a rope out to them.

Yes, they would fire a rocket with a rope and they could then set up a form of Breeches Buoy to bring them back to safety.

The most famous of the Scarborough lifeboat Coxswains was John Owsten.

Indeed.

He came from a long line of fishermen and, who, during his remarkable 41 years with the service, was involved in the rescue of 230 lives in peril. What can you tell us about him?

He was a well known figure. He was a good coxswain, a local fisherman and well respected. His service came to an end when, in 1911, there was an incident, a big sea, and he and another person were washed overboard. Both of them were recovered, but when John was hauled back onto the boat, he was unconscious. He and the other crew member were taken to hospital and both recovered. But he then decided enough is enough and retired.

And, of course, he was at the ripe old age of 68 at that time.

Yes, he was a very, very elderly lifeboatman.

Now I want to go back as well to a significant tragedy in 1836 when the lifeboat had to go out and 10 out of the 14 lifeboatmen drowned when the lifeboat capsized during that rescue attempt. There's an etching of that incident which suggests that it happened quite near to the mouth of the harbour. Is that correct?

Yes, it did, it was quite close in to the shore. It was an ebbing tide and the boat went out and it actually turned end over end throwing a lot of people into the sea. They went into the sea on the seaward side. They were wearing very heavy sea boots which basically filled up and caused 10 of the 14 to drown. Three of them were able to get back onto the boat and one was kept up stuck in the boat and they were brought ashore. One came ashore with the boat and when it was nearly arrived at the shore the others were helped by those who went in from the shore to help. In those days, people were really brave. They would risk their own lives forming human chains to be able to drag people off casualty vessels and you know, they went in, in their own clothes, no specialist clothing, nothing. They were just really, really brave people.

Well over a century later, in 1954, another major loss befell the Scarborough lifeboat service, when most of the crew members were thrown from the boat, again not far from the mouth of the harbour, and three of these, Jack Sheader, second coxswain, John Cammish and signalman Frank Bayes failed to be hauled back into the boat. What exactly happened there?

Well, the lifeboat had been called out. All of the local fishing boats had gone to sea that day, ten of them were out, and the sea conditions were worsening, so the lifeboat was requested to go out, bring them and escort them back into the safety of Scarborough Harbour. So they went out the first time and found one, the Venture, and brought her back into the harbour. They went out again to the others because there were others still out and out of these seven of them were found and escorted back into the harbour, but three were missing. So they went out again to look for them. They searched but in those days, communication was not as it is today and communication between towns wasn't really good. So after a while it was learned that the three missing boats were safe in Whitby Harbour. So at that point the lifeboat was told to return to station, which it did. Coming round the East Pier end, a freak wave hit it, rolled it and three crew were thrown into the water. Two others went in but they were recovered straight away back onto the boat. They were able to restart one of the engines but the other engine couldn't be restarted. It was found out later that some rope had got wrapped around it, so that's why it wouldn't start. The three unfortunately passed away. Every year in Scarborough, on the nearest Sunday to that tragedy, we hold a memorial service at Saint Mary's Church in the Old Town, where we remember the loss of those people and also we remember the loss of all other casualties and crew, people who have given their lives and lost their lives at sea in the Scarborough area.

In regard to those two storms 1836 and 1954, is there anything about the geometry of the area around the harbour entrance that causes particularly rough seas?

It depends on the wind conditions, wave conditions and other weather conditions where you can get some really big seas building up. The position that Scarborough Harbour lies, certain wind directions and tidal conditions makes it difficult or impossible to get into Scarborough Harbour. Whitby, on the other hand, is sited differently. So if you can get into Scarborough Harbour in conditions, you may not be able to get into Whitby, but if you can't get into Whitby Harbour, you can get into Scarborough. The sea can be really, well, it's the cruel sea, and you can get waves and suddenly a massive wave comes and your seamanship is put to the test.

I'd like to come now to more recent times. We see and hear about incidents involving the public who become involved in activities with sometimes little awareness of the risks involved to themselves and others. I'm referring to ski boats, paddle boarding and the like. How has this developed or changed the RNLI's work?

In 1963 we introduced inshore lifeboats. They are fast response boats with a crew of three. They can go onto rocks, pick people off the rocks, pick people off beachland, put people on and then come back out into the sea because they're light, and easy to manoeuvre with the number of crew on board and they are remarkably good in these type of rescues. Over 70% of the RNLI's rescues nationwide are done by the inshore fleet. We've also introduced hovercraft to cover areas of mud flats and we also have on the River Thames, lifeboat stations which are permanently manned to help people when they get into difficulty on the River Thames. They came in following the Marchioness disaster many, many years ago, but the inshore fleet is the workhorse of the RNLI.

I think you've got one or two stories that relate to some of the events, recent events in Scarborough.

Yes, I have. In February 2015, a dog went into the sea. This, unfortunately, is a regular occurrence and, unfortunately, members of the public have an unhappy knack of going into the sea after their dogs. It's something which we say 'Please don't. Please never go in after your dog'. It's always 999 and ask for the Coast Guard. We will then go out and we will rescue. Nationwide we rescue over 200 animals a year. But on this occasion the dog had gone in and the owner, a chap called Andrew McGowan, went in after his dog. He got into serious trouble, very serious trouble. We were notified. We launched the inshore lifeboat in really rough seas. It was at the limit of service for that boat. We went out and we did our best. We found him and we brought him on board. One of the crew on board was a paramedic who started working on him straight away. We brought him straight back to the lifeboat station where another of the crew members, who was a doctor, and another medic worked on him as well, but unfortunately, it was too late. He'd gone. But following that, three of his family members decided that they wanted to help the RNLI. Andrew had a brother, Peter, and Peter McGowan is now our full-time station mechanic in Scarborough. He joined the crew and had become a full time mechanic in Scarborough. Donna Loveland who is Andrew's sister, she set up 'Swim Safe' so she and Swim Safe operate on the beaches in Scarborough and provide water safety during the summer holidays for children, and I understand some of your children have been involved with the Swim Safe programme.

They have indeed.

The third member is Simon Loveland and that is Donna's husband and he has decided to join the crew, so he is now a crew member on Scarborough lifeboat.

There's one other story, again it's water safety. Ravi, a little 10 year old lad from Leeds, was with his parents, went into the sea and was washed out by a rip current. He laid on his back for quite some time. I understand that instead of the parents calling the Coast Guard, they'd called another emergency service. So there was a delay in the lifeboat being launched. So Ravi was laid on his back for a considerable time in the sea, floating. Our in-shore lifeboat went to rescue him. When they got towards him, they found him apparently lifeless in the sea and when they got close they heard him shouting, 'Help!' They got him out, put him into the inshore boat, took him back to the lifeboat station, he was perfectly alright. He recovered wonderfully well. He had learned from the advertising that we've done, how to float, the float-to-live message.

That's a very, very encouraging story, isn't it John?

We had one two weeks ago as well. A young chap, local chap from Scarborough and his friend went for an early morning swim near the Spa. One got out because it was cold. The other, had got pulled out by a rip current and couldn't get back into the shore. His friend rang the Coast Guard. We went and launched to his aid and got him out. When we pulled him out he was heavily into cold water shock and in a bad way. The normal core temperature is 36-37°. His was 25. He was looked after on the boat, looked after at the boathouse, taken to hospital by ambulance and he made a remarkable recovery. Because the following day he was up and about and able to come down to the lifeboat station with a donation and a large box of biscuits for the crew. It was a big box of biscuits, but it didn't last long. But you know, those are incidences of the things that we do.

John, I'm very grateful to you for providing us with the history of the Lifeboat service in Scarborough and for telling us all about the stories and events, not only in historic times, but also how you've developed to the present day conditions and circumstances. I'd like to thank you for the 35 years of service that you've given in active service on the lifeboats and thereafter, I think you've spent 20 years in your current job in education.

If you actually look at it, we started in 1801 with a rowing boat which, if it turned over, it wouldn't self-right. No lifejacket, no seagoing equipment. We then get a boat that would self-right. We get life jackets, the early ones made of cork, which would make you float. Then we got better ones with Kapock filling. Everything we do in the RNLI, we try to improve. So the rowing boats went to a rowing boat with a sail, then after that a boat with one engine, and then another boat with two engines. Then a boat, the 'Mercy' with an enclosed wheelhouse where we could look after the casualty properly, doing 15 knots. Now we have the Shannon, state-of-the-art, 25 knot boat with everything on board that it needs. Our crew have casualty care training and the best equipment that we need to save the lives. And all of this can only be done because the generous British public support us financially. Without them helping us to we couldn't save a single life, and I thank the general public for looking after us and helping to make sure that we can do the work that we want to do.

John, thank you very much for your contribution today.