

A REDCAR BOATMAN

Born in Fisherman's Square, I grew up with the fishermen, spending days when I should have been at school listening to fishermen's tales and watching them baiting their lines. Lines made from Indian hemp and cotton, tanned and tarred to last. They had anything up to 200 hooks attached to each line.

When I left school I was employed as a share fisherman. I worked out of Hartlepool on a transom stern keelboat for a short time and then on boats and cobbles from Redcar.

Coming from a fishing background, I have a photo of my grandfather's boat "MIZPAH MH29". At the bottom of the photo it sadly states "Robert Preston drowned from MIZPAH June 1907".

Included in those fisherman's stories was the story of how his body was recovered later with the help of the local fishermen. They knew roughly where to look for his body, rowed out in their boats and shot their lines in the area they thought he would be in. The hooks and lines snagged onto what was his body and so it was recovered.

When I was old enough to join the Redcar Lifeboat crew, like anyone starting out, it was first as a helper. That is to help launch and recover the boat. In 1967 I joined the Lifeboat crew, first doing shore work then when there was a vacancy because of my boating background, was soon made up from deckhand to 2nd Coxswain of the RNLI 37 foot self righting Oakley "Sir James Knott". An important post with the RNLI and like any voluntary job, you do it because you like it. With the changes coming about in the new Lifeboats I eventually stood down from this position and left the RNLI in 1982.

It may be more accurate to say that I was transferred. At this time I then helped with the forming of the ZETLAND LIFEBOAT MUSEUM COMMITTEE where I was the Caretaker and Press Officer. With the ZETLAND being the oldest existing Lifeboat in the world, I was obviously very proud to be associated with it.

Returning however to my time with the Redcar Lifeboat Service. During this time I helped with the rescue of 54 lives, as of course did the other crew members.

One rescue that I will never forget happened in June 1977. The drilling rig "LIETY - S" was anchored just south of the River Tees about a quarter of a mile from the beach. Concern was growing for the safety of the crew. A weather forecast had given northerly gales and had kept the fishermen ashore that day. I was in my bathhouse repairing lobster pots. Someone came along and said "you'd better get to the bathhouse, you may be getting called

out". There were no pagers in those days. I ran from Fisherman's Square along to the Lifeboat House, I met the mechanic, he was warming up the engines. I rang the Coastguard, the reply was to launch immediately. The Coxswain was away that day so it was up to myself and the six man crew.

The maroons were fired to alert the rest of the crew and within minutes we launched and headed towards "LIETY - 5". The sea was getting very rough and with a northerly gale blowing we were riding out 20 foot waves. Our top speed was 8.75 knots and we went on at the best speed we could make under the circumstances.

When we got close to the Rig, we had to decide fast which was the best way of getting alongside. We made our first run in with the seas breaking all around us. We were hampered by some of the lobster pots and marker buoys that were in our way. At the time the tide was going out and we were playing with this time. The six men on the Rig had a scrambling net rigged. I nudged the Lifeboat alongside and two men climbed down. The net then got caught on our boat. A third man got his foot stuck in the net and was dangling upside down. I came astern from the Rig and waited my chance to run in again. We managed to get alongside and two of the crew pulled him on board and moved away from the Rig again. Three men were still on the Rig, sea conditions were getting worse and I decided that we had to make the next run in our last because of the falling tide and our echo sounder showing not much water below us. I ran in again and ordered the remaining men to rig a rope ladder and safety rope and make their way down it. They shouted that they could not do it. My reply to that was "if you don't come now, we will have to leave you on the Rig". They soon responded to my request.

Just as we got back alongside, a big wave caught up with us. I shouted to the Bowman to keep down and hang on. The sea broke on us pushing the bow of the Lifeboat under the platform of the Rig. This collision with the Rig damaged the bow fittings on the fore deck. A bullring of heavy brass, was flattened. I put the boat astern, got alongside the ladder and we got the three men on board. After a minute or two I was then able to get the boat heading out into deeper water and able to check the damage. Informing the Coastguard, we then headed back for Redcar. Fortunately know one was injured. The Rig Men had only been on board it for a few days and said it was their first job and probably their last.

Without the help of the crew, the rescue could not have taken place, all of course very good team work. The Rig workers had been sinking two shafts for an outfall pipe for a new steel complex. Normally when the sea got rough, the crew used to be taken off by their own safety boat. The worsening conditions had prevented their own boat carrying out this duty. The Rig Agents had then asked for the Rig to be evacuated. It was very much "touch and go" as to whether we could get them off.

During my 16 years of being a Lifeboat-man, I was never afraid of the sea, even though like many other fishermen, I can not even swim.

Since leaving the RNLI I lost touch with what was happening at sea until I was myself rescued. But not by Lifeboat. This time it was the National Coastwatch Institution ... later to become the Sea Safety Group, Coastwatch Redcar DFS. A voluntary organisation watching the coastline. I knew I had to give them my support. My new occupation is being Licensee at a local Pub in Redcar. In my spare time I do a watch at the Lookout Station which is located above the Zetland Museum at Redcar. It is very interesting and I work alongside other volunteers. Not all have had connections with the sea. All the volunteers, like myself have had instruction with chart work and now with Radar. I find it all very interesting and hope that we can get many more Sea Safety Group Teams operating around our coasts.

Ray Preston

SSG Station Controller