

Lifeboats in Groomsport



The Boathouse and harbour in 1944

Photograph taken by a member of 166th Signal Photography Company, US Army

In 1857, after several wrecks had occurred in the Belfast Lough area with the loss of ships and many lives, the RNLI decided to provide a lifeboat to be based in Groomsport. In December that year the Groomsport Branch of the RNLI was established. The chairman was Lord Dufferin, Major Robert Perceval-Maxwell was the treasurer and Rev A H McCausland, of Groomsport Parish Church, was the secretary. (*Downpatrick Recorder, 05 December 1857*)

The first lifeboat entered service in 1858 and it was kept in the Boathouse which had been built on land donated by John Waring Maxwell, the local landowner. The Boathouse had been designed by Charles Lanyon, the architect of many notable buildings in Belfast, including Queen's University. The cost of the building (£200) was raised by the local gentry and businessmen.

The Lifeboats

Four lifeboats were based at Groomsport. They were all "pulling" lifeboats – they had to be rowed by the crew.

1 The name of the first lifeboat which served from 1858 to 1867 it not known. It was 28 feet long and had 6 oars.

During its service it was launched twice and saved one life. Whilst on exercise in 1866 the lifeboat capsized, fortunately without any loss of life.

2 The "**Florence**", which was in service between 1867 and 1885, had 10 oars. She was launched 10 times and saved 36 lives.

In October 1881 it went to the aid of the "Margaret" which was bringing wood from Quebec to Belfast. The high seas prevented the Florence from being launched in Groomsport and horses had to pull to lifeboat on its trailer to Bangor where it was launched. On that occasion, all 15 crew members of the "Margaret" were rescued.

3 The “**George Pooley**”, which served from 1885 to 1901 took part in 17 rescues and saved 32 lives.

In June 1897, in a northerly gale, the lifeboat again had to be towed to Bangor to be launched. It rescued 12 people from the two vessels and landed them at Ballyholme Sailing Club.

4 The “**Chapman**” served from 1901 to 1920. She was a Liverpool Class lifeboat. It was 38 feet long and had space for 15 crew including 12 oarsmen. The Chapman was launched 16 times and saved 18 lives.

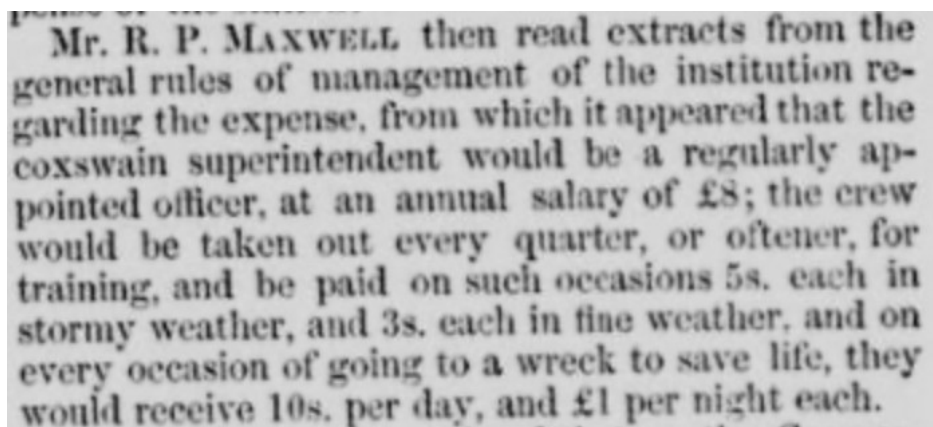
A lifeboat station had been established at Donaghadee in 1910, where a Watson Class lifeboat with an inboard petrol engine was in service. It was berthed in the harbour and did not have to be launched when responding to an emergency. In 1920 it was decided to close the Groomsport Lifeboat Station.

The “Chapman” was transferred to the RNLI reserve fleet and later was used as a pleasure boat. In 2002 she was restored to her original condition and today is the main exhibit in the small Lifeboat museum in Lytham, Lancashire.

Lifesaving Rocket apparatus had first been installed in 1868. The “Rocket House” remained in the village until in 1960s.

The Crew

At a meeting in in Belfast on 30 November 1857, Robert Perceval-Maxwell related the payments which the RNLI expected to be made to members of lifeboat crews:



Mr. R. P. MAXWELL then read extracts from the general rules of management of the institution regarding the expense, from which it appeared that the coxswain superintendent would be a regularly appointed officer, at an annual salary of £8; the crew would be taken out every quarter, or oftener, for training, and be paid on such occasions 5s. each in stormy weather, and 3s. each in fine weather, and on every occasion of going to a wreck to save life, they would receive 10s. per day, and £1 per night each.

News Letter 01 December 1857

Local men – fishermen and sailors – provided the crews of the Lifeboats and their skill and bravery meant that many lives were saved. They had to row the boats, often in stormy seas, dressed in heavy oilskins and cork lifejackets.

The four men served as coxswains of Groomsport lifeboats were:

William Orr 1861 to 1888

Henry Waterson 1888 to 1916

Ross McIntosh 1916 to 1918

Robert Waterson 1918 to 1920

During the time that Henry Waterson was coxswain 50 lives were saved.

Over the period of 62 years, from 1858 to 1920, the crews of Groomsport's lifeboats saved 87 lives in during 55 call-outs.

Peter Gibson
January 2023

Sources:

"A History of Lifeboats on the Ards Peninsula" accessed at:
<https://www.portaferrylifeboat.com/video/video.htm>

"Tides and Times in the Port" by Rev Dr David Irwin

Newspaper reports accessed at the Irish Newspaper Archive of www.findmypast.co.uk