



The Watersons
– a seafaring family that
crewed Groomsport’s Lifeboats



Four of the five Watersons mentioned in Griffith's Valuation are probably the following:.

- David was a fisherman who died on 01 June 1876, aged 74.
- Henry was a fisherman who died on 10 April 1889, aged 65.
- Hugh probably died in 1869, aged 67.
- John was a fisherman who died on 17 September 1885, aged 92.

1901 Census

The 1901 Census recorded that there were 48 Watersons living in Groomsport.

The table, below shows that of the 14 Waterson men of working age (15+), 10 were fishermen and one was a mariner.

Surname	Forename	Townland	DED	County	Age	Sex	Birthplace	Occupation
Waterson	John	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	15	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	Thomas	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	16	M	Co Down	Agricultural Labourer
Waterson	Henry	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	17	M	Co Down	Bricklayer
Waterson	James	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	18	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	Hugh James	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	22	M	Co Down	Bricklayer
Waterson	John	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	24	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	William	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	28	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	Robert	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	29	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	William	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	39	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	Henry	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	40	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	Peter	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	46	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	James	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	48	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	Hugh	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	50	M	Co Down	Mariner
Waterson	John	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	60	M	Co Down	Fisherman

Extract form 1901 Census

1911 Census

The 1911 Census recorded that there were again 48 Watersons living in Groomsport.

The table, below shows that of the 16 Waterson men of working age (16+), 12 were fishermen and one was sailor and one was a mariner.

Surname	Forename	Townland	DED	County	Age	Sex	Birthplace	Occupation
Waterson	Henry	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	16	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	Arthur	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	17	M		Fisherman
Waterson	Robert	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	18	M		Fisherman
Waterson	John Alex	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	20	M	Co Down	Sailor
Waterson	Thomas	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	24	M		Fisherman
Waterson	Henry	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	27	M	Co Down	Bricklayer
Waterson	James	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	28	M	Co Down	Fisherman
	Hugh							
Waterson	James	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	32	M	Co Down	Bricklayer
Waterson	John	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	33	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	Robert	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	38	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	William	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	42	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	William	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	50	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	Henry	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	50	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	James	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	59	M	Co Down	Fisherman
Waterson	Hugh	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	60	M	Co Down	Mariner
Waterson	John	Groomsport	Bangor	Down	69	M	Co Down	Fisherman

Extract form 1911 Census

The Watersons and Groomsport's Lifeboats

From 1858 to 1920 Groomsport had a Lifeboat station which was served by four Lifeboats:

1858 – 1867 The name of this lifeboat has been lost to history

1867 - 1885 **Florence**

1885 – 1901 **George Pooley**

1901 – 1920 **Chapman**

Records of crew members are not available but it is known members of the Waterson family served on all four lifeboats.

Reports of the rescue of the *Carioca* in December 1862, by the first lifeboat, include accounts of John Waterson (1840 -1922), the second coxswain, entering the water, lashed to a rope, to reach the distressed ship. He then took control of the ship and guided her to safety at Donaghadee.

GROOMSPORT LIFE-BOAT AND THE WRECK OF THE CARIOCA.—A correspondent from Groomsport supplies the following additional facts relative to the wreck of the *Carioca*, noticed in our columns yesterday:—An article in your paper of this morning scarcely does justice to the life-boat crew in reference to the barque *Carioca*, of Liverpool, 300 tons, laden with wheat and cloverseed, from Philadelphia to Belfast. The facts are these:—On Friday, she was seen near the Black Head, at anchor from the gale. During the night she lost her anchor, and drifted cross to the Buoy of the Briggs. Being seen here with her signals flying between seven and eight o'clock A.M, as soon as possible the life-boat crew collected; launched their boat in a bay to Westward of Orlock Point, and, after much struggling and encountering heavy seas, reached the *Carioca* in three-quarters of an hour. A rope was thrown from the barque, which they caught, but were obliged to let go immediately; but, on returning a second time, they succeeded in holding on until one of the crew, John Waterson, lashed himself to a rope, and, jumping into the water, was hauled on board. The master then gave the vessel in charge to him; and, finding the crew unwilling to put to sea, to run South, which he wished to do for shelter, he had no alternative but to run for Donaghadee Harbour, the entrance to which is not much wider than the length of the barque. However, with great skill, he brought the barque safe into the harbour, and beached her on the sand alongside the North pier, without the loss of a spar or doing any damage to the shipping in the harbour. The master then gave him a certificate of his services, and gave the barque in charge to Lloyd's sub-agent. The barque had her starboard anchor out with seventy fathoms of chain, and her port anchor with twenty fathoms of chain, when the life-boat reached her; but they had to slip the latter and cut away the former in order to save the vessel from the Copeland Island, which was to leeward about one mile.

Belfast News Letter 23 December 1862

When the salvage of the Carioca was settled, John Waterson was awarded an extra £4 for his actions in saving the vessel.

SALVAGE CASE—GROOMSPORT LIFEBOAT.—The following award has been agreed upon by the arbitrators who kindly undertook to settle the salvage due to the crew of the lifeboat for saving the Carioca in the gale of the 20th Dec. last :—

“After hearing evidence as to the services rendered by the crew of the Groomsport lifeboat to the barque Carioca, in bringing her safely into Donaghadee harbour on the 20th December last, we award £80 as a fair salvage for such services, and recommend that £7 10s be given to each of the crew of the lifeboat, and £4 extra to the second coxswain, who boarded the vessel.

(Signed)

“JOHN MULHOLLAND.
“SAMUEL MARTIN.

“Belfast, 12th January, 1863.”

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution is entitled to £16, being two shares of the whole salvage, for the risk to the boat in performing the service. The total sum claimed on behalf of the crew of the lifeboat was £100, the belief being that the cargo of the Carioca was worth £10,000. It turned out, however, that the value of the cargo was £8,000, and hence the reduction.

Belfast News Letter 15 January 1863

Probably the most extensive service given by a member of the family to the lifeboats was that of Henry Waterson (1861 – 1929).

The report of his retirement in 1916 (see below) indicates that he joined the lifeboat crew at about the age of 12, around 1873. He would have joined his older brother, John, as a crew member and, perhaps, other older members of the family.

Henry served on three of Groomsport's lifeboats and was coxswain of the George Pooley and the Chapman for 28 years – from 1888 to 1916. The post of Coxswain was salaried. In both Censuses (above), Henry described his occupation as “mariner”.

In his 42 years of service, Henry had helped to save 75 lives.

The following is a report of the meeting at which Henry Waterson asked to retire.

LIFEBOAT INSTITUTION.

Groomsport Branch.

The quarterly inspection of the Belfast, Bangor, and Groomsport Branch and Station took place at Groomsport on Saturday afternoon by Lieutenant MacLean, R.N. At the conclusion of the inspection a meeting was held in the boathouse, under the presidency of Mr. H. C. Craig, while amongst others present were Mr. J. C. Lepper, Mr. A. H. Crawford, Mr. Walter Barbour, Mr. E. R. Stephens, and Lieutenant Campbell Gardner (hon. secretary). Lieutenant MacLean reported that the station and boat were in good order. A report of the service rendered by the crew on the night of September 27th in connection with the stranding of the s.s. Cliffmore at Cloughfin, Islandmagee, was made by the Hon. Secretary. The Committee expressed admiration for the way the boat was manned and responded to the call in the face of a strong north-easterly breeze. Henry Watterson, the coxswain, came before the Committee and asked leave to retire after a service of twenty-eight years as coxswain, during which he has been in command of the lifeboats Florence, George Pooley, and Chapman. He had also served as second coxswain for eleven years, and as an ordinary worker of the crew for three years, making a total of forty-two years' service in connection with lifeboat work, and during which period he had only missed being out twice when the boat was out on service. The Committee received his resignation with great regret, and desired a special minute to be entered on the books expressing their high appreciation of his services, and recommending that he be granted a pension of £12 per annum. The crew were then called before the Committee, and Ross M'Intosh, who was the second coxswain, was unanimously appointed coxswain, Robert Watterson promoted to second coxswain, and William Savage to bowman.

Northern Whig 04 October 1916

Henry was presented with an RNLI Certificate of Honour by the Lord Mayor of Belfast.

REWARDS FOR LIFEBOAT SERVICE.

County Down Coxswains Honoured.

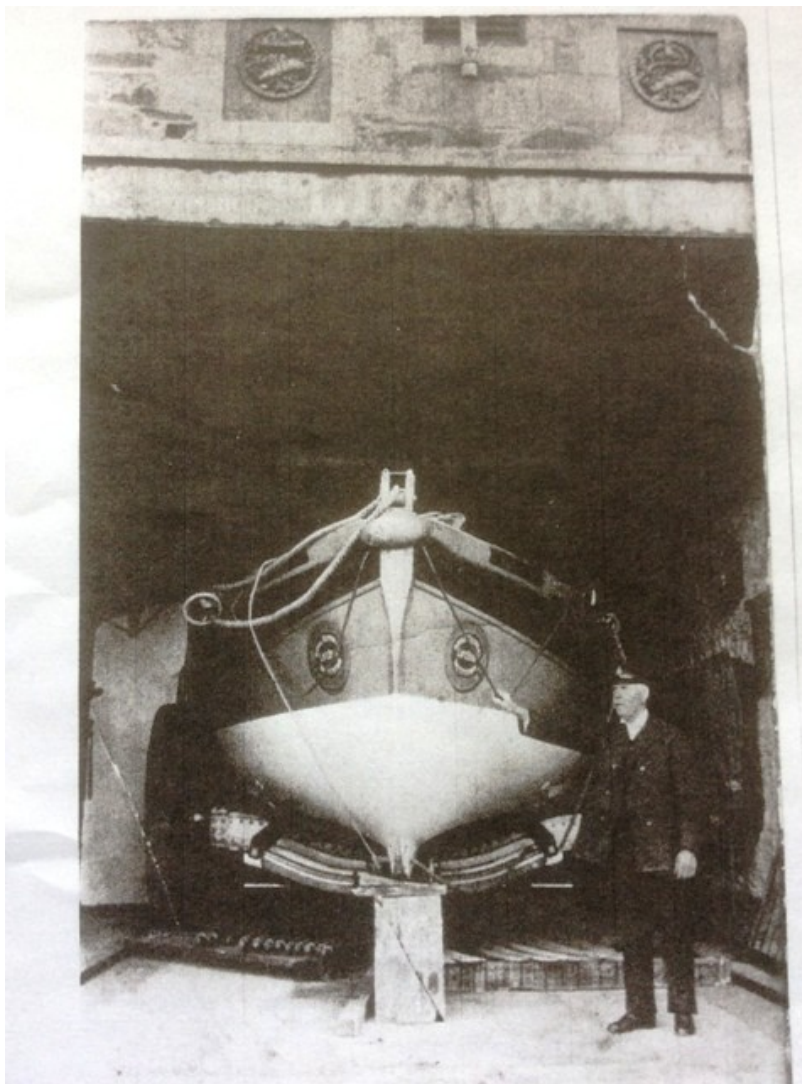
At the monthly meeting of the Belfast City Council yesterday, the Lord Mayor (Councillor Sir Crawford M'Cullagh, J.P.), on behalf of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, presented framed certificates of honour to Mr. Henry Waterson, on his retirement from the post of coxswain of the Groomsport lifeboat, an office he filled for the long period of 28 years; and Mr. Robert Young, on his retirement, after 10½ years' service, from the position of coxswain of the Cloughey lifeboat.

Mr. H. C. Craig, chairman of the Groomsport Branch of the Lifeboat Institution, introduced the two retiring coxswains. He mentioned that Mr. Waterson had forty-two years' service, and during that time he had only twice missed going out with his boat; whilst Mr. Young had thirty years' service, and had not once missed going out during the whole of that period.

The Lord Mayor said it gave him great pleasure to present the certificates. Mr. Waterson had gone out to nineteen wrecks, and had assisted in saving 75 lives; whilst Mr. Young had been out to thirty wrecks, and had assisted in saving about 100 lives. It was a noble calling in which these men had been engaged, and although they had now retired from active work, he hoped they would be spared for very many years to come. (Applause.)

Belfast New Letter 02 December 1916

The following photograph shows Henry at the Boathouse with the George Pooley.



The origin of this photograph is unclear. <https://www.portaferrylifeboat.com/video/video.htm> credits Derek McCready.

In 1918, Henry's nephew, Robert, was appointed Coxswain of the lifeboat, a post he held until Groomsport Lifeboat station was closed in 1920.

In November 1922, Henry, along with three of his children and a granddaughter, arrived in Sydney, New South Wales. Three of Henry's children had previously emigrated to Australia. Henry died in Sydney in 1929.

Roberta Waterson Fraser, the great-granddaughter of John Waterson (1840 – 1922) has supplied the following three photographs which show the extent of the Waterson's family involvement in the crew of lifeboats in the early years of the 20th century.



Groomsport Lifeboat Crew pictured in 1900. Included are: William Orr, Bob Waterson, Tom Waterson, "Jonty" Waterson, Robert Waterson, Danny Orr, John Waterson, Senior, Henry Waterson, James Tosh, Senior.

The caption to this photograph of the crew, in their cork lifejackets, notes that the crew included six Watsons.



This photograph is believed to have been taken about 1904 or 1905. The Watsons pictured include Henry, the coxswain, his son Jander (John Alexander), his brother, John, his nephew (John's son), Jimmy and his cousin, "Wee William".



This photograph of the Chapman and its crew was possibly taken on “Lifeboat Day” in Bangor on 14 July 1903.

There are five Watersons in this photo. They are Henry, the coxswain, his brother, John, John’s sons, “Wilty” and Jimmy and Henry’s nephew, Tom (whose father was Henry’s brother, James).

Two generations of service over six decades

Groomsport had a lifeboat station for 62 years – from 1858 to 1920.. During those decades, at least nine members of the Waterson family, over two generation, served on the crews of the lifeboats.

Detailed records of the crews do not seem to have survived. However, a press report of an inspection of the lifeboat by the Lord Lieutenant, and other dignitaries, in 1902, listed 25 members of the crew, nine of whom were Watersons.

From the press report and other information we know that four members of an older generation of Watersons served on the crew. These were brothers **John Waterson** (1842-1922), mentioned above, **James Waterson** (b. 1852) and **Henry Waterson** (1861-1929),

also mentioned above. Also from this generation was "**Wee William**" **Waterson** (1861-1935) who is believed to have been a cousin of the three brothers.

In the next generation, four of John's sons served on the crew. They were **Robert** (who was coxswain from 1918-1920), **William** ("**Wilty**"), **John** ("**Jonty**") and **James** ("**Jimmy**").

James' son **Tom** also served and Henry's son, John Alexander ("**Jander**"), may also have been a crew member.

The press report of 1902 also mentions a "Peter Waterson". This may have been a misspelling as he came from the branch of the family that spelt their surname with two "t"s.

Peter Gibson
July 2024

Sources:

The Waterson family

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John Parr "The story of RNLB Chapman". Hilbre Publications. Third issue, August 2023.

"Inspection of Groomsport Lifeboat". North Down Herald, 5th December 1902, page 2.

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