

Groomsport's Lifeboats

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RNLB Chapman, Groomsport's Last Lifeboat
Photograph: John Parr

A little bit of Groomsport history from



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Groomsport Lifeboat Station

1858-1920

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.

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 was 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 Boathouse in 1944

A lifeboat station was established at Donaghadee in 1910 and, in 1920, the RNLI decided to close Groomsport Lifeboat Station.

The Lifeboats

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

The name of the first lifeboat which served from 1858 to 1867 it not known. It was 28 feet long and had six oars. During its service it was launched twice and saved one life.

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

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

On at least two occasions, northerly gales prevented the lifeboat from being launched at Groomsport. Horses were used to tow the lifeboat and crew to Bangor harbour where it was launched.

The “Chapman” served from 1901 to 1920. She was launched 16 times and saved 18 lives. In 1920. the “Chapman” was transferred to the RNLI reserve Deet and later was used as a pleasure boat and a pilot boat. In 2002 she was restored to her original condition and today is the main exhibit in the small Lifeboat museum in Lytham, Lancashire.

The Life Boat Crew

Local men – fishermen and sailors – provided the crews of the life boats 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.

Four men served as coxswains of Groomsport lifeboats:

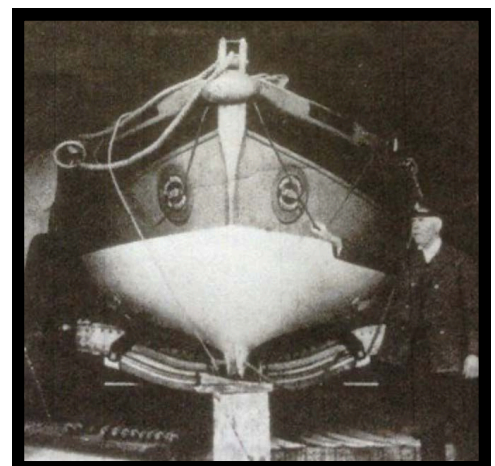
William Orr 1861 to 1888

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.



Coxswain Henry Waterson
and the George Pooley

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

RNLI 200

In 2024, the North Down Museum marked the 200th anniversary of the RNLI with an exhibition of information about all the Lifeboat stations that are, or had been, in Ards and North Down Borough. Ann Blachford (on the right) and Christine Scholes are pictured at the information panel on Groomsport Lifeboat Station. Robert Waterson, the last coxswain of the Groomsport Lifeboat was Ann's grandfather and Christine's great-uncle.



Find out more about the history of the village and Groomsport Digital Archive at:
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