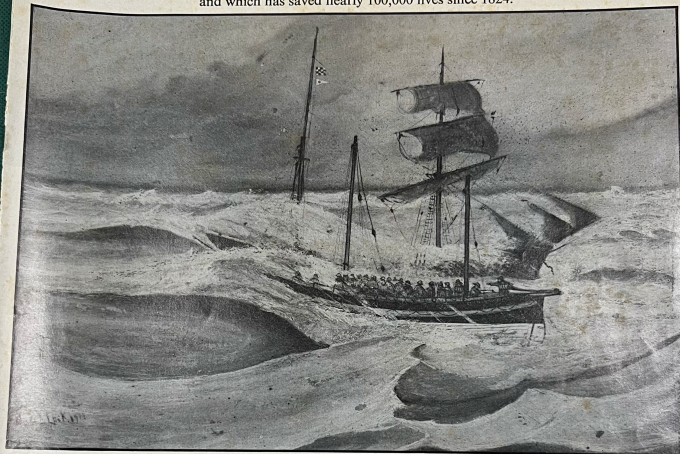


# National lifeboats

by Oliver Warner

This month the Royal National Life-boat Institution marks its 150th anniversary.

In this article the author describes the founding and history of the voluntary organization which, in the words of Joseph Conrad, is unsurpassed in its "record of efficiency and brotherly devotion", and which has saved nearly 100,000 lives since 1824.



This painting by Kenneth Luck, from a photograph by Claude Mowle, shows the Caister lifeboat "Covent Garden" sailing to the rescue of the crew of the German schooner "Falke" on January 11, 1912.

might bear the prefix Royal.

Organized sea rescue was no new thing in 1824, either in this country or abroad, but it was usually local. For instance, Bamburgh in Northumberland had had an elaborate system, run from the Castle, as early as the eighteenth century, and so had South Shields, Liverpool and other places where maritime traffic was heavy and wrecks not infrequent. What had been lacking was effort on a national scale. The impetus for such a move derived from a pamphlet written in 1823 by Sir William Hillary. It is for this reason that his representation appears, in his capacity as Founder, on the obverse of the Institution's medall.

Hillary's work had a long title: *An Appeal to the British Nation on the Humanity and Policy of forming a National Institution for the Preservation of Lives and Property from Shipwreck*. It set out proposals for

the scope of such an institution, and for a policy which has been continued. The "first great and permanent object" should be the saving of life. Other aims were to help ships in distress; the safeguarding of property; the prevention of plunder; the succour and support of those rescued; "the people and vessels of every nation, whether in peace or war, to be equally the objects of this Institution". Finally, appropriate rewards should be offered for sea rescue, and provision made for the widows and families of those who lost their lives in attempting to save others.

Sir William Hillary (1771-1847) was a man of exceptional vision and energy. He had been made a baronet in 1805 in recognition of his "patriotic endeavours" in raising men to serve against the invasion expected from Napoleon's Grand Army encamped on the far shore

of the Channel. He had been equerry to the Duke of Sussex, a brother of George IV, which gave him access to influential people, and, even when he lost most of his private fortune and had to retire to Douglas, Isle of Man, to avoid the duns, he continued not only to further the work of the Institution but took part in the actual work of rescue. He three times won the Institution's gold medal for gallantry. His record in this respect has only once been equalled, by Henry Blogg of Cromer who, by general consent, is considered to have been the most outstanding lifeboat coxswain of all time.

Holland was quick to follow the example of this country. In 1824, two societies were formed there, which also happened to have relations with the RNLBI. They have always been wise, and for our own body, they emphasize the value of the voluntary spirit. The British Institution must be among the largest organizations to depend entirely on voluntary contributions

A service in St Paul's Cathedral on March 4 will mark the 150th anniversary of the oldest national sea rescue organization in the world. The occasion itself is highly appropriate for it was in the City, at the London Tavern in Bishopsgate, that a former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Manners Sutton, proposed "that an Institution be now formed for the Preservation of Life in cases of Shipwreck on the Coasts of the United Kingdom, to be supported by donations and subscriptions, and to be called the National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck."

The motion was carried with acclaim, and within a very short time the Archbishop was able to announce that George IV had not only consented to be patron, an office which successive Sovereigns have held, but that the Institution

Oliver Warner is author of a book, "The Life-boat service", which is to be published by Cassell on April 25, price £4.50.