



Prawle Point

No: 51

'eyes along the coast'

Summer 2015

RNLI LIFEGUARD SERVICE

Since the introduction of a lifeguard service by the RNLI at Whitsand Bay, Cornwall in 2001, 200 beaches are now patrolled by 1000 fully trained lifeguards around the coasts of England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland and Jersey.

Kate Berridge, daughter of Prawle Point Watchkeeper, Ian Berridge, is Lifeguard Supervisor for South Hams and South Devon regions stretching from Exmouth to Whitsand Bay. Last year lifeguards attended 17,050 incidents, 19,353 people were aided and 4 lives saved. However, preventative actions and advice remain the paramount function throughout the service-intervention to avoid risky situations or intentions before difficulties and dangers lead to rescue or disaster.

Talks on beach safety are offered to local schools during the month preceding summer holidays thus encouraging children's awareness and ability to think ahead, consider what could happen and avoid hazards. Parents are not without the need for some timely advice on occasions.

Inflatable beach toys, so susceptible to wind and current, have borne many a child (even non-swimmers) out to sea while watched by distraught parents who failed to secure a safety line, children sent on an errand may not easily relocate their family group until a lifeguard spots a desperate, tear-stained face in panic and, amazingly, some people assume that telling their children to swim between the flags absolves them from parental responsibility. Rip currents, strongest on an ebbing tide, feature at several local beaches and can be identified as a channel of churning, darker, choppy water of varied colours. There may be a line of foam, seaweed or rubbish moving steadily seawards causing a break in the incoming wave pattern. If caught in one, the advice is to swim parallel with the beach until the power eases, then make for the shore. It should also be remembered that the location of sand banks is subject to tidal influence.

Request for lifeguard cover normally originates from a local council or beach owner. RNLI assessment then considers population, likely local and tourist use, surf conditions, rip currents, local risk areas and terrain before setting up the service. The RNLI pays for all equipment and training, wages are paid by the council.



Lifeguards must be at least sixteen years of age and hold a valid lifesaving qualification. They must be able to undergo eighty hours of vigorous physical and medical training before qualifying; such professional standards are then maintained on a regular, weekly basis. Criteria are demanding – ability to swim 200 metres in under 3 ½ minutes, then continue

another 200m all in under 7 ½ minutes and running 200 m. on sand in under 40 seconds, are some of the requirements. There is no upper age limit, length of service being determined by ability to pass these tests of fitness and competency. Initial first aid courses, repeated throughout each season, reach the level of paramedic or first responder. Induction sessions are held at the RNLI College in Poole and at the Isle of Wight Inshore Lifeboat Centre designed for surf exercises. Lifeguards, in their yellow and red uniform, can often be

seen swimming, running or surf boarding at the beach; these are not beach-bum leisure pursuits, rather a commitment to public service as are regular training sessions in local swimming pools. As part of the Search and Rescue (SAR) system, lifeguards exercise with local lifeboat, helicopter, coastguard and ambulance crews at least twice per season. A band of support volunteers help with land based duties such as manning the lookout building, aiding radio communications and casualty care. Victims of weaver fish stings can sometimes be seen sitting patiently in rows with the affected foot in a bowl of hot water!

Staged scenarios and the constant fitness ethic help to maintain interest during protracted periods of low incidence. Rescues may prove emotional whirlwinds. A 15 year old boy, too afraid to leave his surfboard, despite encouragement, needed to be dragged to safety, his frantic mother enveloped the lifeguard with repeated hugs of gratitude, however no time for a warm-up shower as another emergency arose, adrenalin helping against the cold.

A patrol of two is the minimum although more are required on highly popular beaches and at weekends, public and school holidays. A rota for the week is issued specifying where service is required on each day, so choice of beach is not offered although there may be changes of programme. The day could begin with an hour of training before duty from

10am to 6pm. Firstly, sea conditions are monitored, appropriate flags (indicating entry areas assigned to swimming and finless body boarding -yellow and red or black and white for more adventurous surf boarding), signage and information boards are set up and equipment checked. Radio channel 16 is monitored with switch to ch.0 for SAR communications with Falmouth Coastguard. Personal equipment, carried at all times, includes a first aid kit, a set of check cards, on which casualty information can be obtained for passing to paramedics, binoculars and a robust VHF radio, waterproof to a depth of one metre.

A 4WD patrol vehicle, used on busier beaches, also provides a contact point and repository for items such as a defibrillator, a response/trauma bag containing equipment for major bleeds, medication, oxygen, fracture straps and a spine board. An all-terrain quad-bike affords quick response across the softest sand with good manoeuvrability and all-round visibility. Also available on some beaches is the Rescue Watercraft (RWC) which is similar to a jet-ski with rescue sled, it is safe in shallow water with enough buoyancy to remain

afloat if damaged and boasts excellent acceleration. However, as most rescues are carried out within 100metres of the shore, a rescue board is the lifeguard's primary resource as it affords the quickest method of response, copes with large surf and will accommodate a casualty. Rescue tubes can be strapped around an unconscious person thus aiding flotation in deep water. The specifically designed orange Arcania Inshore Rescue Boats, used further from shore, are two-man crewed with 30hp engines and safety return springs attached to the tiller throttle.

Local beaches enjoying RNLI Lifeguard protection are Bantham, Blackpool Sands, Burgh Island, Challaborough, Hope Cove, Sedgewell, Slapton and South Milton Sands.

Lifeguarding may look a cushy job but the demands are onerous, requiring strength, fitness, competent judgement, tolerance, good communication skills with the public and, not least, the ability to remain alert and watchful during long periods of inactivity.

Thanks to Kate Berridge, Ben Howey and Sam Patterson for information used in this article.

WATCHKEEPER GEOF HOWELL

Geof Howell, who died in July 2015, will be long remembered at NCI Prawle Point for his long and dedicated service, his exceptionally keen eyesight and his uncanny propensity for being on watch when incidents occurred.

He joined the station on September 13th 1998, later becoming part of the training team as an exacting instructor who set a high standard. Two other responsibilities, Geof was willing to fulfil, were as Quartermaster, keeping the Lookout supplied with consumables and, as valuable fund raiser, placing collecting boxes in various local retail outlets, retrieving and counting donations as required.

He probably holds the record for the number of incidents occurring on his watch. One macabre event is recalled by long time friend and frequent fellow-watchkeeper Mike Pearce, when Geof spotted a bloated wetsuit drifting into Landing Cove and, fearing it may contain a body, informed Brixham Coastguard who called out the Prawle Point Rescue Team to investigate. Thankfully it turned out to be an immersion suit covered with Goose Barnacles! Younger watchkeepers were often astounded by Geof's confident ability to read ship's names at a seemingly impossible distance and being also a keen birdwatcher, he one day spotted a Blue Throat outside the Lookout so informed Jim Bennett, our late NCI bird enthusiast, thereby attracting a number of twitchers to descend on Prawle Point. During quiet watches, Mike remembers listening to fascinating stories from Geof's history. Whilst working in Australia near Cairns and enjoying a pint in the local hostelry, sheltering from heavy rain, a local man burst in with news of a twelve foot crocodile occupying the drain outside. Geof was told that he might be a Pom but could help by sitting on the animal while it was tied up ready to be dragged to the river for release. On a Friday night drunks were known to sleep it off in that drain so may have had a terminal experience! Native wild life accompanied him at home too- above the porch, an enormous spider, grown too big to find freedom through a grating, dangled its legs to grab flying insects while a venomous snake lived under the house consuming rats. With an interest in geology, Geof sometimes went prospecting in the bush for precious stones such as agates and garnets; an opal he found was fashioned into a ring for Audrey, his wife.

In earlier days cartoons, created and drawn by Geof, appeared in several Newsletters poking fun at Prawle Point happenings. He had a special way with children visiting the Lookout, encouraging them to enter competitions he



devised and providing prizes for the winners. He enjoyed demonstrating the radar, while keeping a patient yet watchful eye on enthusiastic, excited youngsters who so loved being allowed a little hands-on opportunity. Visitors from Wales were astonished to be addressed by Geof in fluent Welsh, a language he acquired during evacuation to that country during the war.

Geof clocked up many happy hours of watchkeeping which fulfilled an important and regular part of his life. Another joy was fishing. He was well known among the local angling fraternity and frequently seen fishing from a boat built to his specification, Miss Mouse, the pet name of his granddaughter, Charlotte. Daughter Catherine recalls "The family had many happy hours and a few seasick ones on that boat. I know his grandchildren have happy memories of learning to fish". She describes Geof as a gentle man with very high standards, generous, loving and much missed. To watchkeepers who knew him well, she says, "Thank you all for making his life enjoyable and happy with a purpose". On his somewhat reluctant retirement from Coastwatch last year, due to moving nearer his children, he was presented with a plaque (initiated by PR Officer, Sarah Procyk) which meant a great deal to him as a commendation of his huge contribution to the station.

Geof was born in 1929 and had three children, seven grandchildren and one great grandchild of whom he was very proud.

Thanks to Derek Venables, Mike Pearce and Catherine for information used in this article and to Mike for the photograph.

NCI PRAWLE POINT: INCIDENTS TO DATE



25.03.15 Watchkeepers reported a dinghy, broken down ashore at Rickham Sands, to Falmouth Coastguard. Salcombe Inshore Lifeboat safely recovered the dinghy with its occupant to Salcombe Harbour.

01.04.15 Fishing vessel Catharina informed Falmouth Coastguard that she had FV Barent Zee in tow 9 miles S of Berry Head. Watchkeepers told FCG she was visual and would be kept under observation.

07.05.15 Yacht Mellon called FCG reporting engine overheating and no wind. Watchkeepers rang Falmouth to report her visual and gave position, adding that Yacht Seahorse and FV Martlet were nearby. Seahorse took the casualty in tow.

11.05.15 Yacht Kingclip reported to FCG they were low on fuel and trying to make Salcombe. Salcombe Lifeboat was tasked to her aid. Watchkeepers reported there was another yacht in the area. Kingclip was towed into Salcombe by the Lifeboat.

29.05.15 Watchkeepers reported that we had lost sight of a red kayak with a single person on board. Salcombe Inshore Lifeboat launched to do a shoreline search. The kayak was not found.

04.06.15 Fishing vessel Newbrook informed Falmouth Coastguard that she had a near miss with a trawler and had to cut her gear. We reported to Falmouth Coastguard that we had the two vessels visual and that they were very close. FCG thanked us for the information given as it could prove useful.

09.06.15 Pan Pan from Yacht Imogen to Falmouth Coastguard requesting assistance

as taking on water. Watchkeepers informed Coastguard that they had her visual. Salcombe Lifeboat launched to tow the yacht into Salcombe.

02.07.15 Yacht Out of the Blue radioed FCG with engine overheating and insufficient wind. Watchkeepers reported her visual off Bolt Head. She was able to restart the engine and motor into Salcombe.

04.07.15 Angling vessel Sea Urchin reported an inverted kayak 1 mile S of Start Point. FCG tasked Salcombe ALB and ILB also Prawle Point CG rescue team, Helicopter 106 heard comms. while overflying and joined search. FCG phoned NCI Prawle Point for her position, this was given with subsequent updates. ILB was tasked to search from Start to Hallsands, then W to Prawle Point while the ALB and helicopter continued searching. As nothing was seen, all eventually were stood down.

04.07.15 Yacht Zarafina called Yacht Unicorn for assistance as taking on water 1 mile off Start Point. Yacht Kildrummy offered assistance and took her in tow. Watchkeepers informed FCG of the situation. Salcombe LB was tasked and took over the tow.

Dolphins were spotted and reported to Brixham Seawatch on January 19, March 6, May 23, 26 and on July 12.

On February 7th Watchkeepers notified FCG of large scale fires in the immediate area with huge volumes of smoke. Visibility from the lookout was halted for a while.

On May 10 watchkeepers reported an injured ewe to the local farmer.



Friends Of Prawle Point

The annual Cream Tea will be held on Wednesday 19 August, in Chivelstone Community Hall at East Prawle, to coincide with Open Day at the Lookout.

However, this year, as savouries are on offer as well as cakes and cream, it has been renamed Devon Teas. All are welcome to this very popular event. The food is homemade, a Tombola will be running and watchkeepers will be on hand to inform visitors and answer questions, maybe even recruit new trainees!

PQ VISIT TO SALCOMBE RNLI

Looking at the All-weather Lifeboat (ALB) from the PQ lookout, it is clear that it is an impressive piece of kit, but from up there you have no real idea of what goes on inside.

With the Inshore Lifeboat (ILB) you get more of a sense of connection with human beings because you can see the crew (just, occasionally!) but no grasp of what they are having to deal with or how they go about their business. So getting up close and personal to the boats themselves provides a valuable and graphic insight into what happens within when they are in action.

On March 19th 2015, 10 PQ watchkeepers and two guests were able to get close to both boats and the kit that goes with them. After a briefing and coffee in the crew room, the party made its way down to the ILB shed at the head of the launching slipway, where coxswain Chris Winzar described the boat in detail and how it operates. Then it was outside and down the pontoon to the AWLB, where the party split in two.



Mechanic Andy Harris took half the group below decks to look at the accommodation for the “passengers” (survivors!), highly expensive communications equipment and the two enormous (1000hp) Caterpillar diesel engines. In the wheelhouse above, Chris explained and demonstrated the screens and equipment available in front of the seven highly sprung crew seats, each with its own headset and access to all the radio traffic relating to particular incidents.

Outside again and on deck we learned that the most frequently used piece of equipment was the 180 metre tow rope! The visit will enable everyone present, the next time they see either boat from the PQ lookout, to picture in their mind much more readily what is going on within the lifeboats and to understand the sort of conditions faced by their crews.

David Murphy



SALTY SUPERSTITIONS

- A coin under the mast:** This was believed to bring favourable winds and buy protection from storms. It may have derived from the custom of placing a coin in the mouth of a dead soul as payment to the ferryman for crossing the River Styx.
- Non-swimmers:** Having a fatalistic view of drowning, many sailors were non-swimmers by choice. “What the sea wants, the sea will have” was the resigned belief so a man overboard may not even be thrown a rope, perhaps more regarded as a placatory sacrifice to the sea gods.
- Ringing of bells:** In the Middle Ages bells, believed to deter evil spirits, were associated with funerals so, on board, may forecast death. Ship’s bells were exempt from this superstition as they signalled the change of watch but, if ringing of their own accord, as in a storm, it was the foretelling of death on board.



Please help us to maintain this valuable service by making a donation and becoming a supporter of NCI Prawle Point or becoming a watchkeeper.

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