



# Prawle Point

No: 55

*'eyes along the coast'*

Autumn 2016

## CENTENARY OF THE SALCOMBE LIFEBOAT DISASTER

On October 27th, 2016 the RNLI flag flew at half mast outside Holy Trinity Church, Salcombe and a muffled peal of bells rang out across the town where, one hundred years ago, thirteen of the fifteen crew members drowned when Salcombe's lifeboat, the *William and Emma* capsized approaching the Bar in atrocious weather.

Among the congregation were over one hundred relatives of those lost and the two who miraculously survived, past and present crew of subsequent Salcombe lifeboats, representatives of the RNLI and local SAR services and many associated families and friends. A service, to remember the brave crew of the thirty five foot, pulling and sailing lifeboat, the *William and Emma* and commemorate the tragedy, united all in a most poignant and moving ceremony both within the church and by live streamed video in the overflow marquee.

The opening hymn "Will your anchor hold", so familiar at funerals of lifeboat crew members, held special significance. Stuart Popham QC (Hon), Chairman of the RNLI, outlined the unfolding events of that fateful day and paid tribute both to the brave crews of 1916 and those who volunteer today, never knowing what challenges may arise. It was when great grandson of survivor Eddie Distin, James Cooper, read *The Bar*, a poem written by R.I.Partridge in response to the disaster, that thoughts must have strayed seawards and imaginations focussed even more intensely on what happened all those years ago. One minute of silence concentrated the mind, so did the lovely harmonies of the Salcombe Community Gospel Choir as they sang Rani Arbo's superb musical setting of Tennyson's *Crossing the Bar*. The Bishop of Plymouth, Rt.Rev. Nick McKinnel, in his address referred to the lifeboat "batling its way over the Bar, the crew, well aware of the risks, the relatives and villagers watching as disaster struck".

Drawn in unison to vantage points and cliff paths on both sides of the harbour, crowds again assembled, this time to watch the respectful commemoration of that tragedy near Salcombe Bar while afloat, a flotilla of six lifeboats, old and new, slowly made its way to the scene of disaster. *Joan Bate*, the Salcombe inshore lifeboat with James Cooper at the helm, led the fleet. Then followed the Salcombe all weather lifeboat,



*Baltic Exchange III*, Plymouth ALB, *Sybil Mullen Glover*, and three ex-lifeboats, *City of Bradford III* with long serving ex-coxswain of Salcombe lifeboat, Frank Smith at the wheel, *Samuel and Mary Parkhouse* (now named *Oniros*) on service at Salcombe from 1938 to 1962 and *Mary Irene Miller*, previously from Port Patrick and

recalling strong associations with Salcombe from the past. Scores of local boats followed at a respectful distance; the scene reminiscent of many such lifeboat processions, both joyous and sad but this day stood out, as the disaster was one of the worst in RNLI history and the impact was momentous. On reaching the Bar, four wreaths were laid simultaneously from Plymouth and Salcombe ALBs, from the ILB (by James Cooper on behalf of his family) and from *City of Bradford III*, into calm waters as the flags of the lifeboats, which had been at half-mast were hauled close up - a signal to the small arms party of three from Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth waiting in the gardens of The Bolt, to fire a thirteen gun salute in honour of those lost. This duty was to have taken place from the decks of Type 23 Frigate, *HMS Sutherland*, but unfortunately, other urgent operational tasking took her elsewhere. Rowing Club crews of the three wooden local gigs, raised oars in tribute.

Contrasts with 1916 could not have been more starkly conveyed. The fleet of lifeboats, three modern with outstanding capabilities, three of historically varying design but none without engine power or (apart from the ILB) protection from the elements. Calm, benign conditions of sea and sky, though welcome, only emphasised the horrendous conditions in which the thirteen perished and the two endured. No roaring of wind and waves this day, instead the roaring of powerful lifeboat engines and thunderous noise from the Coastguard helicopter overhead. In our age of high technology and instant communication, thoughts of the crew of the *William and Emma* with their cork lifejackets, sails and oars, denied the chance of recall, only increased admiration and put the disaster into perspective. The sound of bagpipes from the foredeck of Salcombe lifeboat leading the fleet back into harbour, added to an already emotionally charged scene. A previous member of the Salcombe crew, lone piper, Reggie Gough is now a rescue helicopter winchman.

After the ceremony, relatives, many having travelled some distance including one from Australia, were entertained to lunch at Cliff House while the lifeboat contingent gathered for a buffet at the Harbour Hotel. Andrea Hemsley, granddaughter of James Canham, spoke on behalf of survivor's relatives for television coverage when she said, "My mum was only four-and-a-half when her father died, but she remembered the day clearly. She talked about it all of her life, it deeply affected her and her family and had a devastating impact on

the community in Salcombe. It's been incredible to come back to commemorate and hear such stories, it brings the whole thing to life. It's emotional and upsetting but my mother, if she was around, would have been so thrilled that the anniversary is being marked in such a fitting way. On behalf of all the descendants I would like to say thank you to all the people involved in the organisation."

Above the Bar, a large boulder, bearing a commemorative plaque, had been erected to the west on the upper cliff path, a similar one is now on the opposite side of the water above Limebury Point. A new plaque naming the fifteen crew was dedicated in the church at the end of the service by the Bishop of Plymouth, as part of the centenary, together with a model of the *Baltic Exchange*. In the Lifeboat Museum can be seen a model of the *William and Emma* (which was placed at the front of the church for the service). The only remaining fragment of the hull, Eddie Distin's watch stopped at the time of capsize and the drogue used for steadying the boat can be seen in the Maritime Museum. Gravestones of the crew in Shadycombe Cemetery had been cleaned and specially identified for the centenary with distinctive markers bearing names and photographs.

**The Salcombe Lifeboat Disaster** written by Roger Barrett and published by Salcombe Lifeboats offers a comprehensive account of events leading up to the fatal capsizing on October 27th 1916 and its sad aftermath.

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## CONDUCT IN VICINITY OF CETACEANS

Dolphins and porpoises are highly sensitive to a sonic environment beneath the waves; a world of sound in which we are unable to participate unaided, or even imagine. They use sound for locating and capturing food, for locating and communicating with each other, detecting predators and generally navigating, especially in dim light. Interference from motorised vessels is inevitably caused by frequencies overlapping or distorting audio patterns so vital to their well being thus leading to stress particularly for pregnant mothers and those caring for young. However, if boat owners take care to observe simple codes of conduct, happy co-existence between human and marine mammal can be achieved and enjoyed.

Scientific studies of dolphin behaviour confirm they are likely to avoid directly approaching vessels by swimming rapidly away or prolonging periods of submergence. However, they are inquisitive creatures, sometimes appearing to relish interaction by swimming alongside moving craft, diving beneath, rolling sideways in order to observe crew and riding the bow wave. All very thrilling encounters so long as the dolphins come and go on their own terms.

Codes of conduct have been drawn up by Brixham Seawatch, Marine Connection and the Sea Watch Foundation. The following is an attempt to include all points of advice to mariners.

- Never pursue dolphins or steer directly towards them.
- Do not make sudden changes of speed or course - slowing down or stopping suddenly can confuse and alarm dolphins as much as sudden acceleration.
- If you sight dolphins within a distance of one kilometre, maintain a steady speed of no more than ten knots, preferably slower and never go closer than 100 m.
- No more than 3 vessels should be within a kilometre from them and only one boat within 100m.

- Avoid the possibility of boxing them in between boats or encircling them.
- Limit your presence in the area to 20 minutes.
- Do not call others to join you and do not draw attention to what you have seen.
- Do not swim with, touch or feed them for your safety and theirs. Disease may be transmitted either way and their sheer size and power can be dangerous.
- Avoid dolphins with young.
- Avoid steering between groups.
- Boats with low engine noise and sailing vessels need to take special care to avoid collision as they may not be detected so quickly especially if more powerful vessels are nearby.
- Extra care and sensitivity needs to be exercised around solitary dolphins as they may actively seek contact with boats or swimmers. Both parties could be adversely affected.

All the above points of advice are merely common sense yet sadly, not so common as one would assume as an observation from the cliff top a few years ago illustrates. A pod of around twenty dolphin, making their way westwards, were leaping, turning, circling around each other, cavorting in such a way as to appear exuberant and progressing at a leisurely pace. They were spotted however, from a small motor craft nearby. Within minutes, many more boats congregated and pursued the animals with complete disregard for their safety. It was a heartbreaking sight as the pod returned eastward, speeding to escape, totally without the playfulness previously seen and the youngster among them having difficulty keeping up.

It is an offence to disturb cetaceans or basking sharks. Reckless or intentional injuring or killing may lead to a prison sentence.



# Friends Of Prawle Point



**‘The annual Devon Tea was held as usual in August in Prawle Village. The number of people through the door was down on previous years, partly due to the fact that it was a lovely afternoon and people gravitated towards beaches and cliffs.**

However there was a steady stream of people who wanted to taste our delicious savoury and sweet items on offer. This year we didn’t have a Tombola but we did have a small table sale which proved popular. In the end we were pleased to report a final profit of £303-20’.

## NCI PRAWLE POINT: INCIDENTS TO DATE



### 16.07.16

Pan Pan from yacht *Moksha* with engine failure. We advised HM Coastguard that we had the casualty visual. The vessel was assisted by the fishing vessel *Noah Gil* and then *Bintumani*, *Moksha* is taken in tow by the Salcombe RNLI All Weather Lifeboat and towed into Salcombe Harbour

### 17.07.16

Yacht *Liberte* reported no power. We advised HM Coastguard that the casualty was visible. Two vessels in the vicinity. *Liberte* taken in tow by *Supra* into Salcombe.

### 19.07.16

Mayday from Motor Boat *Zuti*. Engine failure and towing a dinghy. *Last Bug* took *Zuti* in tow, but the tow was lost. *Zuti* then taken in tow by Motor Boat *Tonic*. Salcombe Harbour moorings officer took over the tow at The Bar.

### 07.08.16

Mayday from Rib *Voyager*. Engine failed and drifting towards rocks near NCI Prawle Point. Solent Coastguard telephoned us to see if we had the vessel visual, but we had no visibility in fog. 3 other vessels radioed saying they were searching for the casualty. *Voyager* then restarted her engine and proceeded to Sheldon beach. Mayday cancelled.

### 07.08.16

Pan Pan raised for *Opus*. Communications failed with Solent Coastguard. Eventually Pan Pan raised with Prawle on Channel 65. We contact Coastguard to say we have vessel visual and asked if we could contact the boat on Channel 16. This was refused. Salcombe RNLI launched the Inshore Lifeboat to *Opus* and she was towed into Salcombe.

### 10.08.16

Motor launch *Motley Crew* informed Solent Coastguard their engine was failing and only making 2 knots just off Langerstone Point. We informed the Coastguard we had them visual. Yacht *Quickthorn* offered to turn back and give them a tow. We monitored both vessels as far as Salcombe Bar when Salcombe Harbour Moorings Officer took over the tow.

### 15.08.16

Yacht *Viola* reports she is stuck on a lobster pot line due south of Salcombe. We let Solent Coastguard know we have the casualty visible and will maintain a watch on her. Salcombe RNLI Lifeboat Station send the Inshore boat to assist. *Viola* frees herself and makes her way into Salcombe Harbour.

### 30.08.16

Solent Coastguard called to say they were looking for sports cruiser with engine failure in Starehole and 1 person

overboard. Confirmed we have sighting of vessel answering this description. Gave position of possible casualty and details of 2 vessels in close vicinity. Harbour launch took vessel in tow.

### 09.09.16

Solent Coastguard telephoned us enquiring about 2 Ribs spotted off Bantham Beach travelling very fast. We informed them we had logged 2 Ribs at Prawle Point with blue lights, so very probably Border Force. They thanked us for our input.

### 15.09.16

Solent Coastguard telephoned us re “*Maggie*”. We had logged her first going East and then later going West. The owner was concerned that his son and another person did not have enough fuel to return to the Yealm. We kept an eye on them for some time and mentioned our concerns that they had told Seahorse of their intention to go into Bigbury and were very low on fuel. Coastguard thanked us for our input.

### 19.09.16

Mayday Relay from Solent Coastguard Vessel *Juniper* with damaged rudder taking on water. Coastguard telephones to ask if we have the vessel visual. We confirm that we do and that the Yacht *Marela* was close to *Juniper* and turning towards her. Salcombe RNLI Lifeboat tasked to assist *Juniper*. They put a pump on board and towed her into Salcombe Harbour.

### 05.10.16

At 14:00 *Lady Lou* reported a broken gearbox to Falmouth Coastguard. We reported to the CG that we had *Lady Lou* visual 4 miles off Prawle Point and that there were other vessels nearby. Salcombe RNLI were tasked and took *Lady Lou* under tow to Brixham.

### 22.10.16

Mayday from sports boat Top Cat who had engine failure. We had the casualty visual. Salcombe RNLI launched the Lifeboat and the casualty was towed into Salcombe.

In addition there were 16 activities involving responding to queries from the coastguard, relaying difficult or unreceived radio communications, logging and reporting vessels as visual, being asked by the coastguard to look out for, or monitor progress of, vessels. Advice was given to local hotel staff to call police re possible unexploded ordnance and there were two occasions when local farmers were notified of sheep in trouble.

### 21.10.16

A lone dolphin was spotted 1.5 nm from the lookout.

## SALTY SUPERSTITIONS

### Caul of a newborn

Possession of such a rare object (whether his own or acquired) was believed to protect a sailor from drowning. A caul could command a good price at auction as described by Charles Dickens in *David Copperfield*.

### Flowers

It was believed that flowers brought on board would be destined to become a wreath for a dead crewman or even portend loss of the entire vessel.

### Piercing

Earrings were valued as a charm against drowning. Pierced ears could also commemorate achievements such as crossing the equator or signify survival from a sinking ship.

# HOOK LIGHTHOUSE - COUNTY WEXFORD

## The oldest continually functioning lighthouse in the world

**A visit to Hook Lighthouse is an experience never to be forgotten, for its antiquity, its commanding and impressive position, its sheer girth and size and, not least, the beauty of approach along the Hook Peninsula.**

The Irish do love their superlatives but a little research soon suggests a place in history as the oldest continually operational lighthouse in the world. The Tower of Hercules, at La Corunna in Spain, may be cited as a contender for the record, certainly its origins predate Hook but reconstruction on the same site seems to fuel contention. This article, however, is not an attempt to prove historical pinnacles, more of a tribute to a wonderful, enduring structure.

While it is believed that monks, from a small nearby monastery, maintained a fire beacon of some sort on this site since the fifth century, warning sailors of dangerous rocks in the vicinity, the existing lighthouse was constructed in 1172 by Strongbow's son in law, William Marshall, Earl of Pembroke. Having established a port in the town of New Ross, approximately thirty kilometres up river from Hook, he realised that the port depended for success on ships being able to reach their destination safely, so had a 30 metre tower built at the mouth of Waterford Harbour. The first map showing Hook as a serving light is dated 1240; the loyal monks continuing their service as first custodians and possibly helping construct the present medieval tower. Legend suggests that Vikings, intent on plunder, were so grateful to be warned of danger, they left the monks alone.

Constructed of local limestone, the original building survives intact. The lower tier, thirteen metres in diameter at the base, houses three storeys comprising three spacious chambers each with superb rib vaulted quadrant ceilings and original thirteenth century stone fireplaces. One is named as a coal chamber, another the monastery chamber suggesting the building also served ecclesiastical purposes. These are linked by stairways built within the four metre thick walls which also contain mural chambers including two garderobes. The 115 steps access the original beacon platform now a double balcony affording spectacular views of the fossil bearing carboniferous limestone rocks and the occasional sighting of Fin and Humpback whales. Above this level, a narrower, six metre diameter upper section was added later to accommodate a higher light.

Monks faithfully tended the burning beacon until the first lighthouse keepers were installed in 1671 to maintain a new coal-burning lantern on top of the tower. This was replaced in 1791 by a twelve inch diameter lantern containing twelve lamps fuelled by whale oil. In the 1860s, three dwellings were

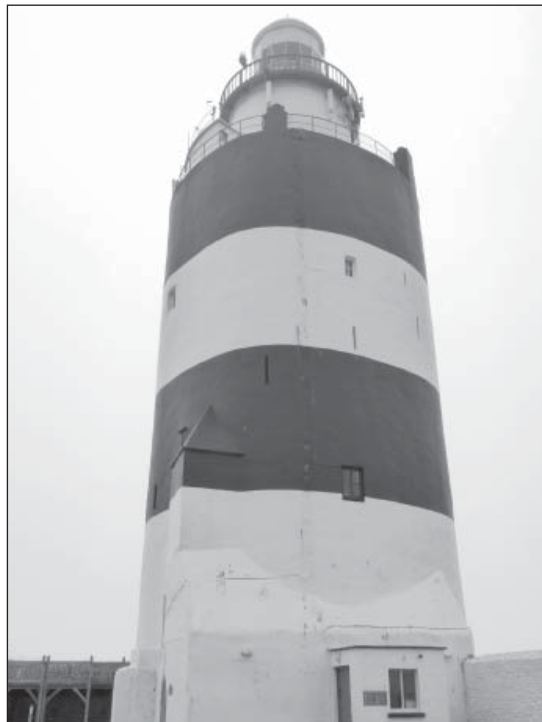
built for the keepers and their families and by 1871, gas lighting became the new power source of the period only to be superseded by paraffin in 1911 when a change of light from fixed to flashing was effected by clockwork mechanism turning a platform bearing three huge lenses, wound up every twenty five minutes by the keeper on duty. Electricity took over in 1972 incorporating light sensitive switches to control the lantern and by March in 1996, keepers became redundant when Hook Lighthouse was converted to automatic function now remotely controlled from Dun Laoghaire by the Commissioners of Irish Lights. So ended an almost eight hundred year period of carrying up the fuel and tending the light.

Dense fog which can descend quickly on the peninsula prompted the firing of fog guns every ten minutes from the cliff edge. This method of warning was later replaced by explosive charges detonated from the top of the tower on an extending arm and finally by a compressed air horn blasting every forty five seconds, heard for the last time in January of 2011 when all foghorns were turned off in deference to the technological advance of modern shipping.

Painted white with two wide black bands, the characteristic is flashing white every three seconds with a range of 23 nautical miles. The keepers' cottages are now open to the public as cafe and visitor centre.

The familiar saying, "By hook or by crook" is normally associated with the medieval custom of allowing

peasants to collect, from royal forests, whatever deadwood they could pull by billhook or shepherd's crook. There is an Irish version, however with maritime rather than agricultural origin. Cromwell was reputed to have said that Waterford would fall to his army when they landed at Hook or at the settlement of Croke on the opposite, western shore of the Waterford Channel. An alternative version relates to the first Norman invasion of Ireland from Bristol and Pembroke. The crossing was perilous so if you failed to land between the safe harbours of Hook in the east or Crookhaven much further west, the wild Atlantic awaited you and the treacherous west coast; better to land by Hook or by Crook.



*Interior of lighthouse showing model of duty officer replenishing paraffin supplies in the monastic chamber.*



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

**Please contact:**

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