

CELEBRATING 200 YEARS OF THE RNLI

In 2024, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) celebrates 200 years of service across the UK. In the two centuries since its inception, the RNLI's dedicated volunteers have saved over 146,000 lives. These brave men and woman have risked life and limb in the selfless service of others.

1824: A NOBLE CAUSE SIR WILLIAM HILLARY

The RNLI was first established through the vision of Sir William Hillary. Hillary lived on the Isle of Mann in the early 19th century and had assisted at many shipwrecks. He saw the desperate need for an organised lifeboat service and in 1823 lobbied the Royal Navy to establish one. When they declined, Hillary persevered and worked to establish a philanthropic voluntary service for the British Isles. On 4th March 1824, an inaugural meeting was held at a City of London tavern for what would become the RNLI. The new organisation was called the 'Royal National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck', later being renamed the Royal National Lifeboat Institution in 1854.



Local children who participated in a sponsored walk for the RNLI are pictured in Portrush in 1987. Chronicle and Constitution Archive.



SHOW YOUR SUPPORT

Despite many changes over the last two centuries, the RNLI still depends on volunteers and the generosity of the public to continue their lifesaving work across our waters. Please scan the QR code to visit the RNLI 200 appeal and donate today!



Crew of the Portrush Lifeboat, 1981. Chronicle and Constitution Archive.



Courtesy of Hugh McGrattan.

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1860

Laura, Countess of Antrim

The first lifeboat station to open in Co. Antrim was at Portrush in 1860. This was in no small way due to the efforts of Laura, Countess of Antrim. Laura had married the 4th Earl of Antrim and moved for a time to Portrush. She persuaded Richard Lewis (then Secretary of the RNLI) of the need for a lifeboat station in the town. Furthermore, when this station was threatened with being moved to Greencastle only three years after it opened, it was the intervention of Laura and the Rev. Jonathan Simpson that prevented its closure. In light of her continued efforts and support, the first lifeboat at Portrush (originally called the *Zelinda*) was renamed the *Laura, Countess of Antrim*.



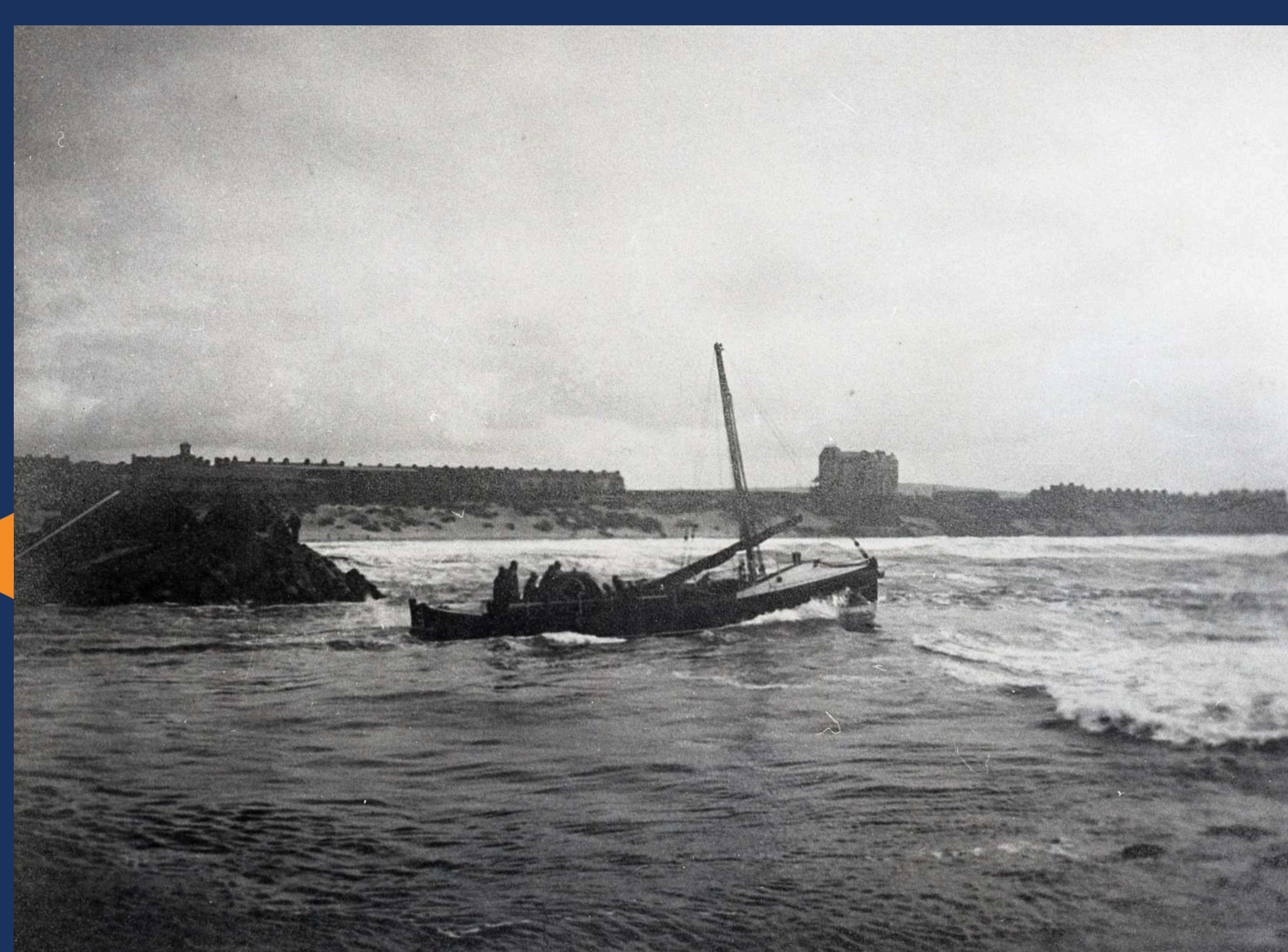
© National Portrait Gallery, London.

1889

Portrush Lifeboat Disaster

Early lifeboats at Portrush were powered through sails and oars, with boats designed to try and keep crews safe in rough seas. Nevertheless, it was still extraordinarily dangerous for the brave volunteers who risked their lives for others.

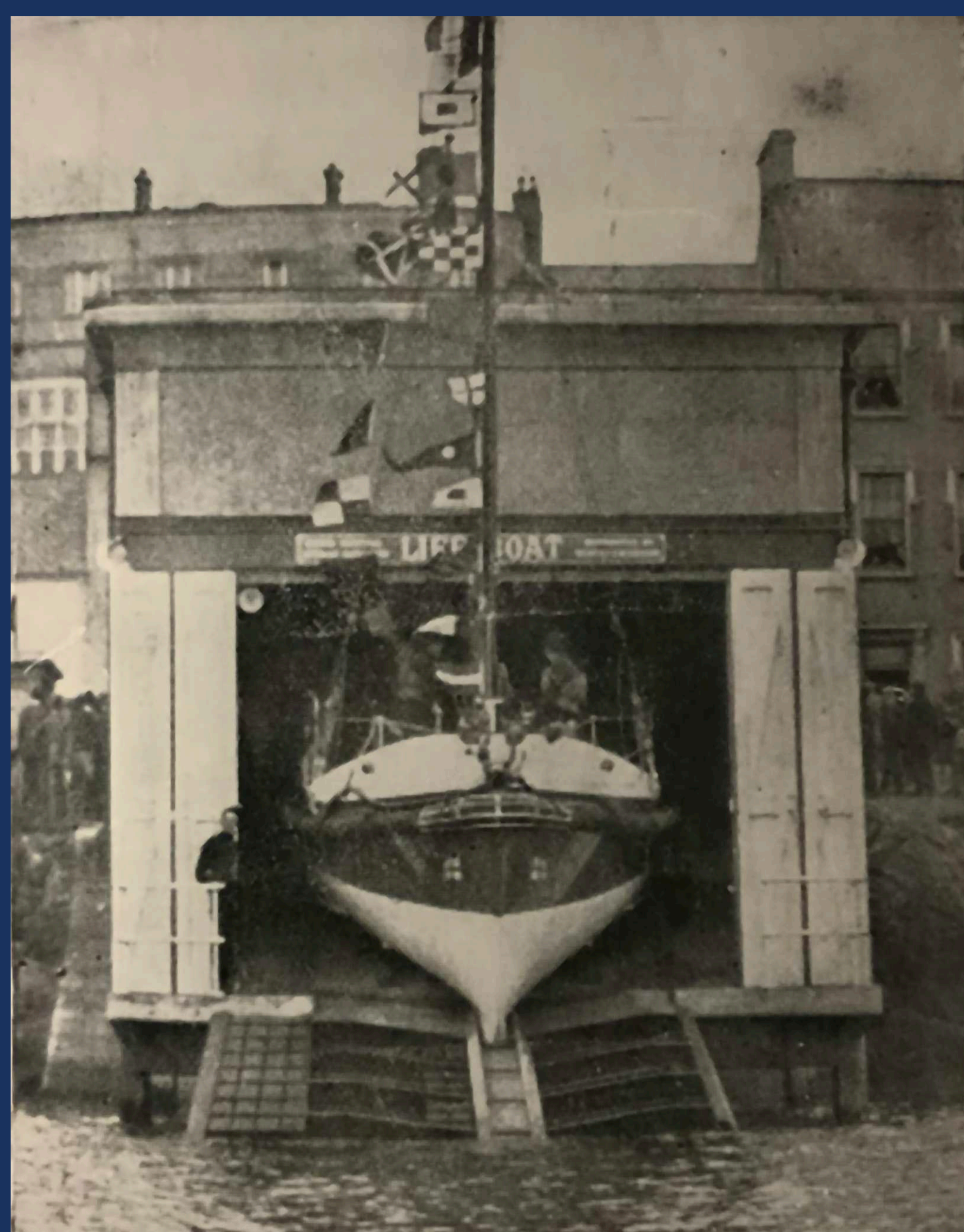
On 1st November 1889, the Portrush lifeboat was launched with 13 crewmen aboard to help the *Dryad*, a ship in distress near White Rocks. This ship would avoid being wrecked but, sadly, the lifeboat itself would be capsized near Portballintrae and three of its crew were drowned. Mr. Galbraith Hamilton Grills was chief officer of the Portrush Coastguard and had received the RNLI's Thanks on Vellum for his work with the lifeboat only a few months before the disaster. Oarsman William McNeill also perished, alongside the lifeboat's second in command, James McAlister, a local fisherman. "They perished after attempting the noblest duty of man towards man, and the memory of their heroic deeds will live long in the breasts of all who knew them."



© Chronicle and Constitution Archive.



The crew of the Hopwood, first launched in Portrush in 1902.
Chronicle and Constitution Archive.



The *T.B.B.H.* (otherwise known as *The Duchess of Abercorn*) at Portrush.
Derry and Antrim Yearbook, 1929.

1924

First motorised lifeboat at Portrush

In 1924, Portrush received its first motorised lifeboat, the *T.B.B.H.* (initials of the boat's four donors). Powered by a petrol engine, this lifeboat cost £7,438 at the time and would serve the community for 25 years. Karl Chambers, a Royal Navy veteran from Princess Street, was appointed as Portrush's first lifeboat mechanic; the beginning of a century of RNLI service by members of the Chambers family.

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1939-1945

Mrs Elizabeth Knox

During WW2, Mrs Elizabeth Knox temporarily took over her husband's role as secretary of Portrush Lifeboat Station after his re-enlistment. Mrs Knox received the RNLI's Thanks on Vellum and Silver Badge in recognition of her wartime role, being the RNLI's first ever female honorary secretary.



Mrs Elizabeth Knox.
Courtesy of Hugh McGrattan.



The *Lady Scott*, pictured in 1960.
Courtesy of Hugh McGrattan.

1962

The *Ella Hewett* Rescue

On 2nd November 1962, the trawler *Ella Hewett* collided with the submerged wreck of the *HMS Drake* near Rathlin Island and got into difficulties. The Portrush Lifeboat *Lady Scott* successfully saved the *Ella's* 19 crew members before it eventually sank.



The crew of the *Lady Scott* are commended for their heroic rescue attempts for the *Bergen*.
Front row: Gilbert Chambers (mechanic), Robert McMullan (coxswain), Jimmy Stewart (2nd coxswain).
Back row: Mack O'Neill, Billy Lee, Nobel Ruddock (RNLI Chief Engineer) and Fred Williams.
Courtesy of Hugh McGrattan.

1965

The *Bergen*

The entire Portrush Lifeboat crew was awarded the RNLI's Thanks on Vellum for their attempts to rescue 5 men lost overboard from the Norwegian frigate *Bergen* on 1st November 1965.

1973

Red Bay Lifeboat Station opens at Cushendall

In 1972, a D class lifeboat was initially trialled at Red Bay before a permanent inshore lifeboat station was established the following year. Alongside Portrush, Red Bay is the second lifeboat station within Causeway Coast and Glens Borough.



1982

Portrush Raft Race established

The first Portrush Raft Race was held on 29th May 1982, acting as a popular fundraiser for the RNLI. It raised £3,500 in its first year and continues to be a much anticipated annual event. In 2023 the Raft Race raised over £25,000.

A raft and its crew pictured at the first ever Portrush Raft Race in 1982.
Chronicle and Constitution Archive.

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Former Mayor of Causeway Coast and Glens Councillor Brenda Chivers pictured with Red Bay Lifeboat Crew in 2019.

1990

Red Bay lifeboat crew commended

Red Bay's crew received a Letter of Thanks from the RNLI's Chairman, in honour of their efforts to assist rescue operations after severe flooding at Cushendall and Ballycastle, October 1990.

2004

RNLI is awarded the Freedom of the Borough by Coleraine Borough Council

2010

Anthony Chambers awarded the RNLI's bronze medal

On 5th August 2009, Portrush Lifeboat mechanic Anthony Chambers saved two boys trapped in a cave by the tide at Castlerock. After several unsuccessful attempts by the inshore lifeboat to enter the cave, Anthony entered the water to rescue the boys. He was awarded the RNLI's bronze medal for his bravery.



Alamy Stock Photo.

2022

The *Ken Blair* named at Portrush

Portrush's latest inshore lifeboat was christened the *Ken Blair* at a ceremony in April 2022. The boat was funded by Sylvia Blair and named in honour of her late husband, a long time shoreline member of the RNLI.

2024

200th Anniversary of the RNLI



Mayor of Causeway Coast and Glens Councillor Steven Callaghan, pictured with Portrush RNLI coxswain Des Austin, RNLI Lifeguard James Wright, RNLI crew member Deborah Smyth and other crew members, launching RNLI fundraising events for 2024.