

Panic on water, madness on the ferry and sad memories

The New Year started for the Harwich lifeboats with several pleasure craft suffering machinery failures. Even after our Sea Safety promotion, boats still put to sea unprepared after being unused during the winter months and it is clear the owners have given no consideration to maintaining or servicing the boats' engines. Often the problem is caused by a simple failure and a little TLC could have prevented a panic call to the Coastguard who task the Harwich Lifeboats.

A recent call to a passenger ferry in Harwich Harbour was to a person falling overboard, which is always considered to be a serious event. It transpired the passenger jumped off the ship, not because he was an illegal immigrant trying to avoid deportation (as happened some time previously), but because one of his mates on the inbound vessel had dared him to jump! The man was in his thirties and in a party of 90 travellers about to disembark. If this is the way young adults get their kicks today then I must be living on another planet. The fact that he walked away without any problems after being pulled from the water was down to good fortune rather than good judgement. He was recovered from the water by the workboat Maggie M which was in the vicinity and transferred to the Inshore Lifeboat which took him to the lifeboat station where he was medically examined by local paramedics.

The new service boards for the Harwich lifeboats are to be installed on the south facing, outside wall of the station. The boards, which note the history of effective services by all the station's lifeboats, have been researched and compiled by the Assistant Mechanic Andrew Moors (Morph). Fifteen boards have been ordered and we hope to have put them in place in good time for this year's summer season.



In 1939, the SS *Simon Bolivar* sank off Harwich with the loss of 88 lives. This terrible disaster is commemorated by a display using the registration plate of one of the vessel's lifeboats and this photograph that has recently come to light, which is also to be installed in the boathouse.

Captain Rod Shaw (Honorary Operations Manager)

Heroes of Harwich who laid down their lives in the service of others

Sally Wink, a direct descendant of William Wink, attended the unveiling of the memorial at Poole (shown right) and retells the events of that fateful day in 1881 when her great, great, great grandfather perished in the waters of Harwich harbour

William Wink was an experienced seafarer who lost his life when the *Springwell* lifeboat capsized during a hurricane. He was described as a well conducted and respected man who owned his own fishing boat, *Atalanta*, which he worked with his two sons, William and James; he lived in Market Street, Harwich with his wife Sarah and their sons. Ken Brand, local lifeboat historian, said in a newspaper interview in January, 2006 "I think old William deserves to be remembered – he played a part in keeping crews safe for the next 125 years." The article said his death marked a mini revolution in lifeboat techniques and equipment, ensuring future lifeboat crews would never face the danger he encountered. This is William's story:

It was between 9 and 10 am on January 18, 1881 when the Norwegian barque *Italia*, inbound from New York with a cargo of maize, was struck by a severe gust of wind which threw her off course. The captain ordered both anchors to be dropped but both ran out and were lost; the barque was then observed flying signals of distress on the ridge just outside Harwich harbour.

The wind was furious south easterly with blinding snow squalls. Signals told of the disaster outside, and within the harbour vessels were breaking free from their moorings and collisions were occurring. On the seafront the roaring sea caused a lot of damage, the spray carried over the Coastguard building and the Green was completely covered with water, the wind in the town lifted slates and tore down chimney pots. Old sea salts were quoted as saying they never knew the like.

Because of the tremendous surf breaking on the beach near the slipway it was impossible to launch her in the usual way. Mr Miller, the Great Eastern Railway Company's Assistant Marine Superintendent and Station Master gave permission to use the steam crane on the Continental Pier to lower the *Springwell* into the water. They had to pull the boat themselves on a carriage down to the quay where Captain D'Arcy Irvine, from *HMS Penelope*, supervised some of his crew getting the *Springwell*, which was a 35ft



sailing boat, from the carriage and into the water. At 11.30, the lifeboat crew set the fore, main and mizzen canvas closed reef and the *Springwell* then started on her perilous journey in front of a crowd of spectators

It was a brief voyage; the sail had hardly been set when the boat went over on her side and then turned completely over, remaining keel uppermost for 30 seconds. When she righted the crew were seen struggling in the waves, two men clung to the thwarts and were able when the boat righted to offer assistance to their comrades one at time so as not to upset the boat. Lifeboats from the GER steamers *Claud Hamilton*, *Adelaide* and the corvette *Penelope* were lowered to help rescue the remaining men in the water; they succeeded in helping all but one.

The wind and tide carried William fast up the Stour. Captain Irvine said the poor fellow had drifted nearly two and a half miles before he was picked up in a very exhausted state; he was wearing a cork lifejacket and lying on his back and was drifting at a rate of a mile and a half an hour. He was taken onboard a smack where everything possible was done for him, but he died soon after and in the evening the smack took the lifeless body to land.

The *Springwell* drifted up stream before the crew were able to gain control and she was finally beached at Ray Island where she was left until later. The weary lifeboat crew walked for two hours back to the lifeboat station, arriving at the same time as William's body was carried from the harbour.

William's funeral took place on January 22. Coxswains



The medal presented to William Wink by the French

J Tye and W Britton, together with the rest of the lifeboat crew, followed the hearse through the town to Dovercourt cemetery. Rev RE Gay, Curate at St Nicholas Church, solemnized the last sacred rites at the cemetery.

At the inquest at the New Bell Inn the foreman said, "The *Springwell* was not fit for use at Harwich. I believe if she had been a boat like those at Aldeburgh and Yarmouth the accident would never have occurred. The *Springwell* is not large enough for Harwich. The boat was only 150 yards from the quay when she capsized."

The jury expressed almost unanimous agreement and Inspector Guy said that was also the feeling of the general public. A jurymen, Mr. Raven, said the *Springwell* had no business to go out, and he supposed it was through reports in the local papers stating that the Harwich men were cowards, that she went out. The verdict: accidental death. The jury also wished to bring to the attention of the lifeboat institution the need for a larger lifeboat. On February 3 the Lifeboat committee expressed their deep sympathy to William's widow and voted £100 for her benefit in addition to paying for the funeral expenses of £13.8s.6d.

The *Italia* floated off on the next high tide and continued her voyage to Ipswich. It turned out her crew were never in any danger.

William is named on the National Maritime Memorial website which shows a picture of his headstone which was erected through public subscription. He had been awarded a French medal in 1873 for his involvement in another lifeboat rescue. His son William was also a member of the lifeboat crew. By November 1881 the *Springwell* was replaced with a 45ft boat. That was also the last year the boat would be kept in the lifeboat house, and every one since has been kept afloat.

Sally Wink adds: "Paul Smith, the present Coxswain of Harwich lifeboat, asked if I would like to attend the memorial service at Poole, which I was very keen to do, not only for myself but for my dear granddad who was also very keen to see some recognition for William.

"In January 2001 my granddad and Aunt Janet were pictured at St Nicholas church for an article in the Gazette announcing plans for the new lifeboat station and asking their thoughts on the proposed memorial and records room which would form part of the new station and include William.

"William is still important to me and my family. I was proud to be there for him. As Thomas Cocking said — they are all heroes."

GEORGE WYATT: another life lost at sea The story of a second Harwich lifeboatmen who gave his life has recently come to light. George Wyatt, a Harwich fisherman, drowned in February 1869 while trying to save the crew of the Danish schooner *Alvilda*, which had run aground on Long Sand during atrocious weather conditions. It was being pounded by mountainous seas in hurricane strength winds and, in what was described as one of the most heroic of rescue attempts, four local fishing smacks went to the aid of the vessel. George Wyatt, in his smack the *Alfred* was sadly lost. Wyatt was a member of the Harwich lifeboat crew and had previously been awarded the RNLI's Silver Medal for an earlier gallant rescue. His name is to be added to the Poole memorial