

Fishguard's most famous lifeboat was launched 100 years ago and is still afloat. Now moves are under way to provide a permanent home for the vessel in the town

Centenary return for *Charterhouse*?

THE LIFEBOAT which was involved in the most gallant rescue ever undertaken by the crew of the Fishguard Lifeboat service, could be returning to the town where she was officially launched a century ago.

It was on a stormy December night in 1920 that flares were spotted in Fishguard Bay. They had been fired from the Dutch schooner *Hermina* which had anchored in the Bay, just outside the breakwater, to ride out the gale.

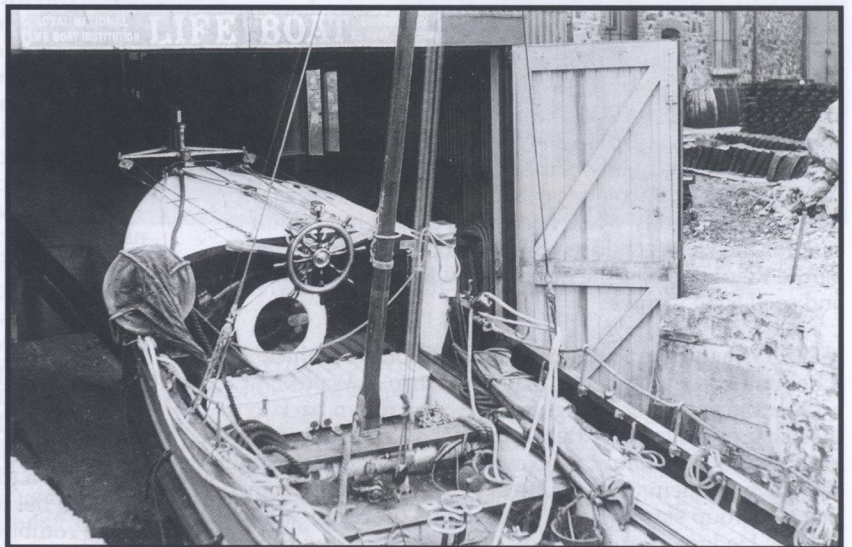
In the mountainous seas the ship began to drag her anchor, taking her slowly but inexorably towards the cliffs and Needle Rock.

The lifeboat crew quickly assembled at the lifeboat slip in Goodwick, and with coxswain John Howells in command *Charterhouse* was launched. She was equipped with sails and oars, but also had an engine and was able to motor across the bay to the stricken vessel.

Here the problems began, because the seas were so high that the lifeboat could not approach too close to the *Hermina* for fear of being entangled in the ship's rigging.

However, thanks to great courage and seamanship over the course of more than an hour, seven members of the Dutch crew were rescued.

Three other crewmen – the captain, the chief officer and the second mate – all decided to stay with the ship, despite warnings from coxswain Howells that the vessel was doomed to be wrecked on the lee shore.



Charterhouse awaits her naming ceremony in 1909.

Leaving the Dutchmen to their chosen fate, the lifeboatmen now had to undertake the hazardous voyage back across the exposed Bay to the shelter of the breakwater. The huge waves which had constantly washed over *Charterhouse* had drenched the engine so that it wouldn't start. This left the lifeboat reliant on sail and oar power.

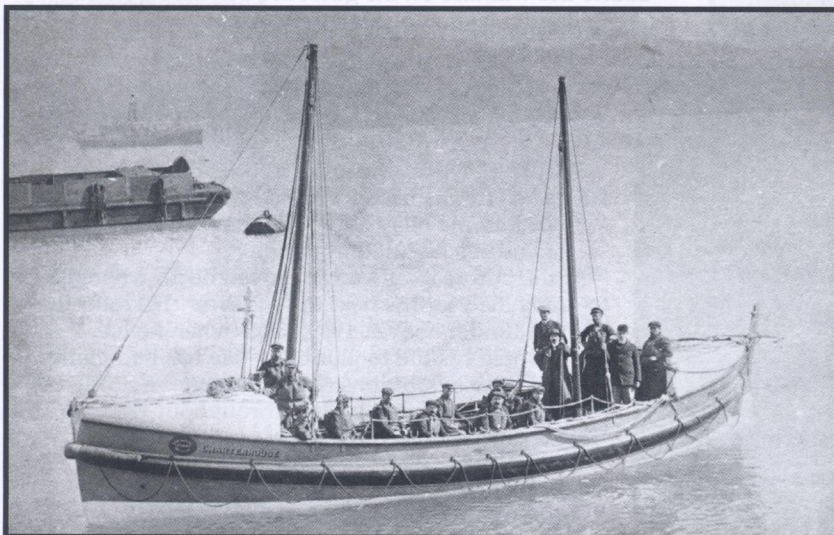
Soon they had even more problems. Having set the mizzen sail – the easier one to raise in the conditions – the crew members were dismayed to see the sail being shredded to ribbons by a ferocious blast of wind.

This left them reliant on the oars alone, unless the jib sail could be set. This was a very dangerous operation in the circumstances, with waves constantly breaking over the bows.

Two crewmen, Tom Davies and Tom Holmes, crawled forward onto the bow air tank and despite the danger of being washed overboard at any moment they managed to set the jib sail.

This allowed *Charterhouse* to sail away from the cliffs and the *Hermina*, although she still had to beat two miles out to sea before being able to tack back into the safety of the harbour. In all, the crew were at sea at night in appalling conditions for over three hours.

Meanwhile another courageous rescue was taking place at Needle Rock, where the *Hermina* had finally come to grief and was starting to break up.



Putting *Charterhouse* through her paces in Fishguard Bay. All the images in this article were provided by Philip Davies whose website, www.PembrokeshiresPast.com, contains details of all his publications

One of the three men remaining on the ship was swept overboard to his death, but the other two were rescued thanks to the courage of William Morgan who was lowered by rope down the cliff face to rescue them.

Coxswain Howells received the RNLI's highest honour, a gold medal, for his part in the rescue, and also received a gold watch from the Queen of the Netherlands. Tom Davies, Tom Holmes and motor mechanic Robert Simpson received RNLI silver medals and there were bronze medals for the other crewmen. The awards were made in London, the men travelling by train – as did the lifeboat *Charterhouse* which was guest of honour at the award ceremony at the Palace of Westminster.

THE *Charterhouse* lifeboat had been presented to Fishguard in 1909 by the Old Carthusians – former pupils of Charterhouse School. There had been a lifeboat at Fishguard since 1855, but the port had just become an important ferry terminal and there was now a need for a state-of-the-art motor lifeboat.

After undergoing sea trials off Harwich, *Charterhouse* battled bad weather around the south coast, taking 22 days to reach her station at Goodwick in October 1909. Her naming ceremony took place in December, a bottle of champagne being broken across her bows by the wife of the Master of Charterhouse School.

Charterhouse remained at Fishguard until 1931 when she was replaced after two decades of sterling service. She was later converted into a private yacht and spent the 1930s sailing around the south and west coasts of England and Wales under the name *Marian*.

After lying on the mud during the war, the *Marian* became a holiday boat for a family named Lomas and was fitted with new diesel engines. She even paid a visit to Fishguard while on a passage to north Wales – the last that anyone in Pembrokeshire had seen of her until recently.



The vessel, now named Marian, as she looks today.

It was while he was researching various aspects of the history of Fishguard that Mr Philip Davies became fascinated by the story of the *Charterhouse*. A retired schoolteacher, Mr Davies has devoted his retirement to collecting old photographs and artefacts relating to the history of the area.

He uses this material to create beautifully produced, limited edition books on such subjects as Fishguard Sea Cadets, the visits of the Booth liners en route from the Amazon, and the photographic history of Goodwick.

"I don't do it as a commercial venture but as a hobby," he explained. "I give one or two books to friends, and a complete set of my titles is available in the local library for people to look at, but that's as far as it goes."

This is an important year of anniversaries in Fishguard and Goodwick, marking the centenary of the junior school as well as being 100 years since the *Mauretania* first called and



Coxswain John Howells.

Charterhouse was launched. Mr Davies has been busy producing limited edition books and booklets to mark each event (he has just republished the rare 1909 Fishguard guide) and it was while compiling the *Charterhouse* book that he began to wonder about the vessel's current whereabouts.

"I tracked her down to north Wales and searched around the ports and harbours until I found her," he said. "She is still seaworthy, sitting on the mud but floating on every tide, and the Lomas family used her as a holiday houseboat until recently."

It was while he was chatting with the family that Mr Davies was stunned to be asked if the people of Fishguard would like their famous lifeboat back!

"The Lomases were finding the boat a bit beyond living on and were thinking about disposing of it," he said. "I asked how much they wanted and they said they would be happy to give the old boat free of charge if it could be displayed in Fishguard."

"What a wonderful opportunity for us to reclaim a lifeboat which is a legend in this area – and in her centenary year," he added.

Mr Davies believes that *Charterhouse* could be restored to her original condition without too much difficulty, and he would love to see the vessel become part of a permanent RNLI display, either afloat or high and dry on Goodwick's Parrog.

He and Clr Richard Davies are in the process of forming an action group to bring *Charterhouse* home to Fishguard; he can be contacted on 01348 870214 or e-mail info@PembrokeshiresPast.com.



Philip Davies (right) chats with members of the Lomas family who are prepared to donate the former lifeboat to the town of Fishguard.