

TREACHEROUS SEAS – HEROIC RESCUES

Robert 'BOB' Hook (1828-1911)

Introduction

From the beginning of the 19th century, the North Sea had become an international highway with boats criss-crossing between Britain and the Continent in huge numbers.

At the same time, in spite of all the skill and experience available and continuing technical development, being at sea was still a very dangerous enterprise. Stranded wrecks and threatened crews were an all too common sight around the British Isles. Lack of communication between ships, difficulties of finding exact nautical positions and the power of sail or engine against wind and weather all added to unforeseen misfortune.

The East Anglian Coast was particularly difficult to navigate with its treacherous sandbanks. On this dangerous stretch of coast the lifeboat station in Lowestoft was one of the earliest in the British Isles to be founded (1801). Hook's rescues were not just local events and publicity often reached the national news. Many of the shipwrecked boats and crews were not British but, before the raging sea and the weather, every man was treated as an equal. Until the early 1920s, lifeboats were powered only by their crews' manual strength pulling the oars and a set of sails, often against the most extreme winds and tides.

A 'Local Hero'

Among the many men who risked their lives to save others, Robert William Hook is probably one of the most famous. He has been credited with saving over 600 lives during his career, both with the RNLI and private companies.

Robert 'Bob' Hook was a true Lowestoft man. He was baptised on the 24 July 1851, married (twice) and was buried 28 June 1911, all at St. Margaret's Church. He was well known in the community, never moving far away from where he was born. He stayed around the 'Beach' village moving from Whapload Street to 32 Mariner's Street later in life. He was connected to the local community not only through his family, his fishing and courageous life saving exploits, but also by being, as listed in the census, a 'beerhouse' keeper first at the Rising Sun on Whapload Road and later at The Fisherman's Arms.

Robert Hook's life has been re-constructed in detail on the next page from records that can be found at Lowestoft Record Office. These include census returns, parish registers, local newspapers, press cuttings and various maritime records (see Maritime Resources at Lowestoft Record Office).

Robert 'Bob' William Hook: The Man

Baptised 11 June 1828

Married 24 July 1851 and 21 May 1881

Died 28 June 1911

Robert William Hook was baptised at Lowestoft St Margaret's the son of Robert and Elizabeth Hook, nee Ellis. His baptismal entry reads:

11 June 1828: Robt Wm son of Robt and Elizabeth Hooke (sic), maiden name Ellis, of Lowestoft, Fisherman.

He was the middle child of three children born to this couple who were married at St Margaret's church in 1824.

Members of Hook's family are recorded on the Lowestoft census return of 1831 as being 1 household of 3 men (this would be Robert senior and his sons Robert and William Ellis) and 2 women (Elizabeth and their daughter Betsey). By 1851 the family is recorded as living at Whapload Way, the only child at home is Robert but his brother William E Hook is listed in the next door but one property.

Robert married for the first time in 1851 at St Margaret's church and the marriage entry reads as follows:

24 July 1851: Robert William Hook full age bachelor fisherman of Lowestoft.

Father Robert Hook fisherman

Charlotte Howard 21 spinster living at home of Lowestoft. Father John Howard labourer, deceased

The couple's names are recorded on two census returns, living at The Rising Sun, Beach (1861) and The Rising Sun, Whapload Road (1871). On both census returns Robert is described as a fisherman and beerhouse keeper. There are no children recorded to this couple on either census.

Charlotte Hook died in the September quarter of 1879 and in 1881 Robert is recorded as a widower and beerhouse keeper at The Fisherman's Arms. In the same household is a housekeeper, Sarah Goldsmith with one of her sons, Charles. In May 1881 Robert married his housekeeper. The entry in the St Margaret's register reads:

4 July 1851: Robert William Hook 51 widower mariner of Lowestoft.

Father Robert Hook, deceased

Sarah Ann Goldsmith widow 43 of Lowestoft.

Father William Hewson farmer

The couple's names are recorded in the subsequent census returns at The Fisherman's Arms, Whapload Road (1891) and 125 St Peters Street (1901). In 1891 Robert is listed as being a beerhouse keeper and in 1901 a retired fisherman. Yet again no children are recorded to this couple; the only children listed in the household are Sarah's children by her previous marriage.

Hook was still at 125 St Peter Street in 1902, but sometime between 1901 and 1907 moved to 32 Mariner's street and he was recorded at

the time of his death in 1911 as being a beerhouse keeper of this same address.

Robert Hook died on 28 June 1911 and the Lowestoft Journal of 1 July 1911 published this obituary:

"Lowestoft's great lifeboat hero is dead. For months past, the gnarled, weather beaten old sea warrior, of giant frame - he stood over 6ft 3 ins and once of immense strength, has laid helpless as a child, and on Wednesday afternoon he passed peacefully away, his death being in vivid contrast with the

strenuousness of his young days, when he was Coxswain of the lifeboat, and when, with lion-hearted courage, and never daunted when the call came to save life, let the storm rage and the sea roar ever so fiercely.

Bob Hook's active days have long been over - he was 84 years of age - and it has been somewhat of a reproach that an effort was not made to render his declining years more comfortable. He has been able to get along, for he was ever thrifty, but it would have been act of grace and an acknowledgement of his splendid services if there had been some recognition"

He was buried in Lowestoft Cemetery on 1 July 1911 and his headstone reads:

In ever loving memory of this brave and noble man Robert William Hook who died June 28th aged 83 years thirty years Coxswain of the Lowestoft lifeboats dearly beloved husband of Sarah Ann Hook "His end was peace"

Robert 'Bob' William Hook: The Lifeboatman

Lowestoft is one of the oldest lifeboat stations in the British Isles having been founded in 1801, twenty-three years prior to the establishment of the RNLI in 1824. Robert William Hook is probably the most famous of the early Coxswains.

He became Coxswain of the Lowestoft lifeboat in 1853, but had joined the lifeboat crew some years earlier. Accounts vary as to whether he was 16 or 19 when he started his RNLI career, but it is confirmed that he was one of the crew of the Beach Company Yawl **Princess Royal** when she put to sea in 1847 to rescue a ship on Holm Sands.

During his time as Coxswain he was awarded an RNLI silver medal, for the rescue of the crew of the **Shamrock** in November 1859, and a second silver medal for the rescue of the crew of the Norwegian brig **Expedite** of Drobak in November 1872. For many the rescue of the **Expedite's** crew aground on Holm Sands off Lowestoft is seen as the crowning moment of his career. Robert Hook and his crew saved ten men in a howling north easterly gale. Conditions were so bad that Henry Hall, a crew member, broke his leg as the heavy seas smashed into the **Laetitia** as she was being towed out of the harbour.

Just ten years later Bob Hook's career was marred and his reputation in tatters. The

stormy weather of 27 October 1882 sent twenty vessels ashore between Great Yarmouth and Southwold but the Lowestoft Lifeboat did not immediately launch. Accounts vary as to why Bob Hook did not immediately respond and pay grievances are given. The men had not been paid for several previous rescues and reports even go so far as to say that Bob Hook locked the lifeboat shed and the door had to be battered down. However, when the Coxswain and crew eventually responded they saved seventeen men that night. The damage was however done to what was up to then a glowing career of rescue and an inquiry followed resulting in Bob Hook receiving the severest possible censure for "gross and wilful neglect of duty".

What exactly happened on the 27 October 1882 is unclear and Bob Hook blamed a break down in communications stating he did not immediately receive the order to launch the boat. At the time of his death in 1911 the Lowestoft Journal of 1 July stated:

"That career was, owing to unfortunate circumstances, which it would do no good to recount, ended some 30 years ago. Bob Hook ceased to be Coxswain of the lifeboat. It was the general opinion at the time, and there are many now who express the view when the subject crops up, that Bob Hook was not to blame for what unfortunately happened - that he was made a scapegoat for the sins of others"

*In the midst of the inquiry, and all this doubt and censure of his very character, Bob Hook and his crew were involved in a daring rescue on 14 November 1882 of eight men from the Norwegian barque **Berthon** stranded on the Holm Sands. The resulting public praise swept away the lifeboat inquiry and was of such magnitude that a medal, the **Berthon Medal**, was struck in their honour.*

The idea for a medal came from a correspondent to the Lowestoft Journal who signed himself Whistling Willie and who claimed to be acquainted with the crew and was sure he and the crew would be proud to wear a medal. Some have thought that this might have been Robert William Hook writing under an assumed name. However, the idea caught on and the medals were struck by E F Crake of Lowestoft and duly presented.

*One wonder's if the inquiry left a sour taste in Coxswain Bob Hook's mouth as he retired from the RNLI in 1883 and became Coxswain of the private lifeboat the **Caroline Hamilton**. He was replaced as the RNLI Coxswain by William Capps.*

Despite the findings of the inquiry Robert Hook's leadership is really beyond question. He was described in the press as a huge man, vast beard and quick to anger but who inspired the crew and was a man of courage; a courage that is reflected in the fact that he was involved in the rescue of over 600 lives throughout his career, both with the RNLI and private companies, and at least one cat and a dog.

*The cat and the dog came from the rescue of the schooner **Horace E Bell** which ran aground at Corton bound for Great Yarmouth with barley. The crew were able to launch the ship's boat and reached port but, unaware of this, Robert Hook took the Lowestoft lifeboat out to rescue the crew. On arriving at the schooner they found only the ship's cat and a dog, which the crew had left behind, and duly rescued them*

*During his time as the RNLI Coxswain Lowestoft had the following lifeboats: **Victoria** , renamed **Laetitia** 1868/9 **Samuel Plimsoll***

The Lifeboats

Victoria renamed Laetitia

Condemned, taken out of service and broken up 1876

<i>Lowestoft Lifeboat</i>	<i>1850-1876 (The previous lifeboat the Frances Ann was taken out of service in 1850)</i>
<i>Official number</i>	<i>-</i>
<i>Launched</i>	<i>41 times</i>
<i>Total lives saved</i>	<i>271 lives</i>
<i>Builders</i>	<i>S Sparham, North Beach, Lowestoft</i>
<i>Built for</i>	<i>Lowestoft No.1 station</i>
<i>Renaming the lifeboat</i>	<i>In 1868 a lady presented to the RNLI, through Mrs & Miss Prince of London, the cost of a lifeboat and the Lowestoft Lifeboat Victoria was appropriated to that gift and renamed Laetitia. 29 January 1869 saw the first rescue launch under her new name to the Shields brig Queen of the Tyne</i>
<i>Cost of construction</i>	<i>Unknown</i>
<i>Description</i>	<i>Norfolk & Suffolk Class</i>
<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>42ft 6 x c11 ft 8</i>
<i>Propulsion</i>	<i>Sail & oars</i>

Samuel Plimsoll

sold in 1905

Lowestoft Lifeboat 1877-1905

Official number 22

Launched 83 times

Total lives saved 165 lives

Builders S Sparham, North Beach, Lowestoft

Built for Lowestoft No. 1 Station

Naming of the lifeboat *The inhabitants of Derby raised the money for the new Lowestoft Lifeboat. To mark this fundraising she was named after one the MPs for Derby, Mr Samuel Plimsoll. Mr Plimsoll performed the naming ceremony on 21 December 1876 at Sparham's yard on the North Beach and broke a bottle of wine on the stem.*

An appropriate choice of name, seeing that Samuel Plimsoll was an ardent campaigner for seamen and is famous the world over for introducing the Plimsoll Line.

Description Norfolk and Suffolk Class

Dimensions 44ft x 12 ft 6 inches

Propulsion Sail and 14 oars

Note: *The Plimsoll line was introduced in 1876, just one year before this lifeboat was launched, following an amendment to the 1871 Merchant Shipping Act. It provided for the marking of a line on a ship's sides, which would disappear below the water line if the ship was overloaded.*

The Shamrock

The Ship

The SS Shamrock of Dublin was lost on the South East part of Holm Sands, Lowestoft (52.29N 01.48.30E) on the 26 November 1859.

Her known technical specifications were:

Construction Iron

Propulsion Screw, 3 cylinder compound

The Rescue

The records of the time state that a 'hurricane of wind' was blowing when the crew of the Laetitia put to sea to save the crew of the Dublin steamer Shamrock which was wrecked on the south end of the Holm Sands, off Lowestoft. The seas were so bad they were breaking over the masthead of the steamer and the lifeboat was in danger of being swamped.

The rescue, in which the crew was hauled, one at a time, through the breakers, was described in the Illustrated London News of 26 November 1859 as follows:

"The Lowestoft beachmen seeing the sea breaking heavily over her, and from the south-south-west, and from their experience knowing that no time was to be lost, collected

their people and immediately launched the lifeboat which is in connection with the RNLI, for their rescue. When the lifeboat reached the steamer, the sea was breaking over the mast head, but she was providentially enabled to anchor in a most advantageous position ahead of her, and although the sea broke over her and repeatedly filled her, this excellent lifeboat as often, in her buoyancy clearing herself of the seas was at length, with difficulty, enabled to approach the steamer. A communication was then by ropes established with the wreck and the whole crew of fourteen were hauled by the lines through the sea and brought safely to shore on the lifeboat"

As a result of such bravery the RNLI awarded double pay to each man, £1.00, and a silver medal to Coxswain Hook and his seven crewmen

Robert Hook - Coxswain

James Butcher - Crew member

Richard Butcher - Crew member

Nathaniel Colby - Crew member

Thomas Liffen - Crew member

Alfred Mewse - Crew member

William Rose - Crew member

Francis Smith - Crew member

The Osip

The Ship

The **Osip** of Fiume was lost on Holm Sands, Lowestoft (52.30.10N 01.48.1E) on the 13 January 1866.

Her known technical specifications were:

Built	1848
Construction	Wood
Dimensions	86.94 x 12.62 x 5.81 (metric)
Propulsion	Sail

The Rescue

The Austrian brig the **Osip** of Fiume was bound from Falmouth to Hull with a cargo of maize when she ran aground on Holm Sands off Lowestoft, surprisingly with the Falmouth pilot still on board. The crew however were not, it seems eager, to be rescued.

First to arrive at the wreck were the Young Company of Beachmen, in their yawl **Young Prince**, but when Robert Saunders and Robert Armes managed to board the brig and advised the crew to abandon the **Osip** their services were refused. It is said that the Captain of the brig threatened his men with a revolver over his decision, and he was eventually overpowered, but not before the help offered by the yawl the **Albatross** had also been refused.

By the time the signal was given for the lifeboat to be launched waves were crashing over the **Osip**. The rescue was reported in Dr

Worthington's letter to *The Times* which was published on 17 January 1866 and it states:

"The frightful billows in which the wreck was immersed, and through which the lifeboat had to pass, warned them of the more than probable fate of the poor Austrians...the tug still continued at full speed, the wreck becoming more, and more distinct, when with a simultaneous "hurrah! They are there still", we each seemed to recognise the wave of a hand appearing from the piece of wreck. A minute more had elapsed, we were nearer, and every eye was strained towards the object, when, thank god, we could see the crew clinging with supernatural strength to the fragments of wreck which was still remaining. The tide was gaining quickly we felt no a moment was to be lost...Our suspense was greater then ever as the foresail of the boat was lowered, the crew being apparently undecided whether to fear the danger before them or not; but their bravery decided the fate of the poor fellows...A wave swept every man from his grasp and the lifeboat succeed in rescuing 8 out of the 12 men. The lifeboat now bravely fought her way out of the surf and approached the Rainbow to be taken in tow, and the news was shouted to us of 7 being saved. The crew mustered 12 including the pilot who was hauled into the boat in an insensible condition and died before we reached the harbour. The remaining four men were seen to go down"

Dr Worthington concluded his letter

“The description I have given of this scene can in no degree convey to the minds of any persons not present the heroic, disinterested bravery of the men concerned in saving this crew, who had been for hours clinging to the wreck, expecting every moment their grasp would be broken, and their bodies dashed into the sea”

*One can but wonder at the conditions in which the crew took to sea, and marvel at their bravery. The Gorleston private lifeboat **Rescuer**, (which belonged to the Ranger Company) put out to sea on the same day to go to the aid of another brig and was capsized en route. This awful disaster, which resulted in the loss of eleven of the eighteen crew members and the Coxswain Robert Spillings, had far reaching effects and the RNLI later that year stationed a lifeboat at Gorleston.*

*The reluctance of the crew of the **Osip** to be rescued initially was compounded by the Austrian Government. Details of this rescue were forwarded to the Government of the day, but at the time the country was at war with both Prussia and Italy and the bravery of the Lowestoft lifeboat crew was overlooked, possibly in the chaos of defeat.*

The only reward they received at the time was a few shillings from the Suffolk Humane Society.

*The **Osip** rescue disappeared into lifeboat history but surfaced twenty-six years later when the tale of the daring rescue was related to MPs visiting Lowestoft for the lifeboat trials in April 1892. Letters were once again written to the Austrian Government and the Lowestoft Journal took up the cause to obtain recognition for the lifeboatmen.*

*It resulted in the presentation by the Mayor, Mr B M Bradbeer, and Mr Sherif Foster MP to RNLI Coxswain Hook (by now ex-Coxswain) of a pair of binoculars and 3 guineas. In addition each member of the crew received 1 guinea for each time they had gone out to the **Osip**. The total award was £38 and 17 shillings. The ceremony is reported in full in the Lowestoft Journal of 10 September 1892.*

However, by the time of the presentation nine of the crew of 1866 had already died; namely Ayres, Butcher, Capps, Gallant, Gurney, Liffen, Mewse, Rose and Yallop

*Surely no other lifeboat crew in the UK has ever had to wait as long for recognition as Hook's crew did, twenty-six years after going out to the **Osip** on the 13 January 1866!*



*Coxswain Robert Hook, in the pose of a classical hero holding his RNLI vellum, standing by the entrance to Lowestoft harbour.
Engraved illustration from the Graphic Magazine 10 January 1883
(LRO 1300/72/35/32).*