

## **THE LITTLE SHIPS OF LOWESTOFT** *in the Evacuation of Dunkirk, 1940*

### **What were the Little Ships?**

*In a national emergency early in the Second World War, Britain called for the urgent assistance of small vessels such as lifeboats, river steamers, tugs, yachts, launches and fishing boats. Their mission would be to reach the beaches of Dunkirk to rescue thousands of Allied troops who were cornered in a small pocket of land there by the invading German army. They have since been known as the Little Ships. Vessels from Lowestoft played their part in this astonishing event.*

### **What led to the evacuation?**

*In May 1940, only nine months after war was declared, the British and French armies found themselves facing catastrophic defeat in the port of Dunkirk. The powerful German army, aided by the air supremacy of the Luftwaffe, had advanced relentlessly through Europe, forcing the Belgian and Dutch armies to surrender. Some 200,000 soldiers of the British Expeditionary Forces and 140,000 French troops were trapped in the beach area Dunkirk.*

*The Government was faced with an impending disaster. Military chiefs urgently set up a strategy of rescue for the troops called Operation Dynamo. Their plan was to use small craft to take the men off the beaches of Dunkirk and shuttle them to the larger naval ships waiting offshore. On 14th May, BBC Radio announced that all owners of small boats from the Wash down to the South Coast should contact the Admiralty at once with their details.*

### **The Great Rescue**

*When the time came, boat owners were contacted with their orders, and the great armada of Little Ships, as they were later called, made its way to Dover. Over the next ten days, as battles raged to keep back the enemy, a flotilla of 900 naval and civilian craft crossed the Channel to the beaches of Dunkirk to bring back as many troops as they could before a major German assault.*

*There was great risk involved to these civilian seafarers, even though they were under the command of the Royal Navy and under some protection by the Royal Air Force. Many small craft, such as river steamers, were clearly unsuitable for seagoing and risked capsizing with an overload of troops.*

*During the ten days of hostilities 235 vessels and 106 aircraft were lost and at least 5,000 soldiers were killed. The scenes were often horrific. Ships of all sizes, often manned by exhausted, unfamiliar crews, were coming and going through waters strewn with bodies and wreckage, amid shellfire and dive-bombing. When larger naval ships were sunk, the Little Ships often found they were no longer shuttles but had to cross the Channel over and over again with rescued troops. Not all of them made it.*

### **Local Heroes of Dunkirk**

*North Suffolk contributed many Little Ships to the Dunkirk flotilla. Three lifeboats, the Michael Stephens and Agnes Cross of Lowestoft, and the Mary Stott from Southwold, were called from their duties to help in the secret mission. About 50 Lowestoft trawlers also took part, as well as numerous longshore and river craft.*



*Lifeboat **Mary Stott** of Southwold.  
Photograph: Port of Lowestoft Research Society Collection,  
Lowestoft Record Office (PLRS 5223)*

*Coxswain Albert Spurgeon took the 46ft Michael Stephens to Dover and handed over command to the Royal Navy. In the darkness and chaos of Dunkirk harbour the Michael Stephens was twice rammed by motor torpedo boats as she ferried soldiers out to the big ships waiting in deep water. When the lifeboat returned to Dover she had 52 soldiers on board! During these dangerous days the Michael Stephens rescued over 1500 men. Later, under Coxswain Spurgeon, it towed the badly holed lifeboat Mary Stott back to Southwold.*



*The Drifter **Lord Cavan (LT 680).***

*Photograph: Port of Lowestoft Research Society Collection, Lowestoft Record Office (PLRS 9232)*

### ***A disaster that turned into a victory***

*Dunkirk was the biggest single defeat ever suffered by the British, but it was also one of the most amazing exoduses in history. Far from rescuing 45,000 people that the Government thought was possible, the Little Ships and the Royal Navy rescued a total of 338,226 people from the beaches of*

*Dunkirk. Yet it could have gone badly wrong. Had the weather not stayed fine throughout the evacuation and enabled vessels such as river steamers to cross the Channel safely, far fewer men would have been rescued. But more importantly, Hitler inexplicably commanded his Panzer divisions to halt outside of Dunkirk, which gave the Allies valuable time to escape. A huge military defeat turned into a national celebration, and 'Dunkirk Spirit' became part of the English language.*

### ***The Drifter Lord Cavan (LT 680) — a Dunkirk victim***

*The Lowestoft vessel was one of two from the area that were lost in the hostilities at Dunkirk. The drifter toiled for 10 days and 10 nights picking up soldiers from the beaches before it was sunk. James Mugridge, the skipper and Royal Navy Reservist, was awarded the DSC for his actions.*