

Albert Spurgeon, COXSWAIN



Photograph by Christopher Wilson, reproduced with permission of the photographer's daughter, Mrs Joan Plant. (LRO 598/10/4)

When Albert Spurgeon retired from the lifeboat service in 1947, he had been Coxswain for 24 years, a record for the time. Under his leadership the lifeboats Agnes Cross and Michael Stephens had been launched 200 times, and during 46 years in the service he was involved in the rescue of 600 people – and one lucky black cat from the SS Hopelyn.

He received various medals for valour in his lifetime, including the RNLI silver and RNLI bronze medals, five RNLI vellums, and was recommended for the Distinguished Service Medal (DSM) for his work with the Royal Navy in their evacuation of Norway.

His seafaring heritage

He was born in 1882, the son of William and Elizabeth Spurgeon and spent most of his life in the Beach area of the Lowestoft, the heart of the old fishing community. He married Ellen Keeble in 1902 and they had six children.

He became a lifeboat crewmember in 1905 and replaced the redoubtable John Swan as Coxswain in 1924. As a Beach Company man, Albert had followed the family tradition; his father, William Spurgeon, had served for many years under Coxswain Bob Hook.



Photograph: Port of Lowestoft Research Society Collection, Lowestoft Record Office

Rescue of the Lily of Devon

Albert Spurgeon was Coxswain in the notable rescue of the Lowestoft smack Lily of Devon (LT 96) in November 1927. The boat had been at sea for four days in the most awful conditions and the skipper, Charles Miller, decided to return to harbour accompanied by the smack Pet (LT 560). The Pet, being a larger vessel, successfully entered the narrow harbour entrance. The Lily of Devon was not so lucky. In darkness and with a full gale blowing, the smack missed the entrance completely. Despite the crew's attempts to drop anchor, the vessel was carried by heavy seas towards the South Beach, where it began to break up.

Coxswain Spurgeon and the crew of the lifeboat Agnes Cross made four perilous attempts to reach the stricken smack. Huge waves tossed the lifeboat, smashing part of its engine room casement. The coxswain was dangerously thrown about, but the lifeboat men succeeded in hauling in the smack's crew who were perilously hanging onto the riggings. The Agnes Cross returned to base but required major repairs at the Brooke's shipyard. Remains of the Lily of Devon were visible for many years on the South Beach. They were eventually blown up when it was decided that they had become a potential danger to longshore boats and swimmers.

Albert Spurgeon received the RNLi Silver Medal for his part in this rescue. And the Prince of Wales presented it to him in London at the RNLi Annual Meeting in 1928. The Lowestoft Journal reported that Mr Spurgeon made the prince laugh out loud. What did the fisherman say? According to reports, Mr Spurgeon asked the royal personage to visit his town because, "We have some very nice ladies in Lowestoft; I am sure you would like them." Knowing the Prince of Wales' reputation at the time, Albert Spurgeon probably said it with a wink!



Photograph: Port of Lowestoft Research Society Collection, Lowestoft Record Office



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Wartime service

As a young man in the First World War, Albert received a Lloyd's Medal for the single-handed rescue of seven survivors of a coaster blown up by a mine off Kessingland in 1917. He happened to be fishing there alone at the time.

In the Second World War he helped in the 'Little Ships' rescue effort at Dunkirk, taking the lifeboat Michael Stephens to Dover.

Among the many rescues he was involved in locally, he saved ten of the crew of H.M. Minesweeper 106 that was wrecked off Lowestoft on the night of 30th September 1943. The rescue took eight harrowing hours, during which Mr Spurgeon received an injury to his head. He was by then 62 years old.

He retired after the War and died, aged 72, in 1953.

Fundraising poster including a photograph of Albert Spurgeon, 1933

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