

## John Thompson Sterry Swan AND THE SS HOPELYN RESCUE



Photograph: Port of Lowestoft Research Society Collection, Lowestoft Record Office (LRO 552/PLRS/4)

### Introduction *The Man*

*The rescue of the crew of the SS Hopelyn in October 1922 was a nationally acclaimed act of bravery on behalf of both the Lowestoft and Gorleston lifeboat crews. It resulted in the RNLI awarding 27 lifeboat*

*gallantry medals (2 gold, 2 silver and 23 bronzes) for the one rescue. The gold medal is regarded as the RNLI equivalent of the Victoria Cross and for two to be awarded, one to Lowestoft Coxswain John Thompson Sterry Swan and the other to the Gorleston Coxswain William George Fleming, is a major indication of the bravery of the lifeboatmen involved in this rescue. To place the significance of RNLI gold medals in context it is worth noting that the Lowestoft station, which has over the years received 39 medals, has only ever received two golds; the first in 1827 which was awarded to Lieutenant R B Matthews and the second to John Thompson Sterry Swan. Yes, gold RNLI medals are that rare!*

*John Swan was baptised at Lowestoft St Margaret's on 6 December 1857 the son of Thompson and Rachel Swan. He was the second child of thirteen children born to this couple, but his elder brother Thomas died in 1856 leaving John as the oldest surviving child. The family are recorded on the Lowestoft census returns living at the Beach (1861) and Cumberland Square (1871-1901) and so John was brought up in the very heart of the fishing community off Whapload Road.*

*It is thought that John left school and went to work at about 9 years old. He is recorded on the 1871 census as a boy aged just 14 on board the Zenith.*

*John married Ellen Manning at St Margaret's church, Lowestoft on 10 January 1880. The couple had four children baptised at this church between 1880 and 1886 (Arthur John Howell Swan 1880, Bessie Elizabeth Swan 1882, Edith Ellen Swan 1884 and John Thompson Swan 1886) and one child Frank, baptised at Christ Church, Lowestoft in 1896.*

*John and his family are recorded on various census returns as living at 11 Clapham Road (1881) and 215 Clapham Road (1891-1901). Sometime between 1901 and 1909 John moved to live at Resolute House, 13 Whapload Road and between 1924 and*

1935 John is recorded as living at Hopelyn Cottage, Whapload Road, named after his most famous rescue. Unfortunately the Lowestoft Journal of 26 February 1965 records the imminent demolition of a row of fishermen's almshouses in Whapload Road one of which was Hopelyn Cottage. In 1907 the property had been given to the Lowestoft Charity Board, along with the cottage at the other end of the row, by the drifter owner Mr T E Thirtle as an offering in return for a good fishing season.

John Swan died in Lowestoft Hospital on 20th February 1935 aged 78 years and is buried in St Margaret's churchyard.



Coxswain Swan of the Lowestoft motor lifeboat, who on Thursday received the gold medal of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution for bravery displayed in rescuing the crew of the Newcastle steamer "Hopelyn"  
(Photo—S. V. Waters)

Photograph of Coxswain Swan, Lowestoft Journal 10 February 1923

### **The Lifeboatman**

John Swan's career as the Coxswain of Lowestoft lifeboat was exemplary. He was appointed on 18 January 1911 to succeed John Mewse following a vote in which he beat George Ayres (appointed as his Second Coxswain) 100 votes to 60. John was the nominee of the Young Company of Beachmen for whom he had been

the secretary since its formation in 1892 as well as the Coxswain of their yawl *Georgiana* for 8 years.

His first launch as Coxswain came just two months later on 19 March to the smack *Express LT 173* which was in difficulties near the Claremont Pier. John was to hold the position of Coxswain until his retirement in 1924 some 13 years later.

During his time as Coxswain of the Lowestoft lifeboat he was awarded 1 RNLI gold medal and 2 silvers. The first of these silvers was awarded for the rescue of twenty-two people on 22 November 1914 from two minesweepers, *HMS Spider* and *HMS Condor*. The second came four years later for the rescue of 9 people from *HMS Pomono* on 30 September 1918. His gold was presented at the very pinnacle of his career as Coxswain in October 1922 for the rescue of 24 crew and Tishy the kitten from the *Hopelyn*.

Under Coxswain John Swan the Lowestoft lifeboat was launched 104 times and saved 290 people, 2 cats and a dog. However he is recorded as having been involved in the saving of a total of 407 lives during his service as both a crewmember and Coxswain for both the RNLI and the New Beach Company.

Coxswain Swan retired from the RNLI in June 1924 aged 67 years and on the 30 June 1924 was received at Buckingham Palace by King George V and invested with the insignia

of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.)

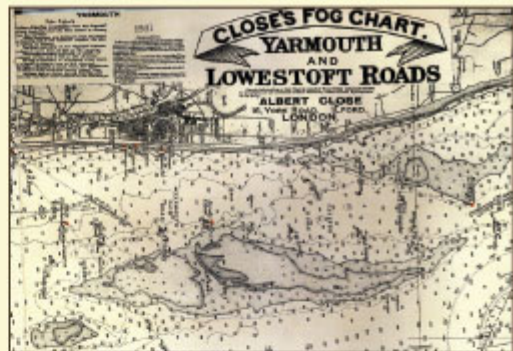
At the time of his death he held the distinction of being the only person to hold both the RNLI gold medal and the RNLI gold badge, which was awarded for his fund raising for the RNLI in April 1935.

### **The Rescue**

The **Hopelyn** was en route, under the command of Captain R Gibson, from Newcastle-upon-Tyne (her home port) to London with a cargo of 3,400 tons of coal when her steering broke down on 18 October. The crew attempted temporary repairs in the hope that they would prove sufficient to make it into port. However, they proved to be ineffective and as the weather deteriorated the order was given to let go both anchors. Neither held and the **Hopelyn** was lost on Scroby Sand, Great Yarmouth (52.3N 01.48E) on the 19 October 1922.

The loss of this ship on the North end of North Scroby Sand is seen as one of the most dramatic at this location and resulted in one of the most spectacular and outstanding rescues involving the combined forces of two lifeboat crews. She was wrecked as a result of the combined forces of a fierce North Easterly gale and a terrific running sea and the conditions did not abate throughout the rescue.

The **Hopelyn** sent out an SOS at 9.30pm on the night of the 19 October 1922 and the



Close's Fog Chart of the Yarmouth and Lowestoft Roads (LRO Local Studies collection)

initial response was made by the Caister lifeboat which was reported as preparing to launch at 9.48pm. However, at 11.00pm the Caister station reported that their boat was unable to get away and the Gorleston lifeboat the **Kentwell**, having been on standby since 9.30pm, was launched at 11.10pm and towed out to the wreck by the tug **George Jewson**. One can only guess at the conditions of the raging sea off Caister which kept their lifeboat on the beach.

On reaching the **Hopelyn** the Gorleston lifeboat **Kentwell**, manoeuvred only by the strength of the crew heaving its oars, was unable to do anything owing to the intensity of the darkness and the terrific seas and they stood by until daybreak. By dawn only the amidships portion of the **Hopelyn** was above the surface, but still the Gorleston crew stood by for a further two hours, looking for any

signs of life as heavy seas swept over the ship. None were spotted and it was assumed that the crew had been lost overboard during the storm and the **Kentwell** returned to harbour. The crew of the **Hopelyn** could only observe what was happening as they had lost their radio mast and they had no distress flares.

The chief officer MacKenzie later stated in a press report:

*“To put your head outside the door of the Marconi room would be simply asking to be washed overboard...it was an impossible task, for waves, which were certainly 30ft to 40ft high...were coming over us and battering down around us with terrific force”*

An hour after her return to port, the Caister Coastguards reported a flag flying on the wreck and again the crew of the **Kentwell** put to sea but again returned empty-handed and damaged as a result of striking the sands. Coxswain Fleming reported it was impossible to get close enough to the wreck due to the seas, broken portions of the hull and the remains of an old wreck some 30 to 40 yards off.

At 3.45pm on 20 October the Lowestoft motor lifeboat the **Agnes Cross**, under Coxswain John Thompson Sterry Swan, put to sea to attempt to rescue the crew, heading first to Gorleston, as instructed, to pick up Commander Carver. On the way out the **Agnes Cross** met up with the returning

**Kentwell** and Coxswain Fleming transferred to the Lowestoft boat to work out a joint rescue plan. By the time they reached the wreck it was again decided to be too dangerous to attempt a rescue in the dark as the **Hopelyn's** steel sides were split open. For the third time the rescue attempt came to nothing and the crew of the **Agnes Cross**, like the **Kentwell** crew before them, had to return to Gorleston empty-handed.

The **Agnes Cross** was re-launched at 4.30am on the 21 October with a crew of ten men from Lowestoft and seven from Gorleston in the face of a north-east gale with squalls and a rough sea; the weather had worsened overnight. Why was there a mixed crew? Well, five of the Lowestoft lifeboat crew had had to return to port on the night of the 20 October as they were skippers and were due to sail the following morning.

By the time they reached the wreck on the morning of the 21 October both the bow and the stern of the **Hopelyn** were under water and the only section that remained above the water was the bridge. The ship had broken its back not long after being driven ashore, from which the survivors were waving a white flag. Twenty-four men and Tishy the black kitten had all been in the Marconi radio house, a mere 12ft square, for 36 hours. The rescue is recorded in Coxswain Swan's logbook in very few words:

*“.....I got such a poor account of the wreck that I decided to wait until daylight next morning, so we returned to Gorleston. We left at 4am and arrived at the wreck at 6am, let go the anchor, wore down on her, took off all the crew and a black cat.....”*

*This was clearly an understated account of a rescue which took place in appalling conditions. The Inspector's report, written by Commander Edward Sterling Carver, provides a little more detail than that of Coxswain Swan's notebook:*

*“.....only the bridge and fidley casing above water. Fore and aft decks were completely submerged, and hull of vessel split down on after part of fore deck, or fore end of after deck, with jagged edges of plates projecting, leaving barely the length of lifeboat in which to come alongside. Dropped anchor astern and to windward of wreck, and veered down. Whilst doing this the lifeboat was struck by a terrific sea and almost thrown on the after deck. Had it not been for the powerful motor fitted in the boat, I do not consider we could have got alongside. Sheered alongside, and shipwrecked crew jumped and slithered down ropes into the lifeboat in about 30 seconds. Steamed ahead to cable.....this was cut, and almost at the same time lifeboat was buried by a terrific broadside sea; fortunately no one was washed out and the lifeboat returned to Gorleston arriving at 7am.....”*

*The last survivor of the **Hopelyn** rescue, Frank Swan (son of Coxswain John Swan, died in March 1970) when interviewed later in life about the rescue stated:*

*“It was the worst job I have ever been in, although the actual rescue only took a few minutes”*

## **The Ships**

### **SS Hopelyn**

*The S. S. **Hopelyn** was built in 1918 by Swan Hunter and Wigham Richardson Ltd of Sunderland for Hopemount Shipping Company Ltd and therefore was only four years old when lost on Scroby Sand. Her technical specifications were as follows:*

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| <i>Construction</i>  | <i>steel</i>   |
| <i>Dimensions</i>    | <i>96.94 x 12.62 x 5.81 (metric)</i>                   |
| <i>Propulsion</i>    | <i>screw, 3 cylinder triple expansion steam engine</i> |
| <i>Horsepower</i>    | <i>249</i>   |
| <i>Gross tonnage</i> | <i>2,348</i>   |
| <i>Boilers</i>       | <i>2</i>   |

### **Agnes Cross – official number 663**

The *Agnes Cross* was built in 1921 by S E Saunders of Cowes, Isle of Wight at a cost of £8,620. She was originally named *John and Mary Meiklam* of Gladswood but was renamed in 1922 and appropriated to the gift of Miss Agnes F Cross of South Kensington, London. She went on station at Gorleston in February 1921 but was transferred to Lowestoft in the same year following crewing difficulties and remained at Lowestoft until 1939. In her 18 years of service at Lowestoft she was launched 124 times and saved 209 lives

|              |                                |
|--------------|--------------------------------|
| Construction | wood                           |
| Dimensions   | 46ft 9 inches x 12ft 10 inches |
| Propulsion   | 60 horsepower Taylor engine    |



Photograph of the *Agnes Cross*  
(LRO 1300/72/28/11)  
(CLICK IMAGE TO ENLARGE)

### **Kentwell – official number 543**

The *Kentwell* was built in 1905 by Thames Ironworks of London at a cost of £2,197 which came from the legacy of Mrs E A Moore of London. During her 16 years at Lowestoft Lifeboat Station, 1905-1921, she was launched 60 times and saved 168 lives. 1921 saw her transferred to Gorleston where she put in a further 3 years of service and was launched 16 more times and saved a further 29 lives; making a combined total of 76 launches and 197 lives saved.

|              |                      |
|--------------|----------------------|
| Construction | wood                 |
| Dimensions   | 46ft x 12ft 6 inches |
| Propulsion   | sail and 14 oars     |



Photograph of the *Kentwell*,  
Part of Lowestoft Research Society Collection  
(LRO 552/PLRS/1779)  
(CLICK IMAGE TO ENLARGE)