

The *William Henry & Mary King* – working history, 1964-1992

Official number: 980

Operational number: 37-13

The *William Henry & Mary King* is a 37ft Oakley class lifeboat, built in 1964 by J S White, of Cowes on the Isle of Wight. Her £33,000 cost was met by a legacy from Miss Jane Graham King of Sutton, Surrey, in memory of her parents, supported by RNLI funds. Unlike most lifeboats, the *William Henry & Mary King* never displayed her operational number in large black digits, since, as the thirteenth Oakley to be built, the number can be considered unlucky.

Arrival of a new lifeboat has traditionally been an important event in the life of a maritime community, and the *William Henry & Mary King* was named by H R H Princess Marina, Duchess of Kent – the Queen's aunt by marriage - at a ceremony at Cromer, in front of the Lord Lieutenant of Norfolk, the Bishop of Norwich, and a large crowd, on Thursday, 8th July, 1965 (photo, right).

Cromer is a coastal resort and fishing port in Norfolk, famous for the Cromer crab. The *William Henry & Mary King* served as the No.2 lifeboat there until June 1967, when the No.1 boat was replaced by one of the larger and more powerful 48ft 6in Oakleys and the No.2 station was closed.



At this time Cromer also received its first inflatable 'inshore' lifeboat - fast, manoeuvrable and much cheaper to run for inshore rescues than the 'all weather' lifeboats, which are better suited to more rugged and distant tasks. During the *William Henry & Mary King*'s service at Cromer she had been launched twelve times and saved one life - though her service records suggest this is a conservative estimate and that crews felt more lives would have been in danger or lost if they had not reached the incidents so promptly.

In September 1967 the *William Henry & Mary King* was therefore reallocated to Bridlington, a seaside resort and fishing port on the North-east coast, between Hull and Scarborough, where she spent the main part of her active service. Just south of Flamborough Head, Bridlington has its own fleets of fishing and pleasure boats but is also at a key position on the busy north-south coastal sea route, and as a result is home to one of the oldest lifeboat stations in the world, from the frequent need to rescue ships and sailors from the fierce North Sea storms. Bridlington Bay used to provide a safe haven for sailing ships when gales blew from the north or west, so much so that it used to be known as the Bay of Safety, but could also turn into a death trap when winds blew from the east or south.

Because of the long, shallow beach at Bridlington, its lifeboat has to be launched by tractor through the breakers rather than sliding down a slipway – the situation which the small, light Oakley class boats had been designed for. During her time there, the *William Henry & Mary King* was launched 291 times – more than any other 37ft Oakley - and saved 83 lives, with her crew receiving numerous awards for their courage and fortitude. Her first Coxswain, John King, received a Bronze Medal in 1968, a bar to his Bronze Medal in 1972 and a Silver Medal in 1973. Following John King's retirement in 1975, Fred Walkington was unanimously elected Coxswain, by the traditional vote of crew-members and helpers of the station, and received a Bronze Medal in 1979.



At sea, in a heavy swell



Retrieving the boat on Bridlington beach

Other actions, beyond normal life-saving duty, included helping the Royal Navy to deal with unexploded wartime mines, caught in fishing-boats' nets, and picking up a sick crewman from a Russian trawler, during the Cold War. This also entailed finding an interpreter (from the local Lada importers, where some of the lifeboat crew worked), as the ship's contact with the coastguard had been restricted by language difficulties.

Originally open to the weather, the *William Henry & Mary King* was fitted in 1971 with a small canvas shelter for the helmsman and crew, replaced in 1982 by a larger metal-framed canopy - which folded down to allow the boat to fit into the lifeboat station. In 1977 radar was installed, previously problematic because space was limited and weight critical in the small Oakley class lifeboats. Its rotating scanner had to be mounted on a folding tripod to fit into the boathouse. In 1985 the boat was taken out of service for more than a year for major repairs to her hull, at a boatyard in South Shields, at a cost of around £130,000. A small water heater was also added, so the crew – often working in freezing conditions - could have a hot drink. Further repairs to the hull were required in 1988.



At sea - before addition of the wheelhouse



The boat on the beach – wheelhouse folded down

In January 1989, the *William Henry & Mary King* was replaced at Bridlington by the *Peggy & Alex Caird*, a new Mersey class lifeboat, twice as fast as the old Oakley. Coxswain Fred Walkington went on to receive a bar to his Bronze Medal with the new boat, then, following his retirement, was awarded an MBE in 2001.

Towards the end of her career, the *William Henry & Mary King* then spent 17 months as a temporary replacement for the Seahouses station lifeboat (formerly North Sunderland), during which time she was launched a further nine times, though saving no more lives. A former crew member has suggested that by this stage she leaked so badly that they thought she might sink just on the voyage to her new home, her double hull was difficult to maintain, and the hull and self-righting system were prone to condensation and fungus. Performance-wise, he said that "she would make 8 knots downhill with a sail up".

Following her last inspection, the *William Henry & Mary King* was returned to the RNLI depot in Poole, Dorset, where she was declared non-operational on 23rd July, 1991 and deleted from the Register of British Ships. In 27 years service with the RNLI she was launched 312 times and saved 84 lives.

The final entry on her RNLI service record shows that she was "Donated and sent by road from Poole Depot to a playground in Islington for use in a childrens play area as part of a culture centre. The boat has been disposed of to Drayton Park Primary School, Arvon Road, London N5 1PJ."



Collecting the lifeboat from Poole



Its new home at Drayton Park, 1992