

The William Henry & Mary King – the Drayton Park lifeboat

In 1989 Drayton Park School carried out improvements to its nursery playground, designed by the Islington Schools Environment Project (ISEP), for which it received a Commendation in the 1989-90 RIBA Community Enterprise Awards – and which included a small rowing boat. At the time a play-structure in the main playground was also coming to the end of its life, and when considering how to replace it one of the nursery teachers, Lena Engel, suggested her boat was so popular that perhaps the older children would enjoy a larger boat too.



Nursery playground rowing boat



Former tyre-and-sleeper play-structure

Meanwhile the RNLI was phasing out its Oakley class lifeboats and, because of the corrosion problems caused to their hulls by the self-righting mechanism, had decided they must all either be scrapped or handed on to owners who would ensure they would never be used again as boats, in case this might ultimately put crews' lives at risk. By coincidence, Ray Kipling, the Deputy Director of the RNLI responsible for disposing of retired boats, was a friend of some Drayton Park parents, Mark and Lucy Rees, and offered to donate the *William Henry & Mary King* to the school as long as the PTA took on the cost of transportation, renovation and installation.

Early in 1991, Linda Lefevre, the then Headmistress, visited the RNLI headquarters in Poole, to inspect the boat, with a deputation including parents, pupils and the Mayor of Islington, and over the next six months the school managed to raise an astonishing £25,000 towards the project – the school and PTA being particularly attracted by the positive values the RNLI represents. Chief organiser was local parent Bronwen Taylor and the fund-raising included events, such as 150 parents and pupils raising £1500 in a 'Run for your Lifeboat' around Highbury Fields, as well as generous donations from individuals, institutions, shops and businesses. Local businesses also provided 'in kind' support, with a Drayton Park haulier, Range, transporting the boat up from Poole; a builder, Murphys, donating the new concrete foundation; and Rene Wiesner, a structural engineer (and parent) designing the new steel support frame, for free.

The *William Henry & Mary King* is reported to have arrived at Drayton Park on 1st Aug 1991 - Yorkshire Day, in honour of her service in Bridlington - to be met by a welcoming party and fireworks.



Arriving at the school in 1991

ISEP designed a new timber wave-shape play-structure, to go around the boat, with rumour having it that meeting health and safety requirements to make the boat into a play-structure proved a greater challenge than getting the boat to site! The new structure was erected over the next few months, with parents chipping in with a working party to strip off any of the boat's equipment or fixtures which might present a hazard to safe play. Some trainee teachers from Middlesex University also researched the boat's background, including filming interviews with the crew in Bridlington, though sadly plans to install a small permanent exhibition in its engine room proved impractical.



The new 'wave' play structure



Relaunch at the Summer Fair, 1992

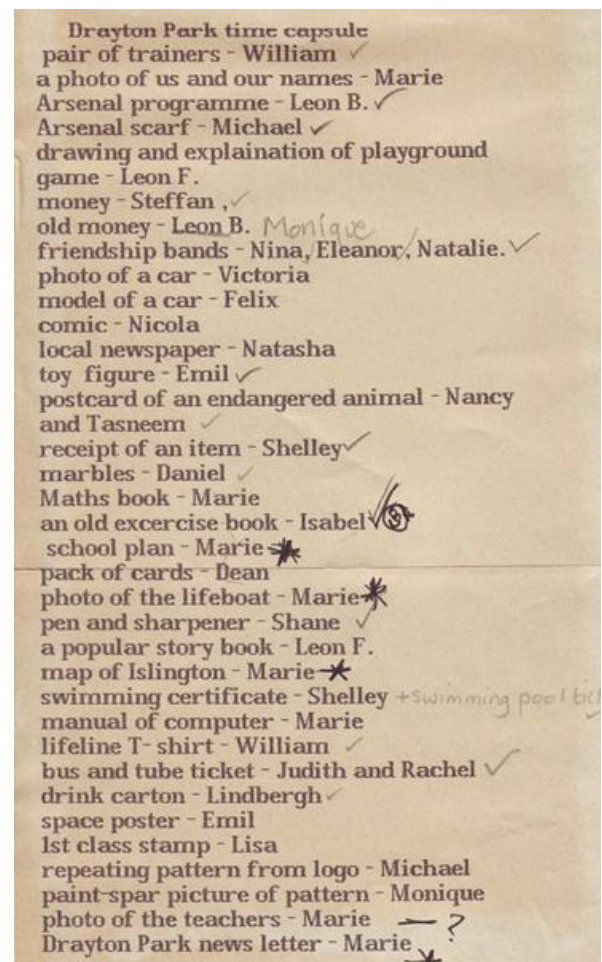
On 27th June 1992 the *William Henry & Mary King*'s new life was officially 'launched' at the school's Summer Fair, in front of three former crew-members, Assistant Mechanic Brian Cundall, Pete Humphries and Alistair Turnbull, and a large crowd. Since then the boat has become a popular Highbury landmark, and worked her way into the affections of generations of children and parents at the school – so much so that Drayton Park has become known for miles around as 'the school with the lifeboat', and for years has featured the lifeboat in our logo. Over that time she was kept repaired as far as possible by the school's Premises Manager, Gary Atkinson, with occasional help from ISEP, and repainted now and then in her original working colour scheme, as provided by the RNLI.



In 2006 the school was visited by Fred Walkington MBE, who had worked on the boat for all of her time in Bridlington, including several years as Coxswain, and had won numerous RNLI awards for his skill, leadership, courage and determination, often in appalling conditions. Mr Walkington met with the staff and pupils, and presented the school with a copy of his book, a history of 'the Bridlington Lifeboat – the First 200 Years, 1805-2005'. By another strange coincidence it turned out, during his visit, that Pam Nicholls, one of the school staff, is related to the tractor driver who launches the current Bridlington lifeboat.

Twenty years battering in a North London playground, though, while a less fierce environment than the North Sea she was built for, left the *William Henry & Mary King* in need of significant restoration work if she was to continue as a safe and attractive part of the playground. A cheaper option would have been to replace the boat with a more conventional play structure but a 2010 survey of the school's parents and staff showed more than three quarters of people who responded wanting to keep the boat – even if more than 80% also wanted to make her safer to play on. Our proposed new community art block was therefore designed around a retained and restored *William Henry & Mary King* and the school and community again rallied round, to raise another £30,000 to make it happen – on top of the £1½ million needed to build the actual building.

So on 9th Aug 2012 the boat was taken away again, both for repairs and to allow room for the new building to be built. While demolishing the play structure, however, a 'time capsule' was found which had been buried during its construction 20 years earlier, with instructions on the box for any finder not to open it until May 2012 – by chance just a month before it was uncovered! The capsule was opened in a special assembly at the school and found to hold a hoard of items chosen by pupils at the time, including games, toys, books, photos, an Arsenal programme and scarf, and a copy of the *Islington Chronicle*, from 16 Oct 1991.





Leaving for repairs, Aug 2012



At Iron Wharf Boatyard, Faversham



A rare view inside the bow compartment



Some of the 'air case' flotation components found inside the hull

The lifeboat was repaired by Abingdon & Skabardis Marine Carpentry of Faversham, Kent, returning to the school on 2nd April 2013, once the building work was complete, for hopefully at least another twenty years in the playground. A new pier/beach-themed play area has been created around the boat, enclosed by a 'wave-shaped' fence, new railings were installed to improve safety, and the *William Henry & Mary King's* continues to be as popular with the pupils as ever – as well as continuing to surprise and delight passers-by.

For this phase of her life, though, we are also taking the opportunity to tell people about the *William Henry & Mary King's* remarkable story. While a lot of people know the Drayton Park Lifeboat, very few of them know that she was a revolutionary design, which helped change the face of lifeboat safety. Or know about the bravery and determination of her crew, saving 84 lives in seas and storms which here in North London we can barely imagine!

Please read more...



Returning to her new home, April 2013



The new playground area