

The William Henry & Mary King - Notable rescues

Since 1824 the RNLI has had a tradition to reward outstanding acts of skill and bravery. The highest awards are the Gold, Silver and Bronze Medals, and the Thanks of the Institution inscribed on vellum. Crews of the *William Henry and Mary King* were acknowledged in this way on eight occasions.

4th Feb 1968 The coaster *Maria F*, from Hamburg, a regular visitor to Bridlington and carrying a cargo of fertiliser, was in difficulties, less than a mile from Bridlington Pier, in a force 9 gale, sub-zero temperatures and very rough seas - dragging both anchors and with a fouled propeller. The *William Henry & Mary King* was launched at 4.34pm, but conditions were so rough that the lifeboat could not put a man onto the ship and the crew of the *Maria F* would not come on deck. By 12.15am the *Maria F* had gone aground and was being pounded by heavy seas, so that, with renewed gale warnings, there was concern she might break up. Two further attempts were made but still no contact could be made with the ship's crew, and conditions were still too rough for use of the breeches buoy or her crew to jump. While manoeuvring, however, the lifeboat then tangled its own propellers, leaving her disabled and with her cockpit filling constantly with water. The crew managed to clear one propeller at sea - having to work under water to do so - went back to the beach to clear the other, then returned to the ship. By 4.20am the waves had eased slightly and the ship's cook asked to be taken off. The *William Henry & Mary King* manoeuvred as close as possible, but was still pitching violently, so when the cook jumped down she was half caught by one of the crew but fell into the fore cockpit, breaking her arm and wrist in the process - at which point the remaining crew decided to stay on board. The lifeboat took the injured woman ashore, allowing its own crew some food and a change of clothes, then returned to the ship, which was now afloat again, on the rising tide, taking a local German teacher to communicate with the crew. Conditions were now improving so the lifeboat brought the captain ashore to contact the ship's owners, returned him to the *Maria F* at 11.25am, and stood by until a tug arrived to tow the ship. The lifeboat had been at sea for more than twenty hours, in appalling conditions, and for this long and hazardous operation a Bronze medal was awarded to Coxswain John King and the Thanks of the Institution inscribed on vellum presented to Second Coxswain John Simpson, Bowman Dennis Atkins, Mechanic Roderick Stott, Assistant Mechanic Richard Cranswick, and crew members George Traves, Fred Walkington, Brian Bevan, Brian Fenton and Harry Wood.

16th Nov 1969 Thanks of the Institution to Coxswain John King and vellum service certificates to six crew members for determination and brilliant seamanship in saving four people from the trawler *Flamborough Light*, of Bridlington - which had gone aground while trying to enter the harbour and was being pounded by heavy seas in a force 8 gale. The lifeboat had to use parachute flares to light up the scene, but, in the rough conditions, was unable to get alongside, so had to fire a light line across, on a rocket, pass a tow-rope over, and then pull the trawler into deeper water and eventually into harbour.

13th Sept 1970 The alarm had been raised for a small cabin cruiser, *Tiger II*, and four crew when its trailer was found at dusk. The men had left no note as to where they were going, just that they were on a fishing trip. They had tried to return at 1 pm but had been unable to retrieve their anchor so had had to let it go, then had been unable to start the outboard motor and were drifting out to sea. They had no radio or flares on board, so tried burning petrol-soaked rags to attract attention, then later, after dark, set fire to their lifejackets to alert a passing collier. The lifeboat had been searching for the *Tiger II* for several hours and by the time she found it, 7 miles northeast of Flamborough Head, the cabin cruiser was pitching violently, in a force 5-6 wind, and the fishermen were all suffering from hypothermia and seasickness, and unable to come on deck. Crew Member Fred Walkington had to jump across from the *William Henry & Mary King* onto a tiny foredeck, about two foot square and slippery with sea-water, to attach a tow-rope - for which he was awarded the Thanks of the Institution inscribed on vellum for his courage and determination. Coxswain John King and the rest of the crew received vellum service certificates.

24th Jan 1972 In the early hours of the morning the fishing boat *My Susanne* of Bridlington radioed a 'mayday' call for urgent assistance as her engine had failed, her anchor would not hold her, and she was drifting onto shore, in a force 7 wind and rough seas. The *William Henry & Mary King* was launched at 4.30am, in pitch darkness, and sighted the boat's lights under the Sewerby cliffs. Parachute flares showed *My Susanne* was on the rocks, in heavy breaking swell - too far from the cliffs for a Coastguard rescue but in a situation where a breeches buoy rescue to the lifeboat would have meant dragging crewmembers through shallow and rough waters. As the tide was rising, Coxswain John King decided to try towing the boat off, before she started to break up. A rocket line was fired over her, from about 100 yards away, and a heavy towing cable passed across; but the lifeboat started to ground as she attempted the tow, so had to slacken off and move into deeper water before trying again. By this time the fishing boat was rolling and grinding on the rocks and her captain thought she was lost, but following reassurance over the radio, the lifeboat managed to tow her clear. *My Susanne's* engine had now started again but in the relief of escaping she passed unexpectedly across the bows of the lifeboat, thereby fouling her port propeller with the tow rope. The fishing boat's engine was still not running smoothly, however, so the *William Henry & Mary King* had to escort her back to harbour on her starboard engine only. For this service in difficult conditions Coxswain King was awarded a bar to his Bronze Medal and the rest of the crew received the Thanks of the Institution inscribed on vellum. The lifeboat crew were also presented with inscribed pewter tankards by *My Susanne's* insurers, in appreciation of the service.

2nd April 1973 Several Yorkshire cobsles - traditional NE-coast open fishing boats – were out in a force 9 or 10 gale, in a rough sea with frequent hail and snow squalls. The *William Henry & Mary King* was launched at 10.30am to assist *Calaharis*, but shortly after launch spotted another, less well equipped coble, *Moss Rose*, in difficulties, and escorted her back to harbour before continuing the search. By now, however, the motor vessel *White Knight*, of Grimsby, had been reported as broken down and dragging her anchor, and Coxswain John King was instructed to go to her rescue, while the Flamborough lifeboat was assigned to help *Calaharis*. Beyond the relative shelter of Smithic Sands the *William Henry & Mary King* hit a hurricane force wind of 12, gusting to force 13, with visibility so reduced by snow squalls and spray that reliable navigation was impossible and flares from the casualty couldn't be seen. Guided by radio from the Coastguard, the lifeboat sighted the *White Knight* at 12.50, rolling very heavily, but in a now force 13 wind needed full power to even reach her. With a display of remarkable seamanship, Coxswain King made three passes at the fishing boat in the space of 15 minutes, taking off two men on the first run, two more on the second, and the skipper on the third. Part of the lifeboat's guard rail was ripped away on the second pass but otherwise she received only superficial damage and no-one was injured. In bitterly cold and treacherous conditions it then took nearly three hours to return safely to harbour. Coxswain King received the Silver Medal for a long and arduous rescue and Thanks of the Institution on vellum were awarded to Second Coxswain George Traves, Bowman Dennis Atkins, Mechanic Roderick Stott, Assistant Mechanic Anthony Ayre, and crew members Fred Walkington and Ken Bentley.

15th Feb 1979 The *William Henry & Mary King* launched in blizzard conditions and force 10 to 11 winds to assist the German cargo vessel *Sunnan Havn* which had broken down and was being driven towards Flamborough Head by the storm. In freezing temperatures, ice was reforming on the lifeboat as quickly as it was cleared, driving snow reduced visibility to a few yards, and following several inundations during the difficult launch the radar also failed. Soon after *William Henry & Mary King* had cleared Bridlington Bay, she was informed that the *Sunnan Havn* had regained limited power but was still being driven by the storm, towards the head, so the lifeboat pressed on, despite worsening seas throwing her about and frequently flooding the cockpit. A further message from the Coastguard then advised that the *Sunnan Havn* had now regained full power and was making for shelter in the river Humber. Returning to harbour, however, the lifeboat had no radar, visibility was down to about 50 yards, and the boat was hit by a wave as now-Coxswain Fred Walkington took urgent action to avoid Filey Brig, a notorious rock outcrop looming suddenly out of the murk. The boat rolled so far to starboard that the automatic engine cut-out operated, expecting a capsize, but she righted again without turning over and the engines restarted first time. The crew had all been attached by lifelines and were uninjured, and Motor Mechanic Roderick Stott shortly managed to regain a weak picture on the radar, which helped the *William Henry & Mary King* get back to Bridlington, after almost ten hours at sea. Once there, however, it was reported that other lifeboats in the area were unable to launch, because of the conditions, so it was necessary to return the boat to readiness in the boathouse as otherwise she risked being unavailable for call-out at low tide if left in the harbour. Refuelling proved difficult, as the diesel was freezing as it was poured, and the boat could only be returned to the boathouse with great difficulty, as the normal slipway was impassable with ice and snow. She was eventually back in the boathouse and ready for service 13½ hours after first being called out. For his leadership, initiative and courage, in appalling conditions, Coxswain Walkington was awarded a Bronze Medal and the rest of the crew received the Thanks of the Institution inscribed on vellum.

31st Jan 1980 Five open cobsles were at sea in a force 8 gale and heavy swell. Between 09.40 and 19.30 the *William Henry & Mary King*:

- escorted *Renown*, back to harbour, as she had tangled her propeller in a net and was being towed by the *Betty A*, another coble;
- rescued three people from *Three Fevers II*, which had been swamped and sunk by a huge wave. One fisherman had climbed on to the wheelhouse, which was being kept above water by air trapped in the hull, and the other two had been swept overboard and were managing to keep afloat by clinging onto fish boxes, nets and wreckage;
- and then escorted the remaining cobsles to safety, including *Sincerity*.

The Thanks of the Institution inscribed on vellum were awarded to Coxswain Fred Walkington for his leadership, skill and determination, and vellum service certificates to the remainder of the crew.

11th Aug 1985 Several cobsles were at sea with angling parties on board, but now in high winds, driving rain and poor visibility, and with heavy seas breaking at the harbour entrance. Between 14.54 and 18.10 the *William Henry & Mary King*:

- escorted two cobsles safely into harbour – both with 12 anglers on board;
- lifted a woman and two children off the yacht *Sula Sula*, which was burning distress flares and being driven towards the shore, then towed it back to Bridlington, with the remaining crew-man on board. The yacht had no radio so the lifeboat had had to manoeuvre alongside to communicate and then again to retrieve the woman and children. By now the wind was a force 8 gale, and waves, breaking over both boats, threw the yacht into the lifeboat's guard rails, which were damaged;
- stood by in broken water as an RAF helicopter winched survivors off another coble, *Valhalla*, which was breaking up just off the North Pier;
- and finally escorted the last coble, *Sportsman*, into harbour.

The Thanks of the Institution inscribed on vellum were awarded to Coxswain Fred Walkington, for his skill and judgement, and vellum service certificates to the rest of the crew.