



# Heritage Newsletter



Issue 56

## Saving Lives at Sea since 1860

### Portrush Lifeboat "*The Zelinda*" from Portrush - The Port on the Promontory by Hugh Mc Grattan

"For 161 years lifeboat crews at Portrush have been saving lives at sea often in arduous and dangerous sea conditions. Since 1860, Portrush lifeboats have been launched more than 1,100 times on rescue missions and saved around 350 lives.

Two lifeboats are currently based at Portrush, the all-weather Severn Class *William Gordon Burr* and the inshore D-Class inflatable *David Roulston*. They cover an area stretching from Lough Foyle to Rathlin Island, sometimes further, and up to 50 miles out to sea. These are the latest in a longline of life-saving vessels that have been stationed at Portrush since the Royal National Lifeboat Institution decided to place a lifeboat there.

The Portrush Lifeboat owes its existence to a chance meeting during a dinner party at Bicton in Devonshire in 1860. Presiding was Lady Rolle, who had just presented a new lifeboat to Exmouth. Among the guests were Mr. Richard Lewis, then secretary of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, and Laura, Countess of Antrim. Lady Antrim was later to recall how, in the course of conversation at dinner, she told Mr. Lewis about a harbour town in the North of Ireland in which she took "the greatest interest". As Portrush was situated on an iron-bound coast, a lifeboat stationed there would be "of the greatest use" she ventured to suggest.

Three weeks later, to her astonishment and delight, she received a letter from Mr. Lewis, stating that a benevolent Staffordshire lady - Lady Cotton Sheppard of Uttoxeter - had given the RNLI the money for three boats.



Laura, Countess of Antrim

She had named the station for two, but had left the third to the discretion of the RNLI. In consequence of the wish that her Ladyship had expressed, Mr. Lewis had recommended Portrush to the Institution's Committee of Management. They had agreed. Things seem to have happened fairly quickly after that. Lord Antrim, on the persuasion of his mother, gave a site for a boathouse at Kerr Street. A subscription list was opened to pay for the building and a crew largely composed of local fishermen was recruited. The new lifeboat - initially named *Zelinda*, but later re-named *Laura, Countess of Antrim*, when the role of her ladyship in the establishment of the lifeboat station became known - was sent to Portrush by steamer, with its transporting carriage, in mid- December 1860. The lifeboat cost £180, fully equipped, and was powered by sails and the efforts of six (later ten) strong oarsmen. As well as having its practical value, it provided the local population with exciting entertainment four times a year, when the crew held its quarterly exercise. The lifeboatmen, in their cork lifebelts, would deliberately capsize the vessel in the harbour to test its self-righting capabilities, much to the amazement and admiration of onlookers!"



A 30-foot Peake Lifeboat on its transporting carriage with crew. This is similar to the first Lifeboat sent to Portrush by the RNLI in 1860

### **Portrush Lifeboat “William Gordon Burr”– from a conversation with Dave Robinson Mechanic at Portrush Lifeboat Station.**

Dave Robinson is the Station Mechanic at Portrush. He is also the crew member who jumped into the water from the Lifeboat at Portstewart Head to rescue the young man who was unable to get ashore. This very brave action by Dave and the Crew of the Portrush Lifeboat featured in the BBC2 Programme “Saving Lives at Sea” aired on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2021.



William Gordon Burr – Severn Class Lifeboat in the West Bay- Photo from RNLI Portrush Face Book

Our conversation with Dave centred around his pending visit, with two other crew members, to RNLI HQ in Poole to bring the Portrush Severn Class Lifeboat home after its major six month refit which cost in excess of £200,000.



The present Portrush Lifeboat, 'William Gordon Burr' is Severn Class which is the largest lifeboat in the RNLI fleet. The class was developed in the early 1990s and introduced into the RNLI fleet in 1996. With a top speed of 25 knots and a range of 250 nautical miles the Severn Class lifeboat can reach casualties fast in calm or rough seas. In addition to twin marine diesel engines the Severn Class lifeboat is fitted with a hydraulic - powered bow thruster for improved manoeuvrability. Her propellers and rudders lie in partial tunnels created by the twin bilge keels, which provide protection from damage in shallow water. The lifeboat is self-righting and will automatically right herself within a few seconds.



Portrush Severn class lifeboat - William Gordon Burr at Poole photo courtesy of Dave Robinson

The Major Maintenance carried out on the William Gordon Burr has included the removal of its engines, a major upgrade on all the boat's Electronics and Systems Information Management System. The Hull has also been given a new look with the boat being wrapped in a blue vinyl film that is UV stable and does not fade. The return Journey from Poole will take 4 days with the boat expected back in Portrush on the 9<sup>th</sup> November 2021.

### **From – Portrush - The Port on the Promontory by Hugh Mc Grattan**

“Despite the amazing capabilities of today's lifeboats, they would be no better than any of their wooden-hulled predecessors were it not for one vital and unchanging factor. That is the courage and dedication of the volunteers—men and women- who crew these vessels, undaunted by the very worst the sea has to offer and risking their lives as they maintain the Royal National Lifeboat Institution's role of Saving Lives at Sea”. *A history of the Portrush lifeboats titled “From Laura to Katie” by Hugh McGrattan was published in 2008.*

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We would like to thank Hugh for permitting us to use text from his excellent book, Portrush - The Port on the Promontory. We would thank Dave Robinson for taking time to talk to us and supplying the photographs of the boat in Poole and Judy Nelson RNLI Press Officer for her help with this Newsletter.

The RNLI philosophy remains the same as it was in 1824: to provide their lifesaving service using volunteers wherever possible, with voluntary donations supplying the funds needed to do so.

6<sup>th</sup> November 2021