

St Annes on Sea Lifeboat Station Lytham St Annes Royal National Lifeboat Institution

Within a short time of the founding of St Annes, the thoughts of the Townsfolk turned to providing a Lifeboat for the area. There were already Lifeboats safeguarding the Ribble Estuary further up at Lytham and on the opposite side at Southport and one at St Annes would complete the coverage for the North side of this dangerous, sand bank strewn estuary, open as it is to the deadly westerly gales. The limited range of the motorless pulling and sailing Lifeboats of the era, although still state of the art, relied on the local fishermen and sailors to volunteer and risk their lives to save the lives of others.

The Town's dreams became reality in September 1881 with the arrival of the first Lifeboat, the *Laura Janet*, along with her launching carriage, at the St Annes Railway Station having been transported free of charge by the London & North Western Railway from her builders in London. The Townsfolk at once dragged the *Laura Janet* through the streets to her new boathouse built on Eastbank Road, refusing in their enthusiasm to allow horses to be hired to help. Little could those people guess that in 5 years their new Lifeboat Station would be involved in the worst disaster to befall the RNLI.

The St Annes Lifeboat settled down to protecting the Ribble until the night of the 9th December 1886 when the German barque *Mexico* was wrecked on the Southport side of the estuary in appalling weather. The three local Lifeboats all launched to save the vessel's twelve man crew. The Lytham Lifeboat *Charles Biggs*, despite severe difficulties and a near capsized, managed to get alongside the sailing vessel and rescue all her crew. The Southport Lifeboat *Eliza Fernley* however, on approaching the wreck, was capsized by a huge wave, only two of her sixteen crew members surviving to tell the tale. After launching, the *Laura Janet* from St Annes was not seen again until she was found upside down on Birkdale Beach the following afternoon. All thirteen crew members had lost their lives in the attempt to save twelve strangers. This disaster, when twenty seven heroic Lifeboatmen lost their lives, was the worst in RNLI history and thankfully, with smaller crews these days and modern technology such as motors, enclosed wheelhouses and radios, should remain so.

An impressive monument stands on the Promenade near St Annes Pier to commemorate the sacrifice of these brave and selfless Lifeboatmen.

Undaunted by the Disaster, the local community set to and quickly enrolled a new crew to man a replacement Lifeboat which carried out some excellent rescues over the following years of the life of the St Annes Lifeboat Station.

Nature however eventually took a hand and the St Annes Lifeboat Station had to be closed in 1925 due to severe silting of the channel opposite the Town causing unacceptable dangers when launching the boat and the subsequent lack of the fishermen who formed the crew and had already moved their fishing boats to Lytham or taken land based jobs.

In the 44 years the St Annes Lifeboat Station was open, it had the fine record of saving 40 lives in 29 service launches.

With the Southport Lifeboat Station also closing for similar reasons in 1925, this left the sole Lifeboat guarding the Ribble based at the Lytham Station. The two Townships of Lytham and St Annes had amalgamated in 1922 to form the Borough of Lytham St Annes and in 1931 it was agreed to amalgamate the Town's two RNLI Branches to coincide with the arrival of a new Motor Lifeboat, moored out in the river at Lytham Pier, the legend "Lytham St Annes Lifeboat" then appearing on her stern.

In 1967 the Station capabilities were increased by the addition of a second Lifeboat, an inflatable boat, now designated an Inshore Lifeboat (ILB), for fast response and rescues in the shallows of the Ribble. Both Lifeboats complement each others capabilities.

Nowadays Lytham St Annes RNLI is one Station with the Volunteer Crew and Volunteer Supporters drawn from all over the local area. The Lytham St Annes Station has the unusual, but not unique, situation of having two Lifeboats in two separate Boathouses 3½ miles apart.

The Station's 13.6 metre (44.6 feet) Shannon class All-weather Lifeboat (ALB) *Barbara Anne* is housed in the 2003 built boathouse on South Promenade, while the 5 metre (16.4 feet) D class (Inshore Lifeboat (ILB) *MOAM* is based at the 1960 built Central Beach Boathouse. Both boats are launched from a carriage to allow for the high tidal range in this part of the Irish Sea.

The Volunteers of the Lytham St Annes Lifeboat Station have an excellent and heroic record for saving lives at sea and helping those in danger in both the Ribble Estuary and the Irish Sea. Since the first Lifeboat arrived at Lytham in 1851, crew members have been awarded 9 medals for gallantry as well as other recognition. The Lifeboats have launched on service over 1,600 times, saving nearly 500 lives and assisting 100s more in danger to safety.

The work continues!

The RNLI, the Charity that saves lives at sea

(David Forshaw 2023)