

Maritime Rescue Institute
Coastal Notes – 19 April 2005

Lifeboats aboard ship originally were just rowing boats. Following the wreck of the 'Orion' off the Scottish coast in 1849 when over 100 passengers lost their lives as the crew commandeered the 2 available rowing boats, clergyman Edward Berthon designed a collapsible wood and canvas lifeboat. Many of these could be stowed aboard a vessel offering a greater chance of survival. However, the road to success was hard; merchant shipping companies did not want to encourage the thought that perhaps their vessels might not be safe and the Admiralty were totally dismissive. Even after winning medals at the Great Exhibition of 1851 it took intervention by Prince Albert to persuade an unwilling Navy even to try them. With minds already made up, the Navy created a set of extreme tests - such as being able to fire a gun from the bow! - and deemed them useless.

Demoralised, Berthon gave up and concentrated on his parish duties at Romsey in Kent. In 1875, Samuel Plimsoll, inventor of the Plimsoll line, encouraged him to try again, this time successfully. He set up the Berthon Boat Co in Romsey employing up to 100 people. Other companies began manufacturing similar craft but they were all known as Berthon lifeboats, rather as vacuum cleaners are called hoovers. Business flourished until the 'Titanic' disaster; some collapsible lifeboats – not Berthons - failed to open and all such devices were banned leading to the eventual failure of the company.

Only 4 examples of Berthon's lifeboats are known to survive. There is one in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich and another on display at Brodsworth Hall near Doncaster. It seems an odd place for a lifeboat to end up but apparently the former owners were keen yachtsmen and collectors.

MRI's Search and Rescue Team received a £300 boost to funds on Sunday. The Dermot O' Brien concert was well attended and an unforgettable experience. Dermot is an absolute master of his art; he held the audience enthralled from the moment he struck the first note. His repertoire ranged through Irish, Scottish, folk, swing, showtime, country and western to a bit of jazz and classics. At times it was hard to believe that there was just one man on the stage, the music was so rich and complex. People travelled literally the length of the country to be there. A well known dance band leader made the round trip from Wick, while another professional couple came all the way from Harrogate. Others came from Kircaldy, Dingwall, Inverurie as well as all points nearer home.

Our local talent ably supported Dermot. Dunnottar School Dancers gave a great display of Scottish country dancing and we also had a band of fiddlers, accordionists and keyboard from various parts of Aberdeen. They played free just for the pleasure of seeing Dermot.

We have asked Dermot to include Stonehaven in his next Scottish tour and he has agreed in principal. That's a real treat in store.

MRI's new totally revamped website has just gone live. Visit www.maritime-rescue-institute.org to find out more about us.

For further information or to get involved with MRI as a volunteer, please contact 01569 765768 or email hamish.mcdonald@btconnect.com.