

Coastal Notes

Last weekend the MRI 24 and 4 SAR Team members travelled down the coast to Eyemouth to take part in the Sea, Salts and Sail Festival organised by the Eyemouth Boat Museum. Along with the local RNLI craft, the MRI 24 acted as guard boat for some of the in-water activities. The 2 rescue craft seemed very modern against the traditional vessels on display. Amongst the many craft can be found prams, punts, faerings, picarooners, codbangers, jalliboats, fifies, currachs and sampans to name but a few. There is also 'Bertha', Brunel's 1834 puddled iron drag boat, used for clearing the Bridgewater Canal. She is currently under restoration as part of the National Historic Ships Register programme.

Ridley Youngman from the Eyemouth Boat Museum will be at the MRI Harbour Festival on Sunday 29th August with an Irish currach, along with some of their other smaller craft, as will Dave Purvis demonstrating coracles.

Eyemouth has a long maritime heritage and is still heavily involved with fishing, being Scotland's second largest inshore fishing port with more than 60 vessels registered: only Peterhead is bigger. In the 19th century Eyemouth paid a heavy price for its fish. A sudden storm in 1881 caught the Berwickshire fleet out at sea, resulting in the deaths of 189 fishermen, of whom 129 came from the town.

Another very profitable industry during the 18th and 19th centuries was smuggling. After 1707 and Parliamentary Union, customs duties rose steeply on tobacco, salt, malt, lace, claret, brandy, lace and many other essentials. Eyemouth lies so close to the English border that it was the ideal transit point for onward travel. All the old houses have cellars that link to each other with hidden doors and secret tunnels. Along the coastline there are caves, inlets and caverns that were used in the trade. Eyemouth wasn't alone or unique in this trade – there is a Wine Cove just south of Stonehaven. The Excise men would have faced an uphill struggle, pitting their wits against a community with the advantage of local knowledge and a feeling that they were justified in their trade. That most famous of Excise men, Robert Burns, was enrolled as Royal Arch Mason in Eyemouth on May 19th 1787.

At the head of the old harbour lies Dundee House, home to the Willis family, who conceived, developed and ran the early years of the famous tea clipper, 'Cutty Sark'. Of course, the architect of the 'Cutty Sark' was Hercules Linton born in Inverbervie. A replica figurehead carved from Linton's original plans of the famous witch from Robert Burns' Tam O' Shanter stands at the entrance to Inverbervie.

A large mansion house, Gunsreen House, is currently under restoration in Eyemouth. This restoration is bringing up proof that the property was built on the proceeds of smuggling: secret passages, concealed hides in walls and below floors, and voluminous cellars have been uncovered. Most damning is a hidden tea, or possibly tobacco, chute leading to a hopper, which could hold over 300 kilos at a time. There is also anecdotal evidence of a secret swinging fireplace leading to a stairway down to hidden cellars.

The work of the Eyemouth Boat Museum is ongoing and will take many years to complete, but they are playing a major role in preserving not only the Scottish

maritime heritage, but also at an international level. This links very closely to MRI's aims of preserving old skills and knowledge for future generations.

For further information, or to find out how you can support the work of Maritime Rescue Institute, please contact 01569 765768.