

Maritime Rescue Institute Coastal Notes – 6 September 2006

Call 999 and one of the options available will be the Coastguard. The Coastguard is the first point of call for all maritime incidents and co-ordinates the rescue services attending.

The Coastguard's origins go back to medieval times. As soon as rulers put taxes on imported goods, smugglers tried to evade the tax collectors and a force was set up to counter this illegal activity. All trade was carried in small ships and 200 years ago public outcry at the loss of lives and shipping drove forward the creation of national lifesaving organisations. In the 1820's coast guard officers took responsibility at shipwrecks to safeguard against looters, but they were also trained to use lifesaving equipment. The [RNLI](#)'s gold medal for gallantry was first awarded in 1824 to Charles Fremantle of the Lymington Coastguard for swimming with a line to rescue crew from the 'Carl Jean' ashore near Christchurch. Like fishermen and seamen around the coast, Fremantle seized whatever was available to save the lives of fellow seafarers.

Over the years they took on many roles. An enquiry in 1921 found that the Coastguard had become the eyes and ears of many organisations with coastal interests. For the Admiralty they provided visual signalling and telegraphy, reported fleet movements, rendered mines safe, undertook recruitment, and reported changes in navigation marks to the Hydrographer. For the Board of Customs and Excise they searched vessels, supervised discharge of cargoes, collected dues from coastal vessels, kept shipping statistics, and patrolled the coast. For the Board of Trade they assisted ships in distress, acted as Receiver of Wreck, and operated life saving apparatus. In addition Coastguards: assisted the Post Office and Lloyds with telegraphy and wireless; provided the Fishery Department with statistics; enforced quarantine regulations for Agricultural Departments; made meteorological reports to the Air Ministry; passed distress calls to the RNLI; and reported faulty navigation aids to Trinity House.

In 1923 the Coastguard, placed under the Board of Trade, was dedicated to life saving, salvage from wreck and administration of the foreshore. The early Coastguard had been caught between the demands of different government departments, but change could now focus on the needs of seafarers, especially the scope for new technology to improve both safety and rescues.

The 1920s Coastguard kept a visual watch. Stations overlooking major shipping lanes and hazards, maintained constant watch day and night and were able to summon auxiliaries to intermediate stations should visibility decrease or bad weather set in. An enquiry in 1931 correctly predicted that increased use of radio would eliminate the need for visual watches; this initiated a controlled reduction in Coastguard stations, lookouts and personnel, which continues in this century.

In the 1930s effective watch and communication reduced the number of shoreline casualties. Coastguards warned vessels approaching danger in time to take evasive action or alerted lifeboats, now with engines, which could quickly assist vessels still offshore.

Stonehaven recently lost 2 such old style coastguards with the passing of Jim Bruce and Bill Pittendreigh. Jim was the Station Officer, ably assisted by Bill and John Corstorphine. After Jim's retiral in the 1970's the role of the Stonehaven station was gradually downgraded as technology advanced, allowing many activities to be centred in Aberdeen.

Professional Coastguards have increasingly been concentrated in a small number of high-tech Maritime co-ordination centres dealing with thousands of emergencies. It is the Auxiliaries of the Coastguard Rescue Teams who are often first on scene feeding back information. This was well demonstrated in the recent search for John Mallard, the diver who had such an amazingly lucky escape. The auxiliary teams were on the cliff tops in poor conditions reporting back to the co-ordination centre in Aberdeen.

You can learn more about the work of the modern HM Coastguard by calling the MCA or by arranging to visit a local Maritime co-ordination centre.

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