

Maritime Rescue Institute
Coastal Notes – 1 May 2007

One stormy night in December 1807 a young cabinet maker from Helston near Plymouth stood with many others watching in helpless horror as over 120 men died less than 100 yards from shore at Lizard Point. HMS Anson had run aground on a sandbar, but conditions were so bad that nobody on shore could do anything to save the crew. Henry Trengrouse was so appalled by this disaster that he vowed to find a way to prevent such a tragedy from happening again. His solution was a rocket apparatus.

He realised that the rockets used by the army as artillery could also carry a line. Once there was a thin line linking the ship and shore then that could be used to pull a heavy rope onto the ship. This was made fast on land and shore and a bosun's chair – a short plank of wood on a pulley – could be hung from the rope and used to winch the sailors back to land and safety. Over time the bosun's chair evolved into the breeches buoy, which was a life ring or harness that would hold the sailor more securely.

At first, the government ignored his invention. The Russian government of the day invited him to St Petersburg to develop his invention, an offer he declined out of patriotism. Eventually, the government ordered 20 of his systems, then decided to manufacture the equipment themselves giving him a paltry £50 in compensation. By contrast, the Tsar of Russia gave him a diamond ring in recognition of the lives saved in the Baltic using his invention.

Eventually, his system was employed by both the RNLI and HM Coastguard and remained in use here up until the late 1980's, when helicopters became an integral part of the Search and Rescue service. Schermuly's improved rocket system meant that the breeches buoy became a safer and more efficient piece of equipment. Over the years it has saved more than 20,000 lives and is still saving lives today in Iceland among other countries.

One of the most spectacular breeches buoy rescues happened during the great hurricane of 31st January 1953. In winds gusting well over 100 miles per hour the cargo ship 'Clan MacQuarrie' went aground near Borve in Lewis. All 66 crew were rescued, with no injuries. Never before or since has such a large scale rescue taken place using a breeches buoy.

Henry Trengrouse died penniless in 1854, having devoted a lifetime to perfecting and promoting his invention. On his deathbed he predicted to his son "If you live to be as old as I am, you will find my rocket apparatus along our shores" a prediction that was to become true. Many, many sailors have good reason to be grateful to this largely unknown man who gave of his time, effort and money to ensure that the HMS Anson story would never be repeated

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