

## Source 4: How to solve the problem of shipwreck

[ xi ]

**GENERAL CONTENTS.**

	Page
Shipwreck,—its frequency near shore	3
— particularly near capes and promontories	6
— Recent instances affording useful hints for future navigators respecting various expedients against thirst, famine, want of water	9
— Cautions in the treatment	11
— Accidental causes of shipwreck	12
— Why influenced by local situations	13
Hurricanes,—prognostic signs of	14
Shipwreck, more often caused by negligence	15
— Hints for prevention, by new improvements	16
— by boats incapable of upsetting	18
— the Shields life-boat, its pre-eminence	20
— by improved nautical implements	22
— by curious inventions by foreigners	30
— by vigilance and intrepidity of the captain	32
— by precautions against storms	33
— laws respecting wrecks, and to prevent plunder	36
— the forming a line of communication with the shore, an important object	38
— How best accomplished	40
— by life-boat, projectile forces, &c.	39
— by impervious air-vessels, a new invention	44
— principle of floating bodies explained	47
Swimming and Diving, their importance	47
— Objection	

The Royal Humane Society was established by Dr William Hawes and friends in London in 1774 (then called the Society for the Recovery of Persons Apparently Drowned) with the primary aim of reducing the unnecessary loss of life from drowning.

In an essay written in 1799 by Dr Fothergill from Bath, he answers three questions set by the Society about the best ways to save lives at sea. He recommends that ships should carry lifeboats and lifejackets, that lifeboats be stationed at readiness to rescue on the coast, and describes fully the sea rescue schemes established in the late 1700s on the north east coast of England at Bamburgh and Shields.

The Royal Humane Society gave Dr Fothergill a Gold Medal for his essay and had it published.

Another example of the important work of the Royal Humane Society is its setting up of a network of 'receiving houses' – firstly local inns, then purpose-built stations – where the bodies of 'persons apparently drowned' in the River Thames could be brought to be resuscitated by trained medical assistants.

[ xii ]

Objection from Human beings swept away by accidents	49
Waste of life,—how reconciled to the laws of the universe,—whether the mere preservation of the species be only intended	50
Whether swimming ought not to constitute an essential branch of national education	ib.
Swimming and diving, their additional advantages	51
New diving machine,—its peculiar utility	53
Asylum for shipwrecked mariners much wanted	54
— whether that at Bamborough castle does not afford an excellent model	56
— hints for establishing such institutions on a smaller scale	59
— in situations peculiarly dangerous	60
Conclusion	61

[ 36 ]

8. When a vessel is cast away, within a small distance of shore (as in the late melancholy accidents, which gave rise to these reflections), the country people hasten in crowds to view the affecting spectacle; some with an eager desire to assist the wretched sufferers; others, (horrible to relate!) for the sole purpose of plunder! In order to prevent the cruel depredations of those inhuman barbarians, a peace-officer ought always to be present, attended by the principal inhabitants; and assisted, if required, by a military force\*.

He

[ 37 ]

He should be empowered to offer premiums for the preservation of life and property, and to encourage watermen to face the boisterous sea in life-boats kept ready for the purpose. But on these mournful occasions, the minds of the more humane and civilized spectators are generally too much agitated to supply the aid that is so much wanted, or to suggest any means of succour, but such as are totally inadequate. Nor is this to be wondered at: the moment of danger is not the moment of reflection, nor can new resources be struck out without the rare and happy talent of invention, and the cool reasoning of a mind at ease. From want of a life-boat, and other necessary expedients, how often are ships and their cargoes irretrievably lost, which otherwise might have been saved!

Extract from *An Essay on the Preservation of Shipwrecked Mariners, in Answer to the Prize Questions Proposed by the Royal Humane Society*

© The British Library Board, Shelfmark T.350.(4)

Q

1. Why do you think the Royal Humane Society set questions on the problem of shipwreck as part of a competition?

2. Looking at the essay's contents pages, why do you think Dr Fothergill won the competition?

3. Looking at pages 36 and 37 of the essay:  
a. make a list of the problems outlined  
b. make a list of the solutions he offered to these problems.

4. What do you think this essay shows about how people viewed the problem of shipwreck in the late 1700s?