

Source 6: The *Original* lifeboat

In 1789, a ship named *Adventure* ran ashore in the mouth of the River Tyne during a violent storm. The rough seas prevented local men from doing anything to save the crew with the boats they then had and many of the *Adventure's* crew drowned.

This disaster inspired The Gentlemen of Lawe-House, a group of local businessmen from South Shields, to place a newspaper advert for a competition to design a rescue boat to go out to shipwrecks. They offered a reward of 2 guineas [£2.10] for the successful design.

The competition received worthy entries from William Wouldhave and Henry Greathead but the group nevertheless decided neither design would be an outright winner. Instead, the committee used ideas from both and produced a final design for a lifeboat. They offered 1 guinea [£1.05] as a reward to Wouldhave, who took offence at having his prize-money halved and rejected his winnings. They asked Henry Greathead to build the design they had completed and thus Henry Greathead went on to become known as the inventor of the lifeboat.

His first lifeboat was aptly named *Original*. Over the following 2 decades, over 30 of Greathead's lifeboats were built for orders around Britain's coast and abroad. The images all show the series of *Original* lifeboats, the first type of boat known as a 'lifeboat'.

An extract from the *Caledonian Mercury* in 1801 shows not only the success of Greathead's lifeboats but how the British press supported the campaign to bring this valuable invention into general use.



Henry Greathead, who built the first series of 'lifeboats' from 1789
Courtesy: RNLI



The *Zetland*, an *Original*-type lifeboat built by Greathead stationed at Redcar 1801–80
Courtesy: RNLI



Etching of Henry Greathead's *Original* in service
Courtesy: RNLI



Model of Greathead's *Original* lifeboat, built in 1789
Courtesy: RNLI

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LIFE-BOAT.

We have formerly stated the services which have been done by Life Boats and their vast utility at sea-ports, &c. The following letter, addressed to Mr HENRY GREATHEAD, South Shields, tends to illustrate the advantages to be derived from them

SCARBOROUGH—November 17.

On Monday, the 2d of November, we were visited with a most dreadful storm from the westward, and I scarcely ever remember seeing a more tremendous sea. The Aurora, of Newcastle, in approaching the harbour, was driven about to the southward, and as she was in the most imminent danger, the life boat was immediately launched to her assistance. The place where the ship lay was exposed to the whole force of the sea; and she was surrounded with broken water, which dashed over her decks with considerable violence. In such a perilous situation

the life boat adventured and proceeded through the breach of the sea, rising on the summit of the waves, without shipping any water, excepting a little from the spray; on going on the lee quarter of the vessel they were endangered by the main-boom, which had broken loose, and was driving about with great force; this necessitated them to go alongside the vessel, and they instantly took out four of the crew—but the sea which broke over the decks having nearly filled the boat with water, they were induced to pull off for a moment, when seeing three boys, the remainder of the crew, clinging to the rigging, and in danger of perishing, they immediately returned and took them into the boat, and brought the whole to land in safety. By the means of the life-boat built from your plan, and the exertions of the boatmen, seven men and boys were thus saved to their country and their friends, and preserved from that inevitable destruction which otherwise awaited them. The boat was not the least af-

fecting by the water which broke into her when alongside the vessel, and indeed the boatmen thought it rendered her more steady in the sea. I must also add, that it was the general opinion, that no other boat, of the common construction, could have possibly performed the service; and the fishermen, though very adventurous, declared they would not have made the attempt in their own boats.

We have appointed a crew of fishermen to manage the boat, under the direction of the committee; and the men are so much satisfied with the performances of the boat, and so confident in her safety, that they are emboldened to adventure on the most dangerous occasions.

I have been thus circumstantial, to shew the great utility of the life-boat, and I should think it would be rendering an essential benefit to the community, if any recommendation of mine should contribute to bring this valuable invention into more general use. I remain, Sir, &c.

THOS. HINDERWELL.

Extract from the *Caledonian Mercury* of Edinburgh, Monday 28 December 1801

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The Lifeboat in the Act of Saving Part of the Crew of a Ship Wrecked Near Tynemouth Castle after W Elmes, 1803
Courtesy: RNLI Heritage Trust



The Life Boat in the ACT of SAVING part of the CREW of a SHIP, wreck'd near Tynemouth &c. of the County of Northumberland &c. &c. &c. First Patron of the means of saving the Lives of some hundreds of Shipwreck'd Men most obedient and most humble Servant Henry

1. Why was the competition launched to design a rescue boat?
2. In the rescue off Scarborough in 1801, reported in the *Caledonian Mercury*, why were the crew of fishermen in the lifeboat so impressed with the design?
3. What impact would this new lifeboat have had on the wider campaign to improve lifesaving at sea?