



1914

The Wreck of the Rohilla

In 1914, at the beginning of World War I, the Steam Ship Rohilla (shortened to SS Rohilla) was commissioned as a hospital ship, working from the port of Leith in Scotland. On 28th October 1914 it was ordered to travel to France to rescue wounded soldiers.

On board were 229 people including the Captain, David Neilson, and medical staff. At dusk the Rohilla neared the east coast of England. A wild storm arose, and the ship was forced to battle against gale-force winds and heavy seas. The captain could not see where he was due to blackout regulations which meant that no harbour or coastal lights were allowed, so he could only navigate by estimating the direction and distance travelled, a method known as dead-reckoning.

At 3.30 in the morning of 30th October the Rohilla neared Whitby. The captain thought the ship was 7 miles from shore, but he had miscalculated: she was actually only half a mile from Whitby's rocky coastline. The Hawsker coastguard spotted her and signalled warnings by flashing lights in Morse code, sounded the foghorn and sent warning rockets.

At 4 am the Rohilla crew saw the Morse signals, but before they could react the ship hit the Whitby rocks at full force and was driven onto the notorious East Scaur, 450 yards from shore. Part of the ship balanced on the rock but the stern was torn away and 60 people were trapped and drowned.

In perilous conditions rescue attempts began, including firing rocket lines and using rowing lifeboats, but these efforts were unsuccessful. Another lifeboat was lifted over the East Pier's 8-foot-high wall and dragged towards the wreck site by 100 men and women. Lifeboatmen rowed out to the ship, making two journeys in hazardous conditions, and rescuing 33 people, but a further journey had to be abandoned because it was so dangerous. All of the Rohilla's own lifeboats were smashed by the force of the waves.

Another lifeboat, the *William Riley*, was dragged over the cliffs to Saltwick from Uppang by men and horses. It was lowered 200 feet down the cliffs but the onshore gale and lashing seas prevented it from being launched. Two other lifeboats from Teesmouth and Scarborough tried to reach the wreck but again, the weather and rough seas prevented them. The remaining people on the *Rohilla*

were unaware of the brave attempts being made to rescue them and thought they had been abandoned.

By 31st October the Whitby lifeboats and the *Mayfly* from Hartlepool were finally able to come within 50 yards of the wrecked ship. Desperate passengers jumped overboard to reach the lifeboats, but some were killed in the attempt. Local people waded into the water to help save who they could, risking their own lives in doing so.

On Sunday 1st November, at 1am, a steam lifeboat from Tynemouth, the *Henry Vernon*, arrived at Whitby harbour and took on barrels of oil. It got within 200 yards of the wreck and spilt the oil onto the water which flattened the heavy waves. Within 15 minutes this enabled the remaining 50 men to board the *Henry Vernon*, including Captain Neilson - and the ship's cat.

The brave crews of the lifeboats, coastguards and local people helped save the lives of 146 people.



Memorial in Whitby cemetery to those who lost their lives in the Rohilla disaster.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Where did the SS Rohilla leave from on 28th October?

Leith docks in Scotland.

2. Why do you think the people on board included medical staff?

The ship was travelling to France to rescue wounded soldiers.

3. Why couldn't Captain Neilson see any lighthouses or other landmarks to navigate by?

Because of the wartime blackout regulations.

4. What is dead-reckoning?

Navigating by estimating the direction and distance travelled.

5. How did the Hawsker coastguard try and warn the Rohilla of danger?

They signalled warnings in Morse code, sounded the foghorn and sent warning rockets.

6. Where was part of the ship balanced and the stern torn away?

The notorious East Scaur

7. What sort of rescue attempts were unsuccessful?

Rocket lines and rowing boats.

8. How many people dragged a lifeboat to the wreck site?

100

9. What other areas on the north-east coast did help come from to make more rescue attempts?

Hartlepool and Tynemouth.

10. Which direction did these vessels travel?

South-east.

11. How was the sea flattened to enable the final rescue?

Spilling oil onto the water.

12. Why did this work?

Because oil is less dense than water and floats on the surface.

13. How many hours and minutes in total did it take from the Rohilla getting into difficulties to the final people being rescued?

46 hours 30 minutes

14. How many people who were aboard the Rohilla did not survive?

83



Photograph of the rescue taken at the time.

Find out more:

- Whitby Lifeboat Museum, Pier Road, Whitby YO21 3PU,
<https://rnli.org/find-my-nearest/museums/whitby-lifeboat-museum>
- Remarkable contemporary newsreel of the rescue,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUzIw_RS0qk
- Website on all things to do with HMHS Rohilla,
http://www.eskside.co.uk/ss_rohilla/index.htm