



The 'Visiter' Sea Rescue, Robin Hood's Bay

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A plaque at the top of The Bank at Robin Hood's Bay tells the story of a heroic rescue which took place in 1881, when a collier brig the 'Visiter' (though in contemporary news reports the spelling was 'Visitor') foundered in a violent storm whilst carrying a cargo of coal from Newcastle to London. The vessel, registered at Whitby and locally owned, was by then elderly, having been built in 1823 at Sunderland. She had sailed as far south as Flamborough by the afternoon of Tuesday 16th January when a south-easterly gale prevented further progress, tearing the sails to shreds and driving her back up the coast past the cliffs of what is now known as Ravenscar, though in those days was called Peak.

In the middle of the night she was taking on so much water that the master set down the anchor, hoping to ride out the storm. The wind veered north-easterly bringing snow and hail, and sea conditions were atrocious. Waves were breaking over the deck and the crew of six attempted to save themselves by taking to the ship's boat, but dared not leave the comparative shelter of what was by now a wreck for fear of being driven onto the unforgiving rocks beneath the cliff. Dodd, the apprentice, was wet through and frozen, having jumped into the sea and swum to the boat roped to a buoy, to be pulled into

it by the other crewmen, and here they spent the bitter winter night in conditions beyond imagination.

It was only when the brig's quarter-board was found on the beach at Robin Hood's Bay next morning that anyone realised there was a shipwreck. The six men in their life-threatening predicament could just be seen from land two miles to the south of the village. The Bay lifeboat was old and the local fishermen who were its crew regarded it as unseaworthy for launching into such mountainous seas, a decision confirmed by the coastguards who inspected it. In desperation the Vicar, Revd. Jermyn Cooper, sent a telegram to Whitby: "Vessel sunk, crew in open boat riding by the wreck, send Whitby lifeboat if practicable".

Rowing the lifeboat, the Robert Whitworth, around the coast from Whitby in such conditions was out of the question, but the Whitby branch secretary of the Royal Naval Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), Captain Gibson, along with first and second coxswains Henry Freeman and John Storr, took the momentous decision to haul the boat the six miles to Bay overland. This would have been difficult enough in fair weather, with the road climbing steadily to an elevation of over 500 feet followed by a steep drop down to sea-level, but the whole country was at the time suffering from severe winter weather, with

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hard frost and blizzards which had blocked many roads. With the combined efforts of 18 horses and over 200 volunteers who turned out in the dreadful weather to cut a way through snowdrifts up to 8 feet deep, Bay remarkably was reached in just over three hours. The way down the steep and twisting Bay Bank was difficult and dangerous, with the helpers controlling the descent by means of ropes attached to the boat's carriage, and as she rounded the double-bend by The Laurel Inn there was barely an inch and a half to spare.

The lifeboat was launched successfully, albeit with some difficulty, however before the wreck could be reached, six of the oars were snapped by one tremendous wave and the lifeboat had to return to shore. Some of the oarsmen were by now too exhausted to row, but following an appeal made by Henry Freeman for volunteers, the

boat's second attempt - now with a larger crew and using the oars from the old Bay lifeboat - was successful.

The shipwrecked men were suffering badly from exposure, two of them by now delirious, but with the sea still raging all were somehow manhandled into the lifeboat. The dramatic rescue was completed by mid-afternoon on the Wednesday and thankfully all six unfortunate men escaped with their lives.

Several days later, the storm having abated, the lifeboat crew walked the six miles from Whitby back to Robin Hood's Bay and rowed the Robert Whitworth around the coast back to Whitby harbour. Later that year, the RNLI provided Bay with a 32-foot self-righting lifeboat, the Ephraim & Hannah Fox, together with a brick lifeboat-house in the Dock which stands to this day. It bears a record of all the rescues carried out by the station until closure in 1931.



Find out more

Scarborough Maritime Heritage Centre, 45 Eastborough, Scarborough YO11 1NH,
<http://www.scarboroughsmaritimeheritage.org.uk/>

Robin Hood's Bay,
<https://www.robin-hoods-bay.co.uk/>



On the 18th January 1881 the Aris
"VISITER"
ran ashore in Robin Hood's Bay. No beach boat could be launched on account
of the violence of the storm, so the Whitby lifeboat was brought overland
past this point—a distance of 6 miles—through snowdrifts 7 feet deep on a
road rising to 500 feet, with 300 men clearing the way ahead and with
16 horses leaving at the tow lines, whilst men worked uphill towards them
from the Bay. The lifeboat was launched two hours after leaving Whitby
and at the second attempt, the crew of the Visiter were saved.
So that future generations may remember the bravery of Captain Henry
Freeman, and the lifeboatmen, and the dogged determination of the people
of Whitby, Hawsker and Robin Hood's Bay, who overcame such difficulties,
this memorial was erected in 1951.

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Scene of the Visiter disaster below the distant Ravenscar headland, Robin Hood's Bay; Inset, commemorative plaque