



Henry Freeman, Man of The Sea

Ray and Sheila Clarke

Henry Freeman was born on 29th April 1835 in Bridlington to William, a brick-maker, and Margaret; he was one of eleven children. When he was five the family moved to Flamborough, a place of crashing seas and stormy winters, which must have had a profound effect upon the young Henry. Along with his brothers Henry was instructed by their father in the brick-making trade, something most of the boys took up. Henry initially followed his older brother William into farming, but returned to brick-making when he moved to Whitby in 1855.

History records that in April 1858 Henry chanced to look out to sea and espied a traditional wooden fishing-boat – a coble - upset by waves between Upgang and Sandsend; was this the moment when he decided to pursue a life at sea? For three years he worked on a variety of coastal vessels before returning to Whitby to become a fisherman. Then an event took place which shaped the rest of his working life.

The evening of 8th February 1861 saw a coastal assault by exceptionally strong north-easterly winds, whipping up the seas into a wrath of anger. Over a 24-hour period more than 200 vessels are believed to have foundered. Although he had not worked on lifeboats before,

Henry was involved in five rescue attempts, but during the fifth rescue the lifeboat was overturned by two enormous incoming waves colliding with a third on its rebound; the resultant explosion of force upended the lifeboat, causing its crew to be tipped into the sea. All drowned bar Henry; they were wearing the then standard lifebelts that fitted low on the body whilst he was wearing a newer one that fitted over his shoulders. Henry was 26 at the time of the tragedy and went on to serve as a lifeboatman for 40 years, of which 22 were spent as coxswain.

Away from his lifeboat duties Henry was a fisherman. From July to October he would typically set nets from a coble, catching herring, and use long-lines with multiple hooks to catch mackerel. In the 1870 register of Whitby Fishing boats, we see Henry achieving his goal of taking on a boat as master.

Henry Freeman was not a man without controversy, taking it upon himself to launch when others might not have done. In 1881 he was involved in the dramatic rescue of the crew of the 'Visiter'. He became an ambassador and spokesman for the Whitby fishing community, for instance campaigning for coloured warning lights on fishing trawlers. He was an energetic promoter of the RNLI (Royal Naval Lifeboat Institution - founded in 1824). He travelled

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to London, Leeds, Halifax and Huddersfield, including occasions when he and a crew would parade through the city aboard a lifeboat; this brought much needed funds to the RNLI. Throughout his time with the lifeboat service Freeman gained much acclaim for his daring exploits - and his reputation was to stand him in good stead when he came up against the law.

In April 1883 Henry and his three partners were charged with the theft of fishing lines set at sea, an offence of such seriousness that imprisonment was not uncommon; for Henry his good name and reputation were also at stake. He was found guilty and given a hefty fine of £15, his previous good character having saved him from a more severe sentence. He retained his position as coxswain until his retirement in 1898, a year of great upheaval for him since he also lost his wife.

In 1861 Henry had married Elizabeth, daughter of Thomas Busfield, a jet ornament maker. The marriage lasted 36 years, although sadly there were no children. Elizabeth succumbed to a liver disease in 1898 and was cared for by her sister Emma, a widow of some 30 years. In 1901 Henry and Emma married and once again Henry ran foul of the law: since 1835 it had been illegal for a man to marry his wife's sister, whatever the circumstances. Both participants must have been aware of what they were undertaking, for they took the unusual step of marrying in Hartlepool. The Act would not be changed until 1907.

On 13th December 1904 Henry Freeman died. His funeral was a well-attended affair at which his coffin was borne by his fellow lifeboatmen, with a large crowd following. During his time with the lifeboats he had saved over 300 lives.



Find out more

The Whitby Museum, Pannett Park, Whitby YO21 1RE, <https://whitbymuseum.org.uk/> ,
has a large, imposing portrait of Henry Freeman, donated by the Graham family.

The Sutcliffe Gallery, 1 Flowergate, Whitby YO21 3BA, <http://www.sutcliffe-gallery.co.uk/>
has photos of Henry Freeman Scarborough Maritime Heritage Centre, 45 Eastborough, Scarborough YO11 1NH,
<http://www.scarboroughsmaritimeheritage.org.uk/>

Whitby Lifeboat Museum, Pier Road, Whitby YO21 3PU -
<https://rnli.org/find-my-nearest/museums/whitby-lifeboat-museum>

‘Storm Warrior: Turbulent life of Henry Freeman’ by Ian Minter and Ray Shill (1991)



Henry Freeman with the new design of cork life-jacket that saved his life