



(BOOK 6)

LIFEBOATMEN

Author: Simon Wills

For those familiar with the seas in and around Poole, this book will make particularly interesting reading, enabling the reader to easily visualise the scenes. The year is 1866 and the worst hurricane for over a century is devastating the south coast of England, at a time when the emergency services are in their infancy. Poole's first RNLI lifeboat has not long been delivered and the crew, although experienced seamen, have only had very limited training and no operational experience to date.

When the storm strikes, a number of ships are sheltering at anchor in and around Poole bay, (outside Poole Harbour). As the storm worsens, many are driven onto rocks and smashed to pieces by the ferocious seas. The newly appointed lifeboat is launched to aid the numerous stricken ships but fails to save any lives. Many sailors are drowned. In an era when gallantry and self-sacrifice are expected, the lifeboatmen are publicly accused of cowardice causing a serious rift in the close-knit community.

The book describes the atmosphere of suspicion and blame in which the coxswain has to rebuild his team and prepare them for the next maritime emergency. It is about leadership and building the right team, as well as confidence within the team and their equipment. This early form of RNLI lifeboat was basically a large open-top rowing boat, albeit self-draining and self-righting, requiring great courage and stamina of all the crew members.

A year later in 1867, with a stronger and better prepared crew, the lifeboat is called out to a large cargo vessel run aground under violent weather conditions and starting to break up from pounding seas. The rescue of 46 seamen under extreme seas is described in some detail and really emphasises the stamina and courage required of the lifeboat crew. Not a single life is lost and the lifeboatmen are the heroes of Poole and can once again hold their heads up with confidence.

The author, Simon Wills, has undertaken extensive research into the social and maritime history of Poole and the early days of the lifeboat service. This true story provides an authentic and enthralling picture of a nineteenth century seafaring community on the brink of great change.

I heartily recommend this book.

John Cox

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