

HEART OF CONFLICT

BRAVERY AT SEA

The outbreak of World War One is now more than a century ago. But there are still people alive who remember their fathers talking about the war. Here are two recollections from men from Newquay, recorded by their grandsons.

Newquay fisherman Edwin (Ned) Hicks remembers rescuing men from torpedoed ships in World War One

“As we were appointed auxiliary wartime coastguard, we were usually on different shifts from our fishermen friends Jamie and Dick Gill. They agreed to fish together with us, sharing the two boats’ costs – ours being the Sunny South. It usually ended up with Ned Hicks and Dick Gill fishing together and Joe Hicks and Jamie Gill fishing together as this fitted in well with our shifts.

Summertime we worked seventy pots each boat in strings of seven, all pots being of withy.

Whilst we were hauling pots it wasn’t unusual for a steamer going up and down the coast to be torpedoed by a German submarine where upon we would set off to rescue as many of the survivors as possible and then take them into Newquay Harbour. On one occasion there was an army officer on the quay who was so impressed by what we had achieved that he took off his hat and much to our embarrassment made a collection for us from the bystanders.

Usually when giving up a day’s fishing to rescue survivors we were paid 7/6 each. On this occasion when the lifeboat authorities found out about the collection which was in the region of £6.00 (£3.00 each) they declined to make the 7/6 payment.

On another occasion we went to the aid of an American steamship and the first survivors we came to was a large black man, evidently a good swimmer as he had swum the furthest from the sunken ship. On coming alongside to pick him up he said ‘I am a good swimmer, pick up my friend then come back for me’ which we did.

We occasionally came across semi-submerged ships lifeboats, so we kept a sharpened broom handle aboard the boat to plug the bunghole of the submerged boat and then bale her out and tow back to the harbour to claim salvage.

The most men we rescued in one trip was in the region of 22, not much room to manoeuvre in a small lug mizzen boat. When there was no wind we worked the tides and rowed the boat with long oars called sweeps.

Many sailors from torpedoed steamships were rescued by inshore fishermen as they were nearest to hand. The lifeboat if she had been alerted would have had to travel several miles to the scene – in those days being sailed and rowed.”

One of the ships that some men were rescued from – unfortunately not all. Sixteen lives were lost.

August 21, 1918: Steamship Lake Edon, gross 2,371 tons; torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine (UB type), in Bristol Channel about 6 miles southeast of Trevoise Head and about 4 miles north by east of Newquay; 16 lives lost.

**Leonard Sheppard (1902-1989) recalls the night the lifeboat James Stevens No. 5 was sunk:
17th December 1917**

“Hundreds of people had lined the cliff tops to watch the lifeboat go to rescue the crew of a steamer in distress. We had heard that it was a voluntary crew and not the full number as it was a particularly dangerous rescue attempt due to the terrible weather conditions.

The crew had manned the lifeboat and it sped down the slipway into the sea with a huge splash and the crowds on the cliff tops cheered. The crew rowed the lifeboat out further and raised the sail. Suddenly a wave and heavy gust of wind caught the boat and over she went. The cliff top watchers gasped and moaned in disbelief. She self-righted herself, but went over again and was gradually swept towards the rocks.

The men on the lifeboat managed to clamber onto the rocks and escape although some were badly injured. However, two men were flung into the sea on the first impact and were swept towards the Tea Caverns. There was talk amongst the crowd who would go down the cliff to help the men. I was told that one of the men was my mother’s 1st cousin Captain James Pappin. I was a small lad aged only 15, although I was used to clambering around on the cliffs it was frightening because it was such a filthy night and I was lowered down the cliff on a rope with a bottle of drink for my cousin. Another man was also lowered down.

All the men were saved, but the lifeboat was smashed to smithereens on the rocks. The steamer survived and got away safely.”