

The Rescue of 'Hermina'

It was the evening of 3rd Dec 1920, in Fishguard. John Howells, Coxswain of the lifeboat, looked out into the bay with increasing concern. The Dutch Motor Schooner Hermina had sailed from the Mersey bound for Rotterdam. They encountered severe gales and had prudently run back to shelter outside the harbour. Now the wind had backed to the North West and increased to storm force. Exposed to the full force of the wind and massive storm waves, she started to drag her anchors towards the rocks and cliffs behind her.

When Hermina put up distress signals the lifeboat launched and, manned by John Howells and a hand picked crew, they set out from the sheltered harbour to the horrific seas outside. Named Charterhouse, the lifeboat had been funded by past and present students, staff and parents at the prestigious Charterhouse school. Very solidly built, she had bow and stern sealed buoyancy tanks, a petrol engine and tubes built into the hull to drain away seawater.

Arriving at the ship they set a kedge anchor and payed out enough rope to lie alongside the Hermina. After an hour of intense effort during which she was often flung up into the ship's rigging, they managed to take off seven of the ship's crew. Captain Vooitgedacht stayed with his ship, accompanied by the Mate and Second Mate, still hoping to save their vessel if the wind changed. Now Coxswain Howells had to get Charterhouse off a lee shore, where the wind and waves were pushing them towards Needle Rock, and back to the safety of the harbour.

When the anchor was retrieved the engine was put out of action by the water, which was washing right over her. Making things even worse, the mizzen sail was torn away by the now hurricane force wind. The only way to save her was to rig another sail. Tom Holmes and Tom Davies climbed up onto the exposed foredeck and, braving the waves washing right over them, managed to make fast a jib sail. This allowed the boat to slowly claw itself away from the nightmare of rocks and cliffs. Finally with the aid of their oars they were able to come about and limp into the safety of Fishguard harbour. Arriving at about midnight, they had been out for 5 hours. Soon afterwards the Hermina began to break up on the Needle Rock. The Second Mate was swept away, but miraculously the Captain and Mate were able to scramble above the worst of the waves and cling on to the rocks until daybreak. They were rescued by William Morgan - lowered down on a rope by the Fishguard cliff rescue team.

This was no ordinary lifeboat rescue! As an incredible feat of seamanship it was recognised widely. Coxswain John Howells was awarded the RNLi Gold Medal, Tom Davies, Tom Holmes and Robert Simpson Silver medals and T Perkins, I Rourke, Patrick Whelan, T Duffin, J Gardiner, W Devereux, H Mason, W Thomas and R Veal bronze medals.

On April 28th 1921 the crew were invited to London to receive their awards from the President of the RNLi, the Prince of Wales, during the Institution's AGM at Central Hall in Westminster. The

Prince had also asked to see one of the caterpillar tractors that had recently been developed to assist in moving and launching lifeboats. The 'Robert and Catherine' lifeboat had just been retired from its station in North Devon and was towed by the new tractor from the RNLI depot at Poplar that morning for the Prince's inspection. The Fishguard crew were lined up in front of this boat to be presented to the Prince as he inspected the boat and tractor.

On Dec 3rd 1921 the crew were presented with Gold and Silver watches from the Queen and Government of the Netherlands as - "A token of high appreciation of the rescue.." One of these watches has recently been donated to our museum.