



Salcombe Lifeboat Disaster
Centenary Year 2016

THE SALCOMBE LIFEBOAT DISASTER



27 October 1916



On the morning of October 27th 1916, in the middle of the First World War, the small community of Salcombe suffered a terrible loss when the *William and Emma* lifeboat capsized near Salcombe Bar after returning from an abortive mission. Thirteen of the fifteen-man crew were drowned. The lifeboat had been called out, about six o'clock in the morning, to render assistance to the schooner *Western Lass*, which was reported to have been wrecked on Meg Rock, near Prawle Point.

1. The Lifeboat

The *William and Emma* was a Liverpool type non self-righting lifeboat, built in 1904 by the Thames Ironworks & Shipbuilding Co. Ltd., Blackwall, London, at a cost of £924.

She measured 35ft x 10ft. When fully laden with crew, gear and water ballast, she weighed as much as 6¼ tons. For sail-power she had a jib and two lug-sails (mainsail and mizzen). She was also fitted to pull twelve oars. With coxswain, second coxswain and bowman, she carried a crew of fifteen.



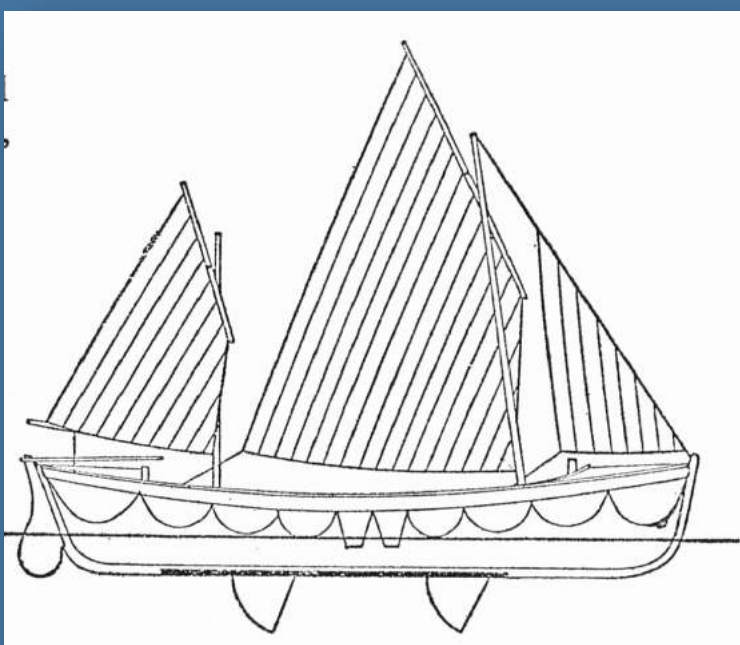
Model of the *William and Emma* by Malcolm Darch



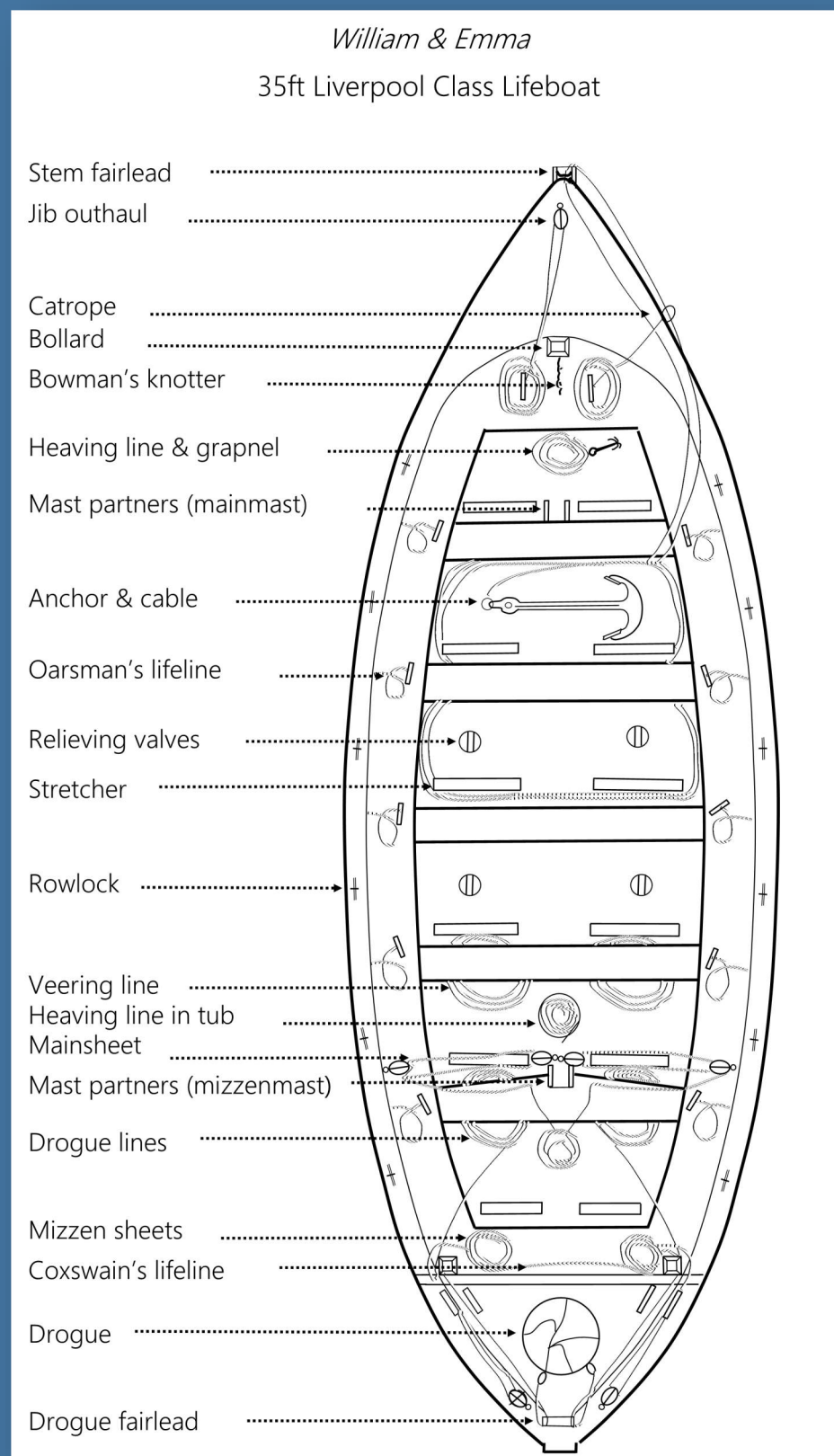
The *William & Emma* on her launch day at Kingsbridge in 1904



A typical Liverpool type non self-righter under sail



Sail plan and hull design



Deck plan

2. The Crew

With many of the younger men of the town serving in the armed forces, the average age of the fifteen man crew was 40. Sam Distin, the coxswain, was 47, his brother Albert, 49 and Peter Foale senior, the second coxswain, 56. Many of the men were related. In addition to the two Distin brothers (Sam and Albert), there were the three Foales, Peter senior and his sons Peter and William, and the two Cudd brothers, Frank and Jack. Some were related by marriage, others like Sam Distin and Thomas Putt worked together as fishing partners. Nine of the victims were fishermen or former fishermen and their loss was said to 'have practically wiped out the town's fishing fleet'.



Of the fifteen man crew only William Johnson and Eddie Distin survived

3. The Casualty - the Schooner *Western Lass*



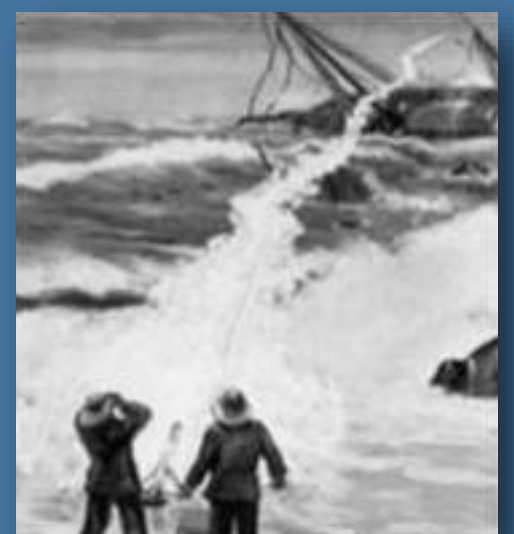
*Prawle Point
Coastguard Lookout*



*A Topsail Schooner
Aground*



*A Rocket Life Saving
Team*



Firing the rocket line

View to the east from the Prawle Point Coastguard Lookout

On the morning of 27 October a furious gale was lashing the South Devon coast. At 5.12am, up at the Prawle Point Coastguard Lookout, Chief Officer May observed a large blue light, a signal of distress, in the direction of the Meg Rock, off Langerstone Point, just over half a mile to the east. After making arrangements to warn Salcombe Coastguard and muster the Prawle Rocket Life Saving Apparatus Company, he made his way down to Langerstone Point, where he found the topsail schooner, *Western Lass* of Plymouth, stranded in a sandy cove to the westward of Meg Rock – the only bit of sand in the vicinity.

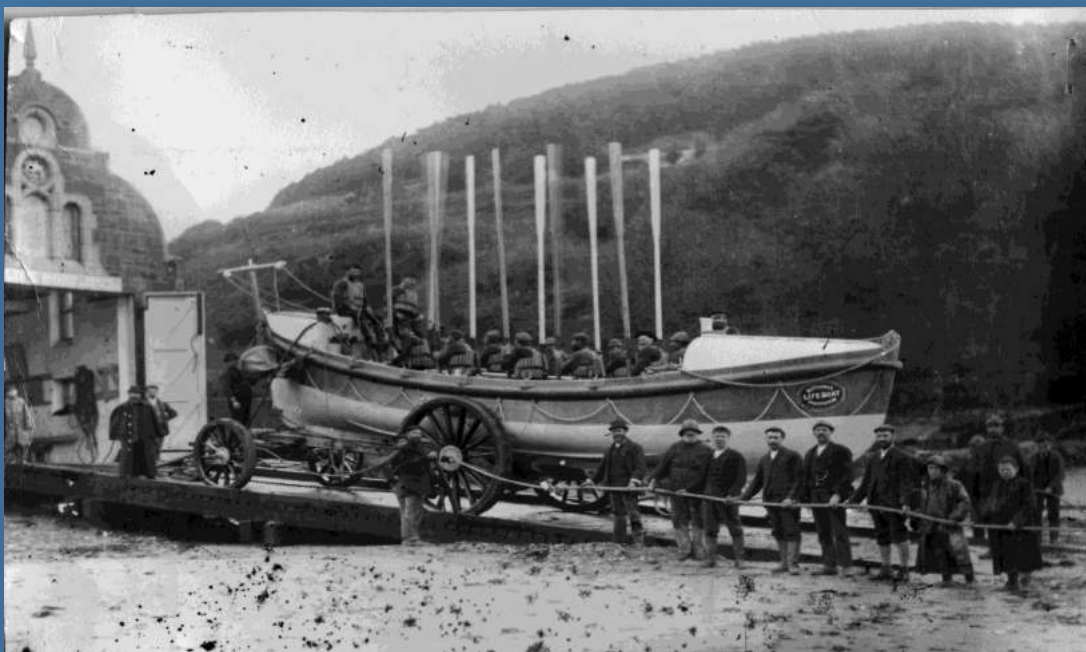
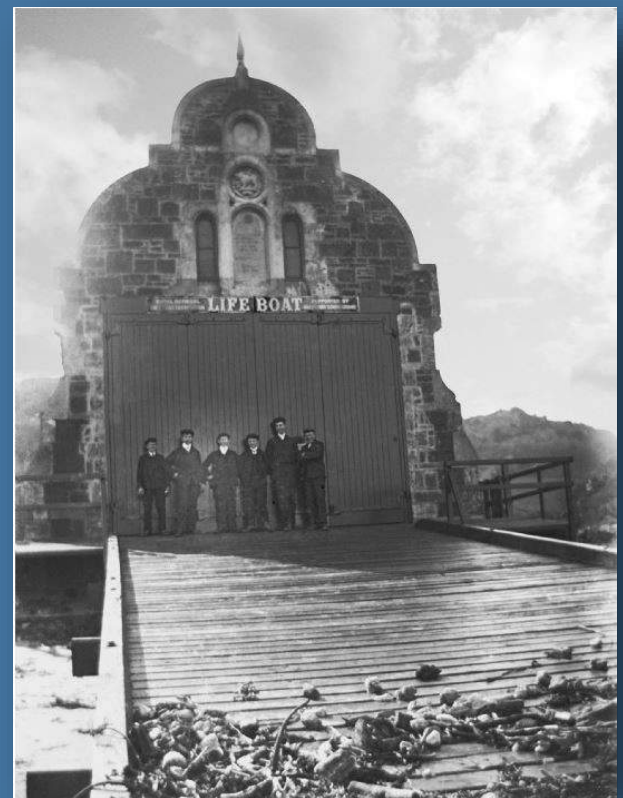
Soon after the Life Saving Company arrived on the scene a line was fired across the stricken vessel and the crew were hauled safely ashore, one at a time, in the breeches buoy. The last man was landed at 6.52am.

4. Launching the Lifeboat

The lifeboat was launched at 6.50am, one hour after the first warning of a ship in distress had been received at Salcombe and, unbeknown to the crew, just two minutes before the last man on the *Western Lass* had been rescued. With a full crew, and all her equipment on board, the *William and Emma* was hauled down the slipway by the launching team.



The South Sands Lifeboat House



Lesty, the previous lifeboat, being launched

Eddie Distin: 'There was a very bad sea on the Bar, which was crossed under oars. We got out all right, no easy matter though. It took a while to battle our way out with tons of water breaking over us, but eventually we made it'.



The Bar looking east to Prawle Point

5. Salcombe Bar

Salcombe Bar is a ridge of sand at the entrance to the Kingsbridge-Salcombe Estuary. It extends south westerly from Limebury Point on the eastern side. A heavy sea breaks over the Bar during southerly gales and, with the tide on the ebb, it is notoriously hazardous to cross. When the crew of the *William and Emma* made their forlorn attempt to re-cross the Bar at about 10.40am, it was 'blowing a hard SW gale with a high sea' and the tide was within two hours of low water.



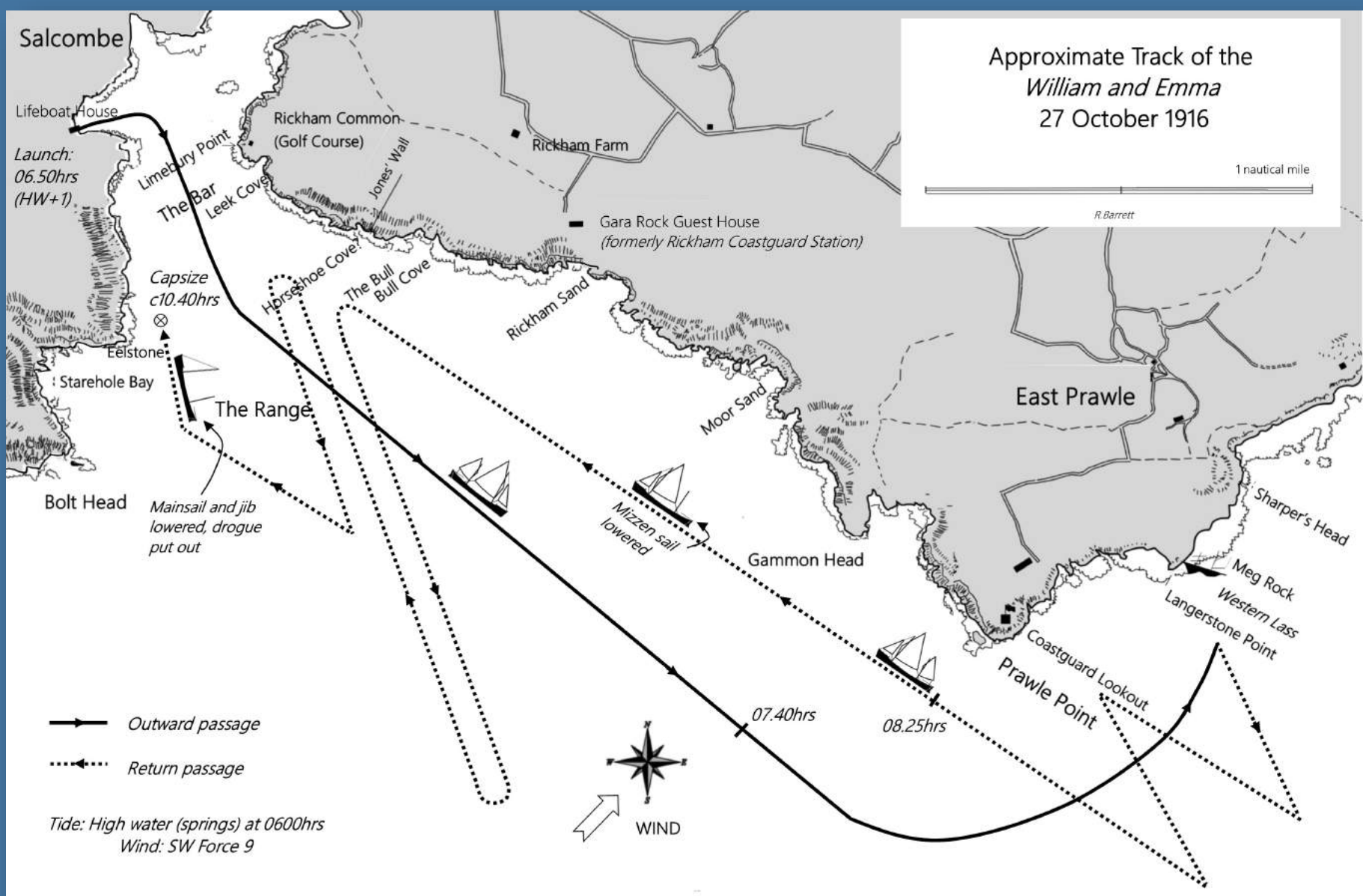
Salcombe Bar at the entrance to Salcombe harbour, looking east to Limebury Point



The William and Emma attempted to cross the Bar by the deeper channel on the western side but capsized at X.

6. A Fruitless Mission

Eddie Distin: ‘On rounding Prawle we saw the vessel in distress, a tops'l schooner. There was too much sea for us to get near the vessel and we couldn't see anyone onboard. But in fact the people had all got ashore before we had left home, but the telephone lines were down and they couldn't get a message through. The sea had been getting worse while we had been out and we could see that we couldn't do anything. We hung around for a while then the skipper said “That's it. Let's go home”.’



Langerstone Point looking west to Prawle Point



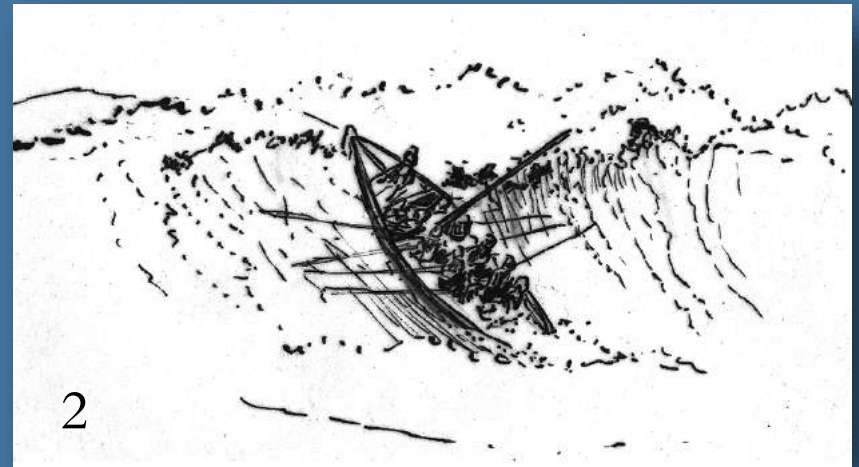
View east from Prawle Point to Bolt Head

7. The Unlucky Wave

With the wind now near hurricane force it was a cruel beat back. When they reached the Bar the crew saw it was not fit to cross and twice they turned away. On the third approach the cox'n said 'What about it lads, shall we try it?' It was now after ten o'clock and the men had been out for over three hours. They were cold, wet and exhausted and so the verdict was given in favour of returning over the Bar.



The William and Emma begins the run in. She has a drogue anchor streaming astern to steady her and the crew are about to lower the masts.



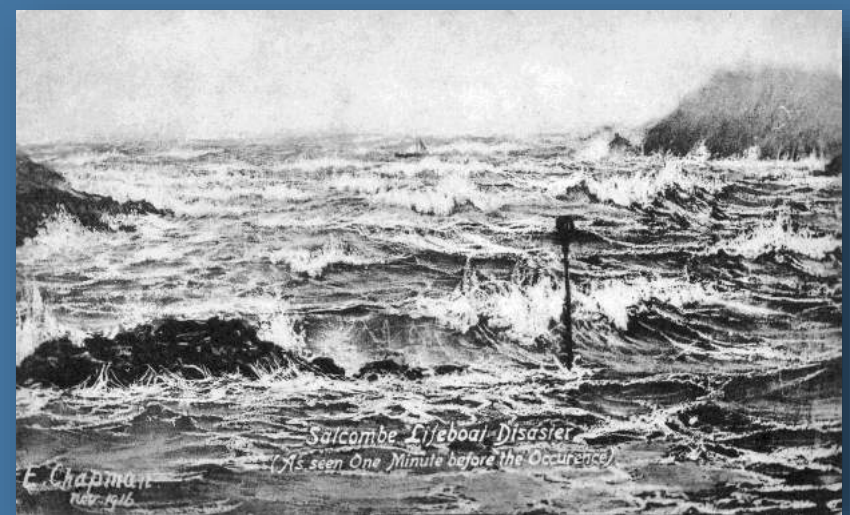
With a sudden roar a huge wave mounts high above the lifeboat and, becoming unstable, begins to topple and then burst along her port quarter.



The lifeboat is pitch-poled and rolled over to starboard as the great wave engulfs her. The crew are hurled forward – oars scatter like matchsticks.



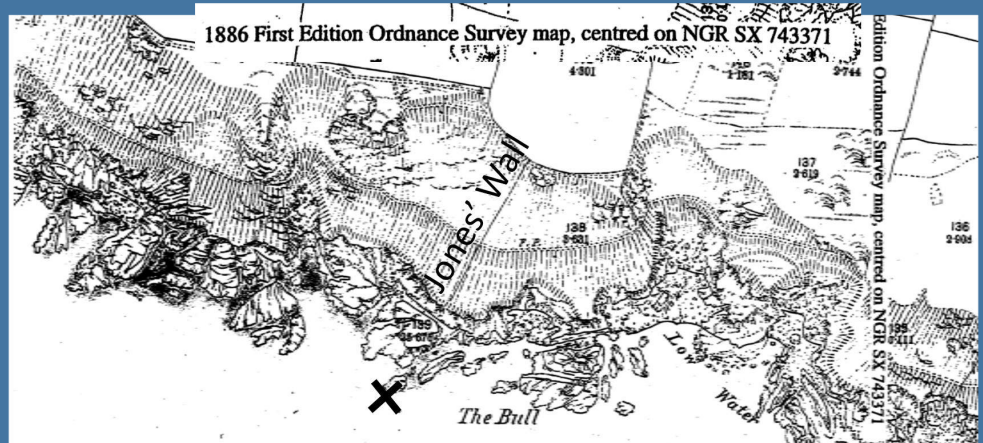
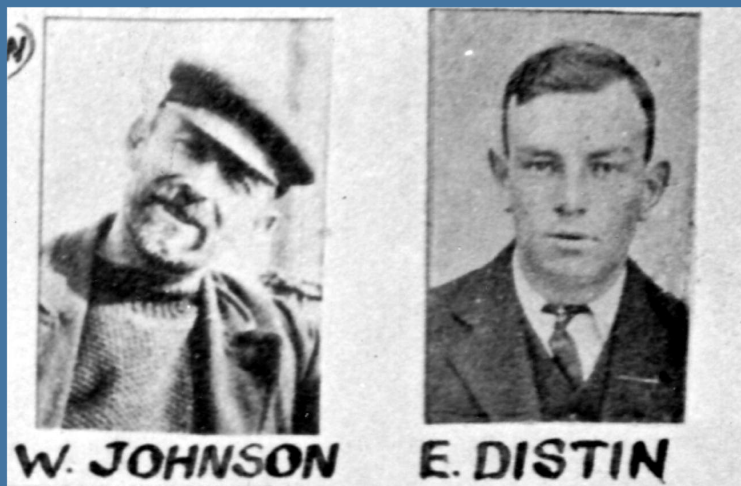
The wave passes leaving devastation in its wake. The crew try to hang on to the lifelines on the upturned hull but one by one they succumb to the waves until only two remain.



Two eye-witness paintings showing the lifeboat immediately before the capsize.

8. The Rescue of the Two Survivors

Eddie Distin: 'I was washed up on a big rock near Jones' Wall but clear of the mainland. And there was Bill Johnson. I hadn't seen him in the water and there we were side by side. We hung onto that rock like grim death because the sea was trying to wash us off again. It was not long before someone was scrambling down the cliff and shouting to us to hang on, and then a rope was thrown - about twenty yards I suppose. I caught it with one hand while hanging on with t'other. Bill was getting on in years so I lashed in a bight and those ashore hauled him in while I steadied the rope.'



Johnson and Distin were rescued up the cliffs at X in No 4 view.

The location of Johnson and Distins' Rescue

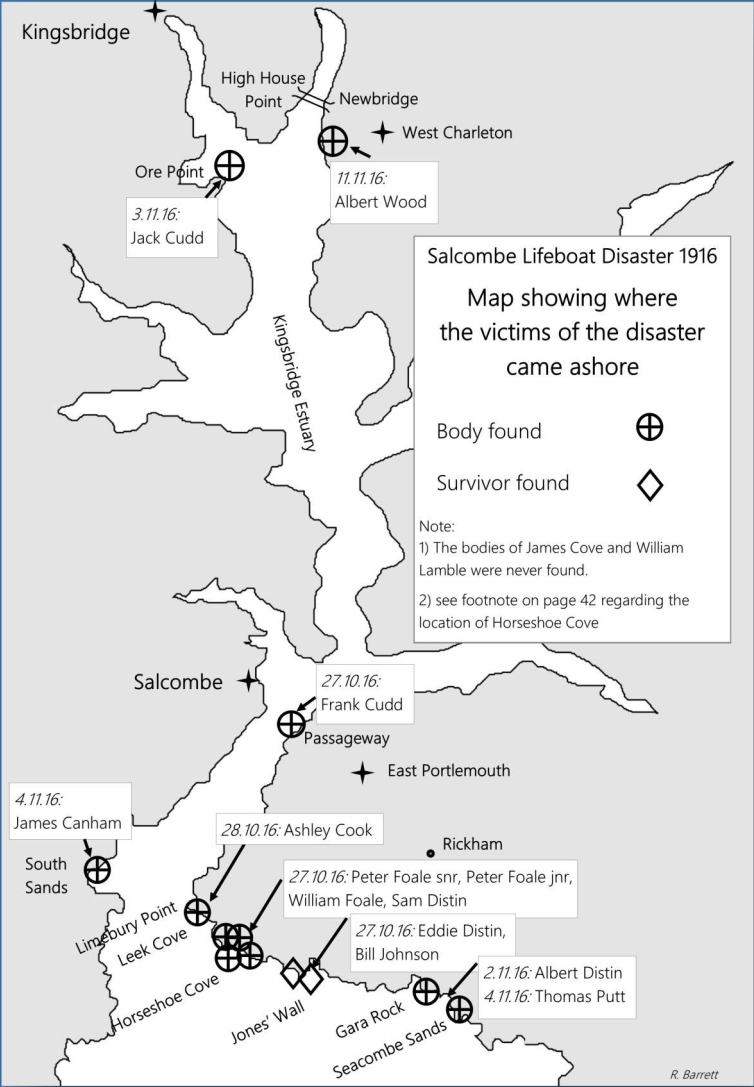
After the two men were hauled out of the water they were carried up to Rickham Farm, a large farmhouse on the Portsmouth side, where they stayed for several weeks recovering from the battering they had received.



Rickham Farm

9. A Town in Mourning

As the extent of the disaster became clear, the small community of Salcombe was plunged into a state of shock. The town was no stranger to grief and loss – sixteen of its sons had already given their lives in the Great War. Yet no one could remember a time when so much sorrow had entered so many homes at one blow. In the days that followed furious storms continued to lash the coast, hampering efforts to find the bodies of the disaster victims.



10. The Relief Fund

Even amidst the distractions of war, the disaster stirred the sympathy of the nation, with people from all walks of life contributing generously to the relief fund for the widows and children left behind.

By the end of the year, a total of £10,759 had been raised by donations from home and abroad. (Approximately £654,000 at today’s values).

Particulars of Dependants of Men who lost their Lives.
JOHN ASHLEY COOK, 49, Fore Street, Salcombe. Fisherman. Married. Age 24. Wife age 23. Two Children (boy age 2 years and boy age 5 months).
JAMES ALFRED CANHAM, 5, Harvey's Row, Salcombe. Ferryman, formerly Fisherman. Married. Age 46. Wife, age 46. Three Children (girl, age 17, epileptic ; boy, age 15 ; girl, age 4). Mother, age 67, dependent for home, earns living as a nurse. Has two sons in Army, one age 27 and the other age 20.
ALBERT DISTIN, Croft Road, Salcombe. Boatman. Married. Age 49. Wife, age 36. Three Children (boy age 5, girl age 4, girl age 13 months).
ALBERT EDWIN WOOD, 1, Victoria Place, Salcombe. Boatbuilder. Single. Age 29. No dependants.
SAMUEL MARCH DISTIN, 31, Buckley, Salcombe. Fisherman. Married. Age 47. Wife, age 46. Daughter, age 21 ; one son, age 19, in Army ; and one son age 15, at Grammar School, Kingsbridge, where he obtained a Scholarship.
PETER HEATH FOALE, 7, Orestone, Salcombe. Fisherman and Pilot. Married. Age 56. Wife, age 55. Daughter, age 22, suffers from Epilepsy.
JAMES HENRY COVE, 5, Robinson's Row, Salcombe. Fisherman. Married. Age 36. Wife, age 34. Four Children (boy, age 10 ; girl 9 ; girl 8 ; and boy 2).
WILLIAM WAKEHAM LAMBLE, Russell's Court, Salcombe. Age 47. Widower seven years. Originally a Fisherman, then Garage Attendant, and recently Coastwatching. One son, age 15, earning 8/- a week. Mother (Widow, 20 years), age 69, and dependent on son for home.
WILLIAM J. FOALE, 7, Orestone, Salcombe. Fisherman. Single. Age 32. No dependants.
PETER HEATH FOALE, JUNR., 7, Orestone, Salcombe. Fisherman. Single. Age 35. No dependants.
THOMAS PUTT, 4, Church Street, Salcombe. Fisherman. Married. Age 44. Wife, age 43. Three Children ; girl age 10 (step-daughter) ; girl age 2 ; and boy 1 week. Stepson, in Navy, age 20.
WILLIAM FRANCIS CUDD, 26, Island Street, Salcombe. Boatman. Married. Age 44. Wife, age 37. Two Children (boy age 4 ; girl age 16 months).
JOHN AMBROSE CUDD, 26, Island Street, Salcombe. Rigger. Age 42. Single. No dependants.



Edith Putt

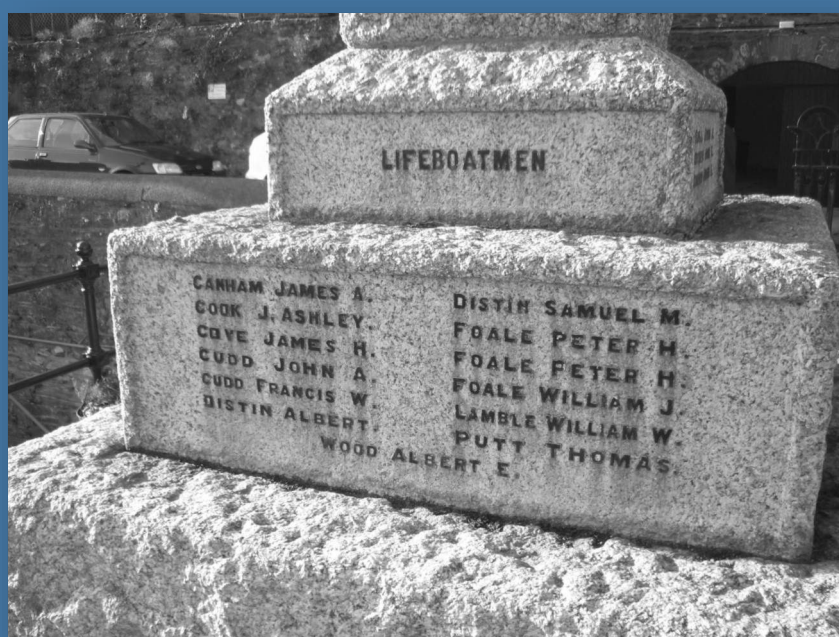


James & Beatrice Cove & children

Widows and Orphans

11. Remembering Their Sacrifice

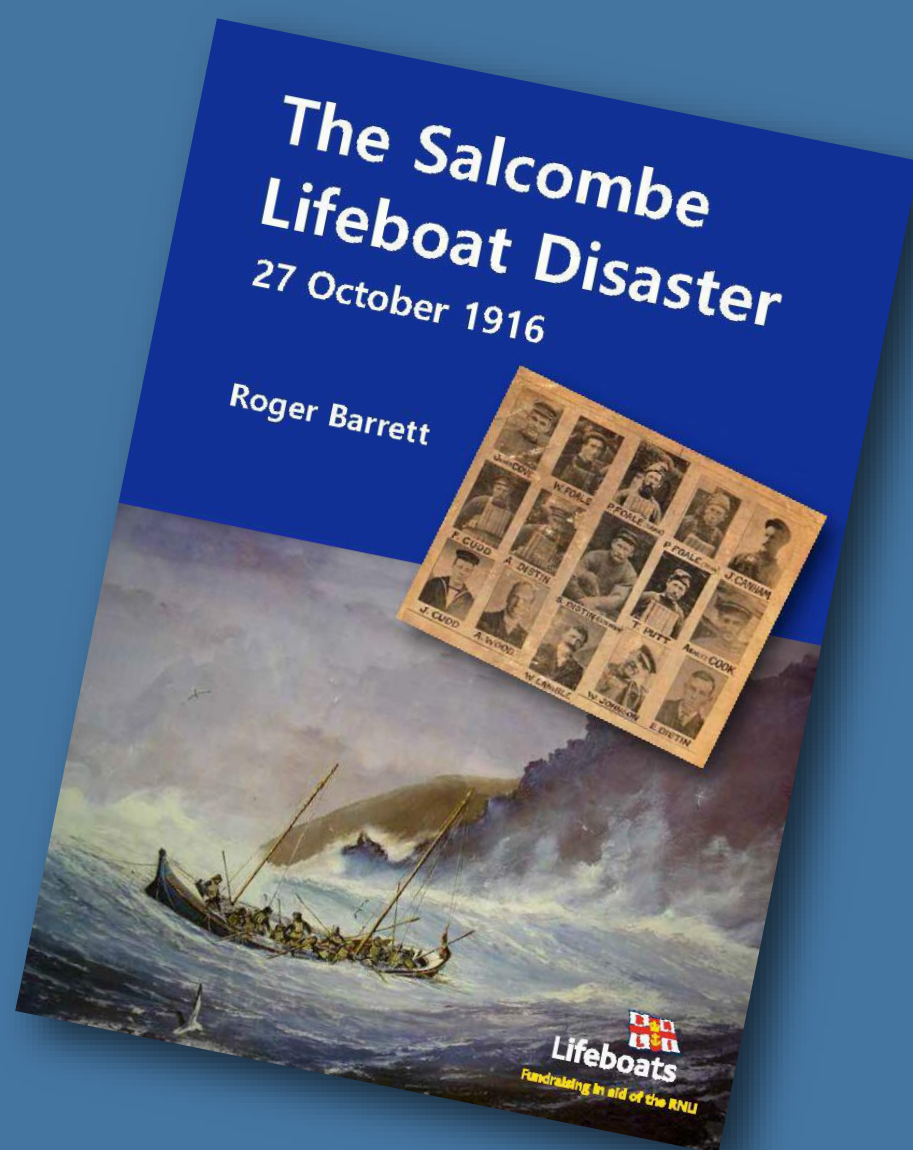
On the town's war memorial, in Cliff Road, the names of the thirteen lifeboatmen who lost their lives in 1916 are to be found alongside those of the fallen of the two World Wars. The memorial was unveiled at a special ceremony on 7 April 1921. Taking pride of place were Coxswain Eddie Distin and the crew of the replacement lifeboat, the *Sarah Anne Holden*.



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*'Sacrifice supreme they offered,
Every soul save two,
Men who simply did their duty,
Yet were heroes true!'*

To mark the centenary of the disaster, Salcombe RNLI has produced a book and a film and will be holding a full programme of commemorative events on the October 27th anniversary. The new book by Roger Barrett, gives a gripping account of the events that led up to the disaster and its sad aftermath.



ON SALE HERE

Price £7.99

All proceeds to Salcombe RNLI

What to Look For in...

...the Maritime Museum:

1



2



3



4



Objects in the Wreck Room: 1) Fragment of the lifeboat's hull, 2) Model of the *William & Emma* by Mike Atfield, 3) a Drogue Anchor, 4) One of the *William & Emma*'s oars.

...SalcombeLifeboat Museum (Union Street)

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5) Model of the *William & Emma* by Malcolm Darch

6) Eddie Distin's watch which stopped at 11.03am on the morning of the disaster.



...Shadycombe Cemetery



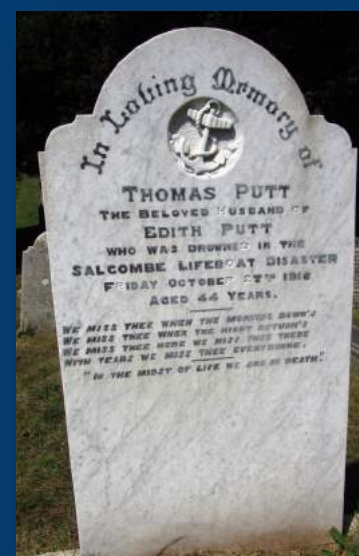
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Gravestones of ten of the disaster victims can be seen in Shadycombe Cemetery. Sam Distin was buried in an unmarked grave and two bodies were never found.

7) John Ashley Cook's gravestone

8) Thomas Putt's gravestone

8



...Prawle Point Coastwatch Lookout



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9) The former coastguard lookout, now manned by volunteers of the National Coastwatch Institution, provides a good vantage point from which to survey the route of the *William and Emma*. The Visitor Centre is open daily.