

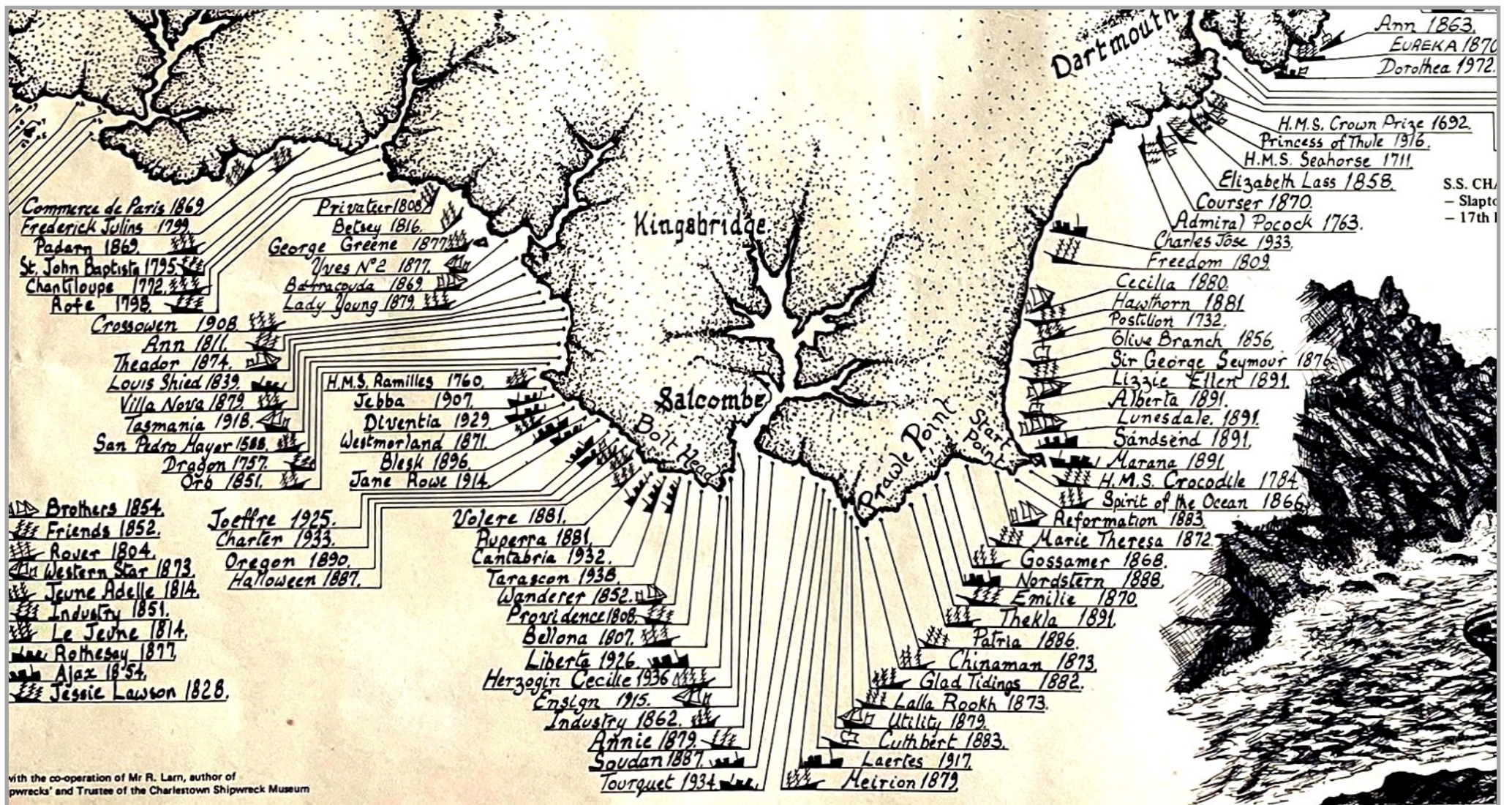
# Wreck and Rescue on the South Hams Coast



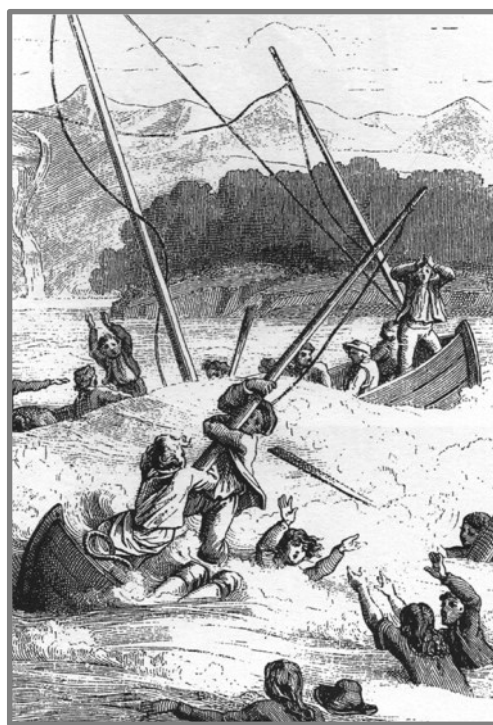
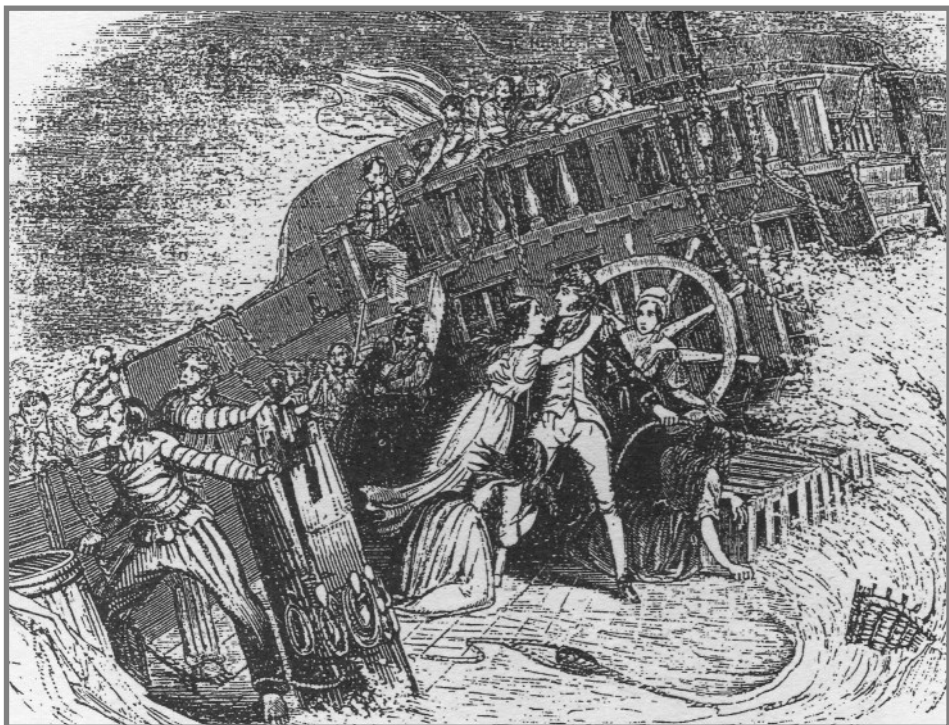


# 1. A Graveyard of Ships and Mariners

Salcombe – Devon's southernmost town – looks out upon the busy shipping lanes of the English Channel. To the east, the jagged headlands of Start and Prawle Points and, to the west, the rockbound coast between Bolt Head and Bolt Tail, have long been known as a graveyard of ships and mariners. As far back as 1652, a certain Thomas Fuller warned mariners sailing in the waters off Start Point that 'it is more than suspicious that many hundreds have here had their silent deaths, never landing to relate the cause of their destruction. Let all ships be forewarned, these rocks can no otherwise be resisted than by avoiding'.



Shipwrecks between the Erme and the Dart. Extract from the South Devon Shipwrecks chart [Planaship 1981]



## The Agony of Shipwreck

A shipwreck has the monstrous, mind-numbing terror of a major earthquake. One moment there is normality then comes the lurching and rending, the cries, the desperate courage and the incomprehension.

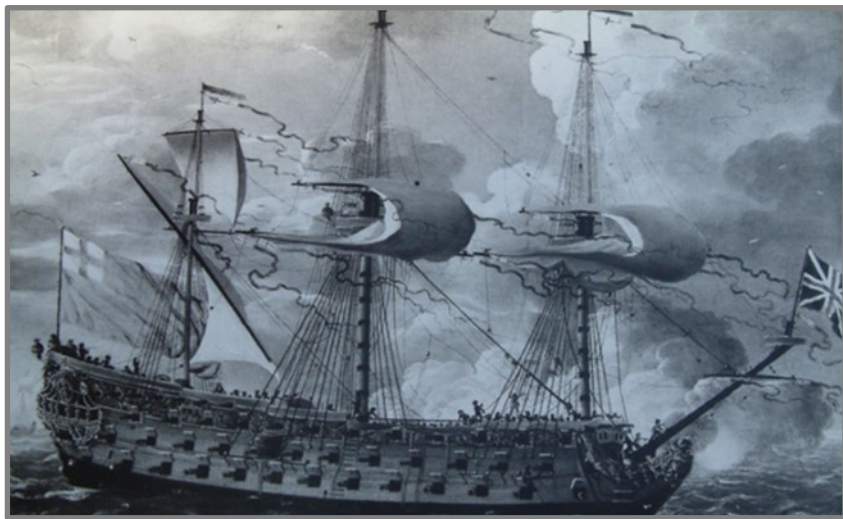
A ship may drive ashore in the murk of a howling gale; fangs of rock may manifest through swirling fog; a navigator's error may turn a night serene with stars into a nightmare.

## The Wreckers

It was not only rocks that posed a threat to passing mariners. Wrecking, the practice of looting ships that had foundered close inshore, is known to have been carried out in the 18th century by people living in the poor communities along this stretch of coast. While there is no evidence that ships were deliberately lured by guiding lights onto the rocks by wreckers, the looting of wrecks was common practice.



## 2. Wrecking in the 1700s



### 1760 The Wreck of HMS *Ramillies* near Bolt Tail

When the 74 gun ship of the line HMS *Ramillies* was wrecked in a storm near Bolt Tail in February 1760 the locals rushed to the scene, not to rescue those on board but to loot and plunder all that they could carry away. Of 734 crew only 26 survived.



### 1772 *Chanteloupe* wrecked on Thurlstone Rock

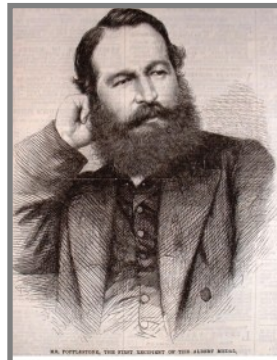
In September 1772 the West Indiaman *Chanteloupe*, homeward bound from Grenada for London, was dashed onto the reef near Thurlstone Rock. A rich lady passenger survived the wreck but her fine robes and valuable jewellery attracted the attention of the wreckers, who ‘*seized and stript her of her clothes, even cutting off some of her fingers, and mangling her ears in their impatience to secure the jewels, and left her miserably to perish.*’



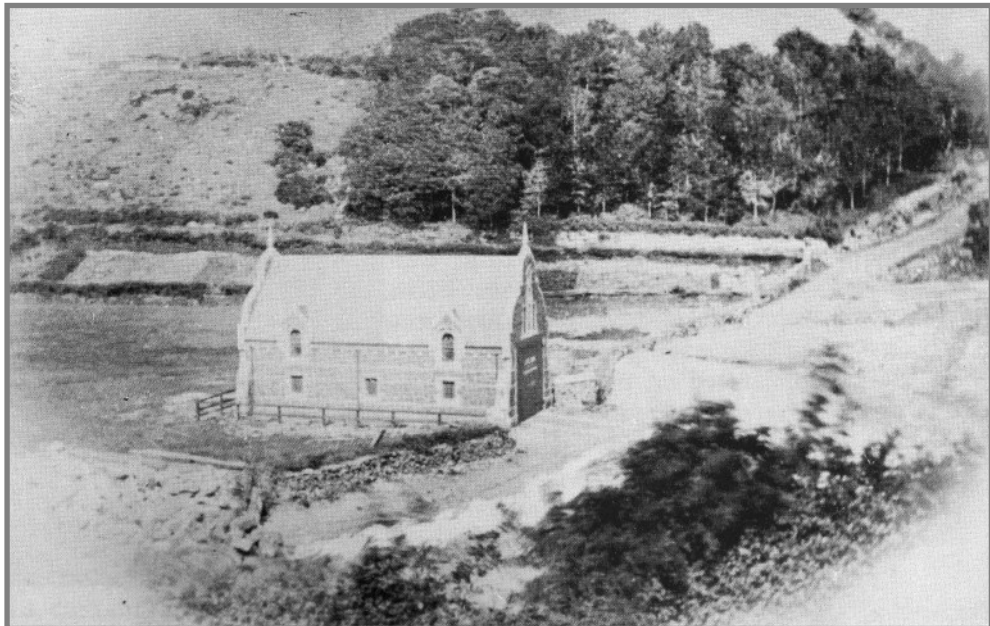
### 3. Saving Life at Sea in Victorian and Edwardian Times

Fortunately, more enlightened attitudes prevailed in the 1800s and, with the formation of the RNLI in 1824, the story became one of selfless courage and humanity, towards those in peril on the sea. However, it was not until 1869 that the first lifeboat came to Salcombe and, in the intervening years, it largely fell to private individuals to organize rescue efforts. A notable example was local farmer Sam Popplestone, who saved the lives of four of the crew of the barque *Spirit of the Ocean* when it came ashore near Start Point in 1866. For his remarkable bravery, Popplestone became the first recipient of the Albert Medal, the forerunner of the George Cross.

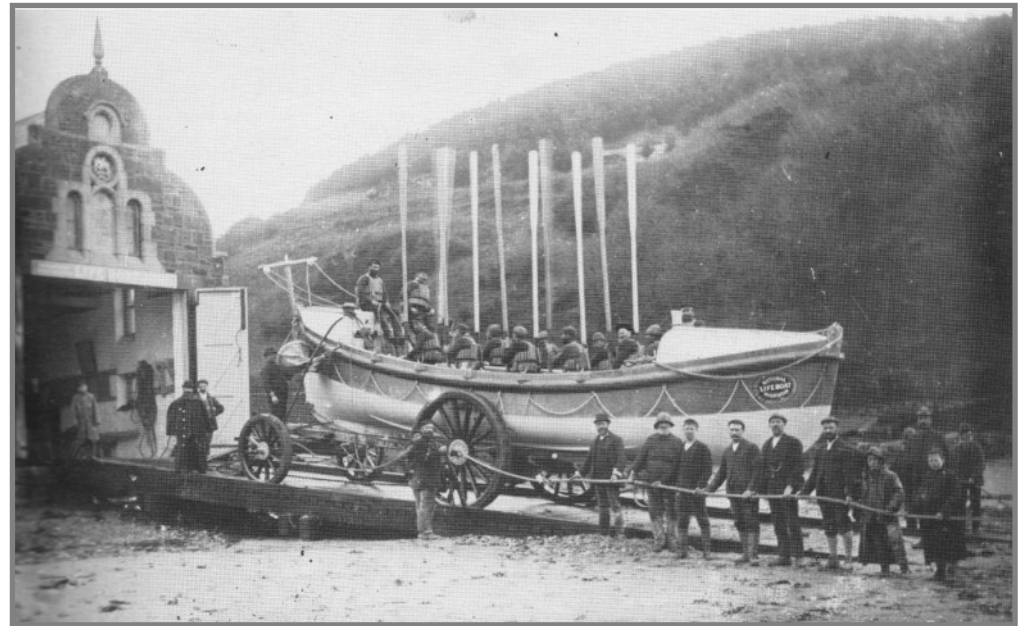
It was the wreck of another large sailing ship, the tea clipper *Gossamer* near Prawle Point in December 1868, that led to the establishment of a lifeboat station at Salcombe in 1869. Five years later another wreck, that of the brig *Theodore* in Bigbury Bay, prompted the RNLI to set up a station at Hope Cove. Salcombe was equipped with rowing and sailing lifeboats until 1925 and Hope Cove until 1930. The Salcombe RNLI station closed in 1925 but re-opened in 1930 when the Hope Cove station was finally closed.



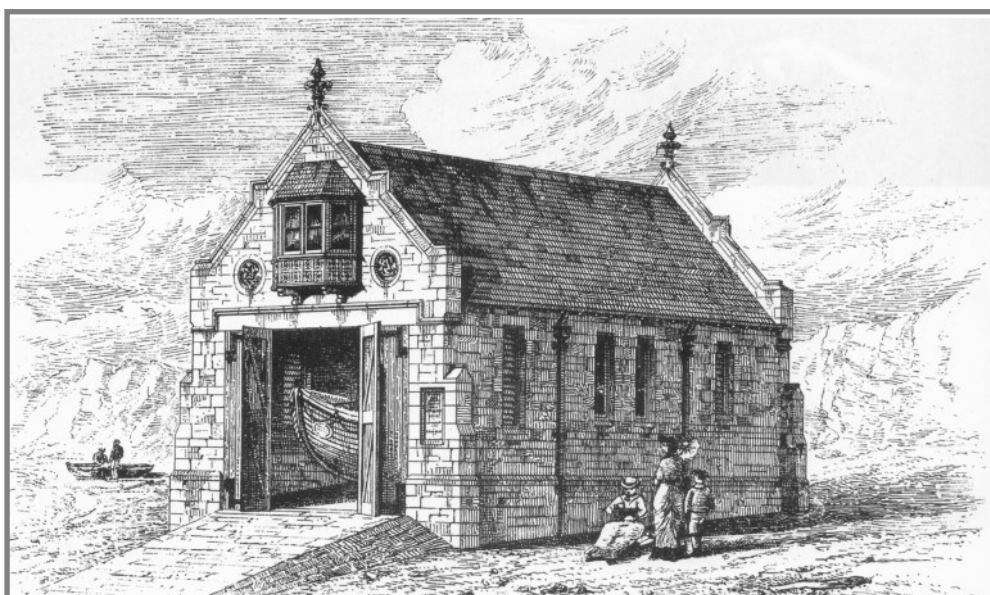
Sam Popplestone of Start Farm  
First recipient of the Albert medal  
for saving 4 of the crew of the  
*Spirit of the Ocean* on 23 March 1866



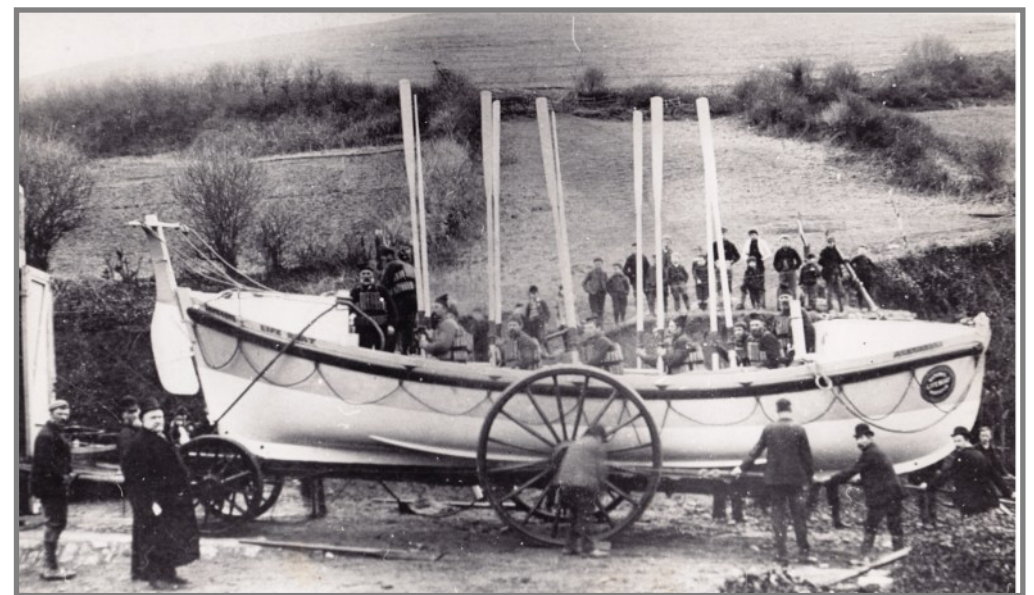
Salcombe Lifeboat Station at South Sands  
in use between 1870 and 1925



Salcombe Lifeboat *Lesty* 1887-1904  
15 launches, 10 lives saved



Hope Cove Lifeboat Station 1878-1930



Hope Cove Lifeboat *Alexandra* 1887-1900

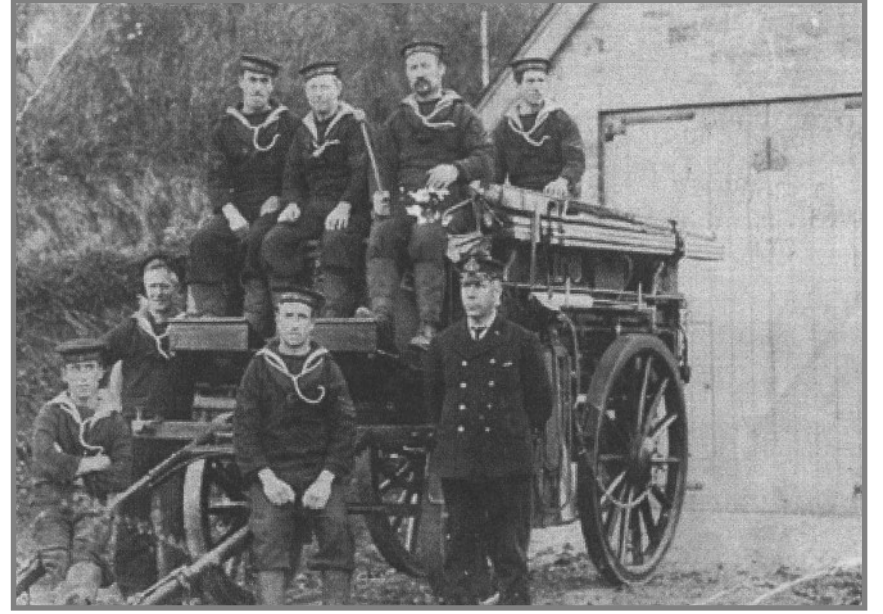


## 4. *The Coastguard Life-saving Apparatus*

The original Coastguard service formed in 1822 had been primarily concerned with the suppression of smuggling but in 1856, with the war against smugglers largely won, the Admiralty took over the force and from then on its role became primarily that of coastal defence. As time went by, however, greater emphasis was given to ‘assisting vessels in danger, taking charge of wrecks, operating the life-saving apparatus and participating in lifeboat rescues’. By the mid-1870s the coastguard stations at Prawle Point, Rickham, Hope Cove and Challaborough had all been equipped with the Board of Trade Rocket Lifesaving Apparatus.



The Victorian Naval Coastguard



Hope Cove Rocket Team c1900

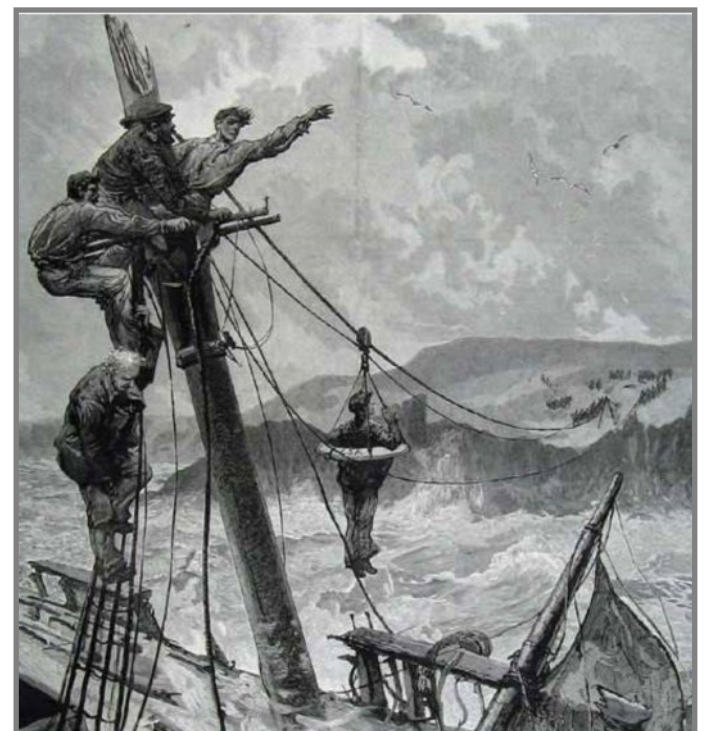
Local volunteers formed a rescue team supervised by the coastguards and, when a stricken vessel was sighted offshore, they would race to the nearest stretch of coast in a horse-drawn cart. A rocket would be fired over the vessel and the line and a hawser attached to it would then be hauled in by the shipwrecked crew and used to bring them ashore in a breeches buoy. The cart and apparatus were housed in purpose-built ‘rocket houses’, such as those that remain today at East Prawle and Inner Hope.



Boxer Rocket and Breeches Buoy



The  
Rocket  
Apparatus  
in Action





## 5. Wreck and Rescue between 1880 and 1906



*Lady Young*, Bantham,  
27th October 1880

Challaborough coastguards took off 13 of the crew by breeches buoy after the barque *Lady Young* was driven ashore in a gale in Bigbury Bay. The last man across, John Nabsley stuffed a bag into the breeches and sat on top of the buoy. Becoming unstable, Nabsley fell to his death.

*Halloween*, Soar Mill Cove, 18th January 1887

When the 920 ton tea clipper *Halloween*, ran aground at night in thick fog, the crew had to spend the night in the rigging suffering terribly from the cold as huge waves broke over the ship. One man was drowned trying to get a line ashore. A local farmer spotted the wreck at dawn and the Hope Cove Lifeboat took off the remaining 13 crew.



*Blesk*, Greystone, Bolt Tail, 1st December 1896

On 1st December 1896, the Russian steamer *Blesk*, got ashore near Bolt Tail in very thick weather. She was laden with about 3,000 tons of petroleum. Hope Cove lifeboat took off her crew of 43 in two trips. The oil spillage from the wreck caused a great deal of damage to local wildlife and was the first oil pollution incident to be recorded on the South Devon coast.

*Jebba*, near Bolt Tail, 18th March 1907

Hope Cove Lifeboat was unable to get alongside the Elder Dempster liner *Jebba*, after she ran ashore at night on Greystone Ledge with 155 passengers and crew on board. So two fishermen, Isaac Jarvis and Jack Argeat climbed down the 60metre (200ft) sheer cliff face in the dark and managed to rig a bosun's chair and haul ashore 117 people. The Hope Cove Life Saving Apparatus Team saved a further 38 from the cliffs above.



Isaac Jarvis and  
Jack Argeat

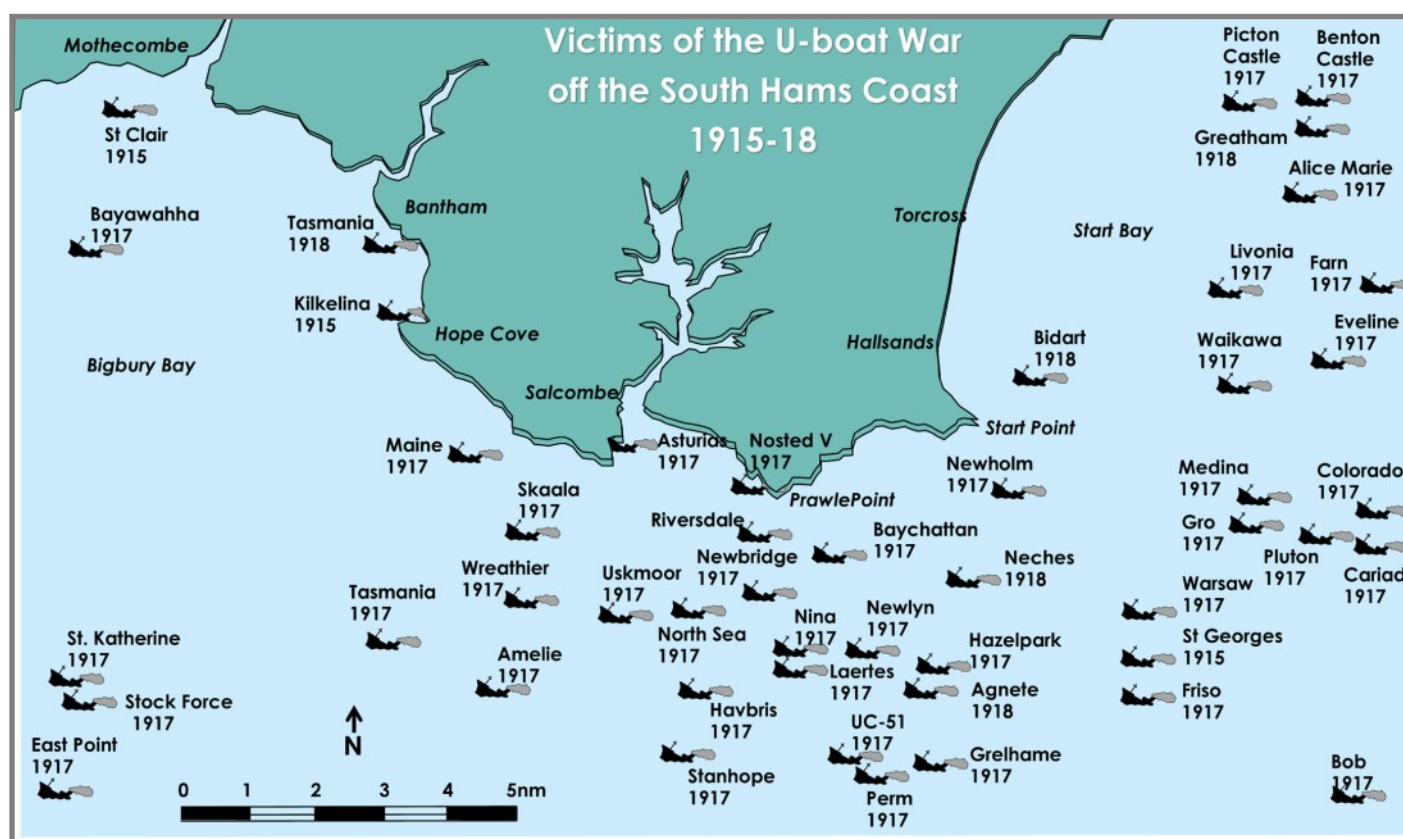




## 6. The First World War 1914-18

### *William & Emma*, The Salcombe Lifeboat Disaster, Salcombe Bar, 27th October 1916

In the middle of the First World War Salcombe suffered a terrible loss when the pulling and sailing lifeboat *William and Emma* capsized at the harbour entrance on her return from a fruitless mission near Prawle Point. Thirteen of her fifteen man crew were drowned. It was one of the worst disasters in the history of the RNLI. For Salcombe's close-knit community the loss was devastating.



*Havbris*, Norwegian collier, torpedoed July 1917



*Agnete*, British collier, torpedoed April 1918



*Laertes*, British cargo ship, torpedoed Aug 1917

### First World War U-Boat Victims

The Channel waters off Salcombe were a notorious 'killing ground' for German U-boats in the First World War with at least 45 British or allied 'merchantmen' sunk between 1917 and 1918 off Salcombe and Start Point. Many of the victims were steam colliers carrying coal from South Wales.



#### *SS Medina*, Start Bay, 28th April 1917

The 12,350 ton, P&O liner *Medina* was returning from India with 410 passengers and crew when was torpedoed by U-boat UB-31 three miles ENE of Start Point. All but six of the passengers and crew were safely loaded into boats.

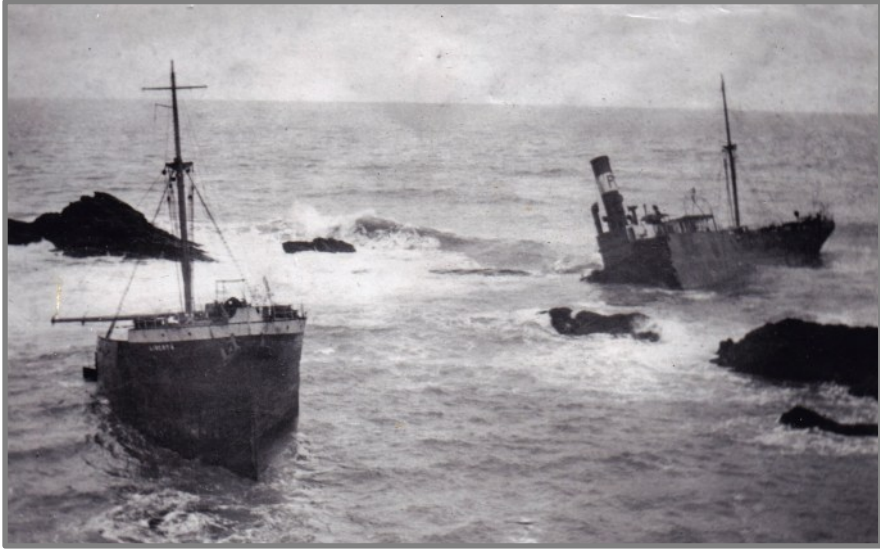


#### *Asturias*, Eelstone, 20th March 1917

The hospital ship HMHS *Asturias*, showing her lights and red cross, was torpedoed without warning, by U-boat U-20 south of Start Point. In an appalling state, she drifted to Starehole Bay. Total casualties were 31 dead, 12 missing and 39 injured. The attack caused international outrage.



## 7. The mid 1900s



*Liberta*, Little Mewstone, Bolt Head,  
15th February 1926



*Liberta*: Torbay motor lifeboat rescued three men through the surf. The remaining 30 men were taken off by breeches buoy

*Benmohr*: Prawle life-saving team brought off 43 of the crew of 49 by breeches buoy



*Benmohr*, Prawle Point,  
25th February 1931



*Herzogin Cecilie*, Ham Stone, Soar Mill Cove, 25th April 1936

The famous Finnish windjammer *Herzogin Cecilie*, with a cargo of Australian grain, struck the Ham Stone off Soar Mill Cove at 3.50am on 25th April 1936. With a hole in her bow, her foredecks were soon awash. Later that morning the Salcombe lifeboat *Alfred and Clara Heath* took off a lady passenger and 21 of the crew. In June, the four-masted barque was towed to Starehole Bay where efforts were made to salvage the ship and her cargo. Sadly, her back was broken in heavy storms and she became a total wreck.



Eddie Distin, Salcombe  
LB Coxswain 1917-51



Salcombe Lifeboat, *Samuel & Marie Parkhouse* 1938-62



*Louis Sheid*, Leas Foot, Thurlestone,  
8th Dec. 1939

A survivor of the 1916 Salcombe lifeboat disaster, Salcombe lifeboat coxswain Eddie Distin was awarded the RNLI's silver medal for rescuing 62 men from the Belgian steamer *Louis Sheid* in atrocious conditions.



## 8. 1960s -1980s



### *The Baltic Exchange* Lifeboat 1962

In 1962 the *Samuel and Marie Parkhouse* was replaced by *The Baltic Exchange*, a 14metre (47ft), 23ton, Watson class lifeboat powered by two 60hp engines, giving her a top speed of 9 knots.



### *Friars Craig*, Lannacombe 31st October 1972

Salcombe lifeboat, several fishing boats and HMS *Kedleston* converged on the scene when the 590 ton coaster came ashore in thick fog but the four crew were taken off by breeches buoy.



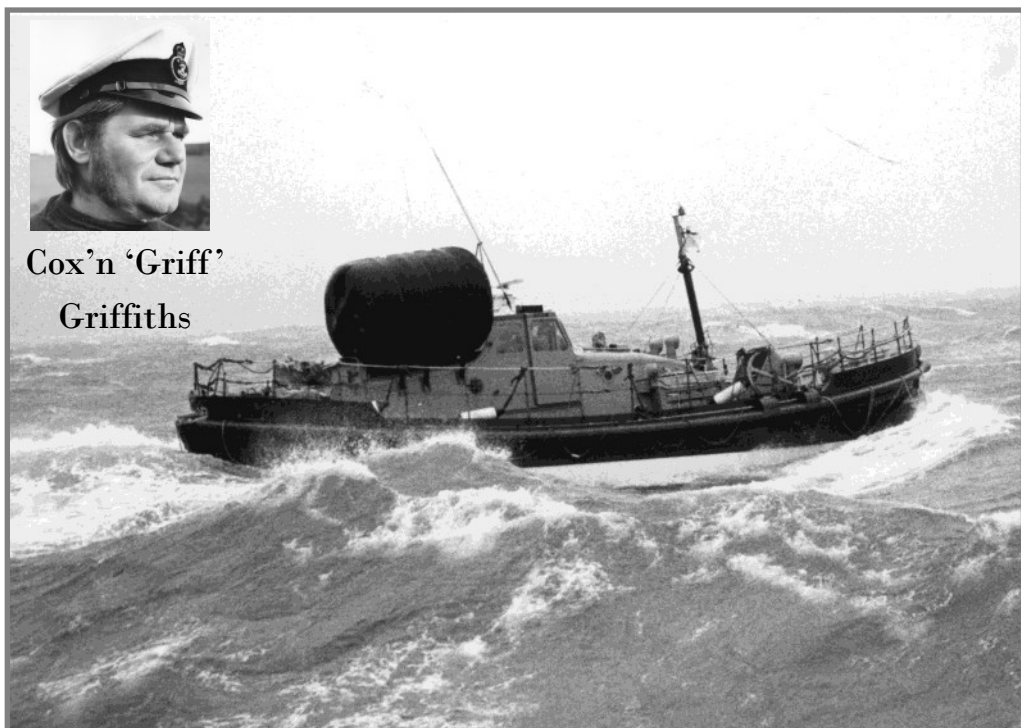
### *Yvette*, near Langerstone Point, Prawle 12th March 1978

After the Brixham trawler *Yvette*, struck the rocks three of the crew were rescued by breeches buoy and the skipper by helicopter.



### *Heye-P*, Prawle Island, 16th December 1979

Four crew of the coaster *Heye P* were lifted off by a Sea King helicopter in treacherous conditions after the men refused to go ashore in the breeches buoy. It was the last time the rocket apparatus was used by local coastguards



Cox'n 'Griff'  
Griffiths

### The 1983 Lifeboat Capsize

History came close to repeating itself when, in April 1983, the *Baltic Exchange* lifeboat capsized in Start Bay while searching for missing divers. A huge wave had broken over her port quarter causing to roll over. One man, Mike Hicks, was washed overboard and the rest of the crew were submerged. Fortunately an inflatable airbag brought her upright again and Coxswain 'Griff' Griffiths was able to recover Mike and proceed with the search.





*The Baltic Exchange II Lifeboat 1988-2008*



*The Baltic Exchange II Lifeboat saving the coaster Janet C off Start Point, 8th January 1992*



*The 9,700 ton Demetrios wrecked on Prawle Point on 18th December 1992*

*The Baltic Exchange II* was a 14 metre (47ft) steel constructed Tyne Class all-weather lifeboat weighing 25 tons. With twin 425hp engines and a top speed of 18 knots she was more than twice as fast as her wooden hulled predecessor. During her ten years on station she was launched 478 times, saved 135 people and rescued a further 530.

On the night of 8th January 1992 *Janet C*, a 1200 ton coaster, lost power 2½ miles off Start Point and started drifting within a ¼ mile of the rocks. At 2.30am, in gale force winds, the *Baltic Exchange II* lifeboat, with coxswain Frank Smith at the helm, managed to get alongside her. After several attempts the lifeboat crew managed to get a tow line on-board her and then struggled for 3 hours to hold her off the rocks until a powerful tug arrived. Frank Smith was later awarded the RNLI Bronze Medal in for his courage, seamanship and determination during the rescue.

On 18th December 1992, the 9,700 ton cargo ship *Demetrios*, came ashore in a force 10 gale on the west side of Prawle Point and broke her back on the rocks. Fortunately there was no-one on board, for the *Demetrios*, formerly the Chinese owned *Longlin*, was being towed by a Russian tug, to a breaker's yard in Turkey, when the tow parted at the height of the gale. Thousands of people visited the wreck causing considerable congestion on local roads. Much of the ship was salvaged but parts of the hull can still be seen on the rocks and at low tide.



## 10. Search and Rescue Today 1



### ***Baltic Exchange III - Tamar Class ALB (All Weather lifeboat)***

The 31 ton *Baltic Exchange III* lifeboat entered service in March 2008. Powered by two 1000hp Caterpillar engines, she has a top speed of 25 knots. With two, 2,300 litre (507 gallon) fuel tanks, the ALB can sustain that speed for 10 hours. She has a range of 250 nautical miles and can carry up to 108 survivors.



### ***Gladys Hilda Mustoe - Atlantic 85 class ILB (Inshore Lifeboat)***

Named after her donor, Salcombe's inshore lifeboat came into service in 2018. The ILB is designed to operate in shallower water than the all weather lifeboats and is ideal for rescues close to the shore or cliffs and among rocks. With two 115hp Yamaha engines she has a top speed of 35 knots,



Hope Cove Lifeboat



HM Coastguard helicopter



HM Coastguard Rescue Team

### **Hope Cove Lifeboat**

An independent lifeboat service was formed in 2011 at Hope Cove following the controversial withdrawal of the HM Coastguard's general purpose boat. The current lifeboat is a 6.4metre rigid inflatable powered by two 90hp outboards.

**HM Coastguard** coordinates all maritime search and rescue (SAR) operations in the UK through a network of coastguard stations, (MRCCs). South West England is covered by Falmouth MRCC.

### **HM Coastguard helicopters**

Two Leonardo AW189s (pictured) are operated from Lee-on-the-Solent and two Sikorsky S-92 from Newquay in Cornwall. They are regularly called out to incidents on the water and along the coast, as well as to help with inland rescues where a helicopter is needed.

### **HM Coastguard Rescue Teams**

Rescue teams are based locally at Yealm, Bigbury, Kingsbridge (East Prawle) and Dartmouth. The trained volunteers are paged in an emergency by Falmouth Coastguard.

The teams have capability for first aid, water rescues close inshore, missing person searches, and mud and cliff operations.



## 11. Search and Rescue Today 2



### National Coastwatch Prowle Point

The volunteers up at Prowle Point keep a sharp lookout throughout the year for vulnerable craft and people and report any concerns to Falmouth Coastguard.



### Devon Air Ambulance

The charity operates two helicopters which respond to time-critical situations every day of the year. The G-DAAS H145 aircraft serving South Devon operates from Exeter.

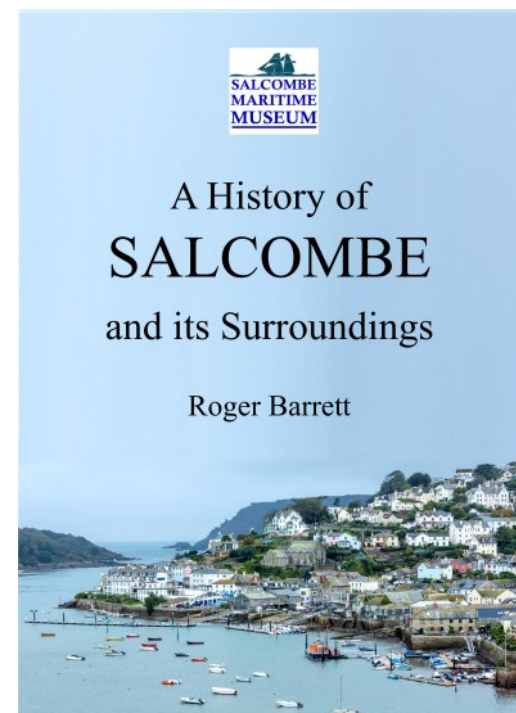
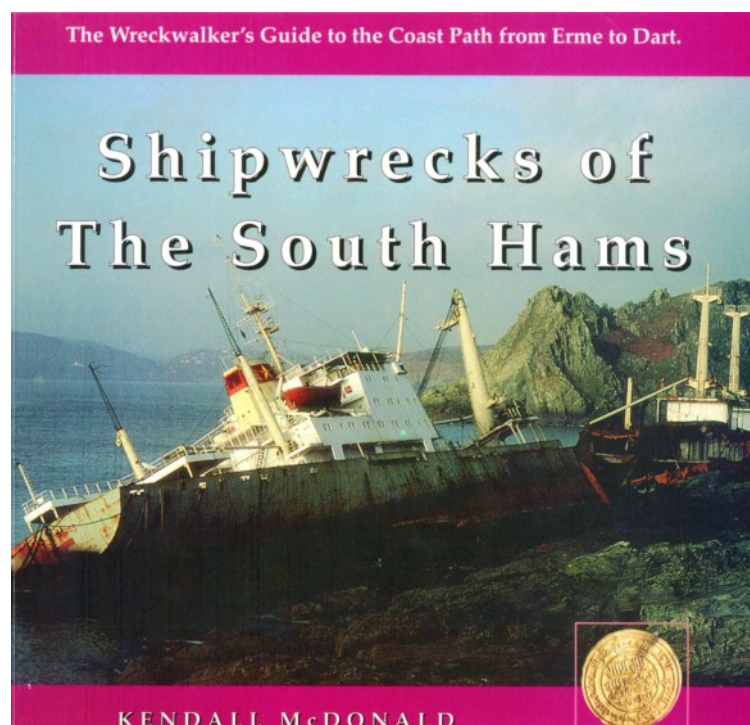
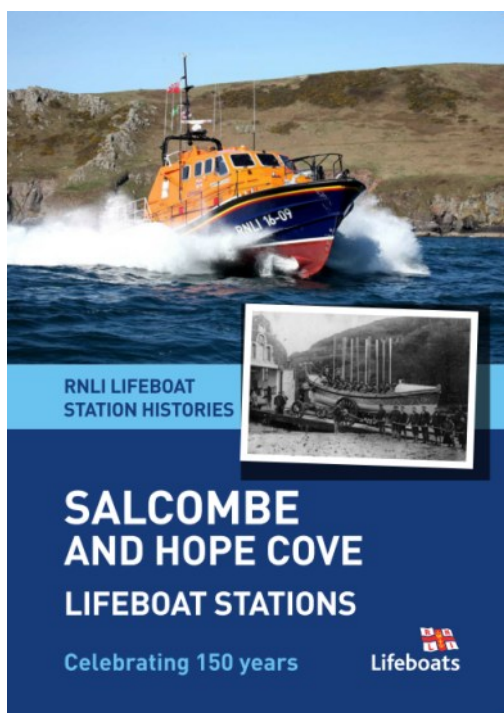
## 12. Find out more - places to visit and books to read



Salcombe Lifeboat Museum and Shop  
Union Street - free entry  
[rnli.org](http://rnli.org)



The Wreck Room, Salcombe Maritime Museum  
Old Council Hall, Market Street - free entry  
[www.salcombemuseum.org.uk](http://www.salcombemuseum.org.uk)



To purchase any of these titles please visit [www.salcombemuseum.org.uk/shop](http://www.salcombemuseum.org.uk/shop)

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