



The Wreck of the Rohilla

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In World War I the SS Rohilla was commissioned as a hospital ship, working from her home port of Leith in Scotland. Rohilla's Captain, David Neilson, was a very experienced sailor and, with his crew, had been with the ship since the day of her commissioning - but he had never sailed the North Sea before.

On Wednesday 28th October 1914, HMHS Rohilla was ordered to Dunkirk to evacuate wounded soldiers from the British Expeditionary Force. There were 229 people on board including doctors, five nurses and orderlies. At dusk, as the ship headed down the east coast of England, a fierce storm arose and soon the Rohilla was battling against gale-force winds and heavy seas. Due to wartime blackout regulations, no coastal, harbour, maritime or ships' lights were allowed. So in total darkness, in high winds and raging seas, the captain could only navigate by dead-reckoning.

By 3.30am on 30th October, the Rohilla neared Whitby. Although Captain Neilson had calculated that the ship was 7 miles from shore, she was actually less than half a mile from Whitby's perilous rocky coastline. The Coastguard at Hawsker spotted her and urgently signalled warnings in Morse code, sounded the foghorn, sent out maroons (warning rockets) and called out the Whitby lifeboats. At 4.00am, at the change of watch, a crew member sent to take soundings told the Captain he had

noticed Morse signals in the sky above the ship. But before a signalman could arrive on the bridge, the ship struck the Whitby Rock at full power and then rode onto the notorious East Scour, just 450 yards from the shore. The bows and mid-section balanced on the rock but the stern was torn away, drowning 60 poor souls trapped there.

Rockets carrying lines were fired towards the ship in an attempt to evacuate the remaining passengers, but the wet, heavy lines failed to reach the ship, while huge seas breaking over the piers prevented Whitby's two rowing lifeboats from launching through the harbour mouth. As dawn broke, the lifeboat coxswain ordered the No 2 lifeboat to be carried over the East Pier's 8-foot-high sea wall. It was dragged for a mile along the scour towards the wreck site by 100 men and women. The lifeboat rescued 33 people in two hazardous journeys before becoming so damaged that she was abandoned. All but one of Rohilla's lifeboats had been wrecked. She launched the remaining boat only for it to be smashed against the ship's side.

Meanwhile the Upgang rowing lifeboat, the William Riley, was transported across the cliffs, through Whitby and over to Saltwick by 6 horses and 100 men. With winches and ropes the boat was lowered 200 feet down the cliffs to the shore, only to discover that the onshore gale and lashing seas prevented launching. People

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from miles around travelled to the cliff-tops to offer help and watch in horror.

The Teesmouth lifeboat was holed leaving harbour and had to return to base. The Scarborough rowing lifeboat, towed by a steam trawler, arrived at 6 pm and stood by all night but, being unable to reach the ship by early morning, returned to port with her exhausted crew. On the stricken ship the passengers, unaware of the unflagging and brave attempts being made to rescue them, feared they had been abandoned.

Throughout that terrible Saturday, the Whitby lifeboats, aided by the steam trawler Mayfly from Hartlepool, continued to make rescue attempts. At last the William Riley was launched from the shore. The crew rowed her within 50 yards of the wreck and in desperation people jumped overboard, trying to reach the lifeboat or the shore. Some were dashed onto the rocks and drowned.

Local men and women gathered on the shore or waded into the raging seas, repeatedly risking their own lives, to save others.

Tynemouth's steam lifeboat Henry Vernon arrived in Whitby harbour at 1 am on Sunday 1st November and took on barrels of oil. The boat got within 200 yards of the wreck and poured the oil on the waters, flattening the heavy seas. In 15 minutes, the 50 remaining men were taken on board, including Captain Neilson, carrying the ship's cat. The Henry Vernon sailed into Whitby to cheering crowds and ringing church bells.

After enduring over 50 hours of exposure, in gale-force winds and terrifying seas, the lifeboats and their brave crews had saved 146 lives. The various seamen, coastguards and local people from several communities had risked their own lives to effect a brave and remarkable rescue.



Find out more

Whitby Lifeboat Museum, Pier Road, Whitby YO21 3PU,
<https://rnl.org/find-my-nearest/museums/whitby-lifeboat-museum>

Remarkable contemporary newsreel of the rescue,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUzIw_RS0qk

Website on all things to do with HMHS Rohilla,
http://www.eskside.co.uk/ss_rohilla/index.htm



SS Rohilla, by Bill Wedgewood



The Rohilla foundered at Saltwick Nab, a mile from Whitby Harbour



Dragging the No. 2 lifeboat, by John Freeman



Trying to launch the William Riley, by Tricia Shaw



Within 50 yards of the wreck, by Diana Moore