



A way of life

It's 25 years since RNLB's lifeboat Freddie Cooper put to sea and became a focus for volunteer effort in the town

WORDS & PHOTOS: Mike Trippitt

Facing east into a gentle breeze, second coxswain Karl Barber sounds the horn. In a well practised, flawless routine, four crew members release the chains that hold the vessel to its carriage. The Aldeburgh Lifeboat RNLB Freddie Cooper slides into the white, fizzing surf and heads purposefully towards the horizon. The Mersey class lifeboat will be at sea on a training exercise for most of the day.

Full-time coxswain Steve Saint remains ashore. He'll join the

boat later at Southwold. For him it's another day in the office, yet it's also so much more than just a job. "It was in my blood really," says Steve, whose father, Nigel, was full-time station mechanic for 33 years. "I was always down here with the old man, as a kid, but he never pressured me into doing it. At 18, I joined up as a volunteer. I always wanted to be the mechanic, but never sought to be the coxswain. It just sort of happened really. I went full-time in 2003 as station mechanic, and I took over as coxswain in

ABOVE: Freddie Cooper on a training run

TOP RIGHT: Coxswain Steve Saint

RIGHT: The Freddie Cooper is towed from its shed

September 2009."

Steve is one of only two full-time paid staff at Aldeburgh. He remembers Freddie Cooper coming on station 25 years ago in 1993. Although the boat was funded by a legacy from the will of Winifred Cooper, who came to Aldeburgh regularly with husband Freddie, Steve says the Aldeburgh team didn't know the couple. "They never made themselves known to us. Sixty per cent of our income is from legacies. Nine times out of ten it's from people who were not

known to us.” In Freddie Cooper’s 25 years service the composition of the volunteer crew has changed. Life is different now, says Steve. “When I joined a majority of the crew were fishermen, or had some association with the beach or the town. Many moons ago 90 per cent of our crews came from a maritime background. Now it’s the other way – about 90 per cent are from a non-maritime background in the RNLI in general.” Not only do people work out of town, many move away to buy a home where prices are lower. Some stations struggle to find volunteers, but Aldeburgh has 18 sea-going crew supported by more than 20 in the shore-based team, really good for a town of its size, says Steve.

For most of us, putting to sea in dire weather is the last thing we would do, but for the volunteer crew of the Aldeburgh lifeboat it becomes almost instinctive. “When I know somebody’s out there and they need help, I need to be out there,” says Steve. “I need to be taking my team to sort it out. It’s quite a difficult thing to explain, because when it’s blowing a force 10 and it’s going to be a tough day, why would you want to go out there? But you do.”

Steve, full-time station mechanic James Cable, the volunteer crew and shore-based volunteers joined the RNLI for

one reason, to save lives at sea.

Sometimes the crew’s efforts are in vain and, although thankfully rare, unsuccessful rescues can be emotional experiences.

“We go to bring people back,” says Steve. “It’s very hard when that doesn’t happen.” Some people feel anger, he says, when they have been through training, they go to a situation but can’t finish the job. “That’s part of the job, we can’t do anything about it, but it’s sad. It happens.” With different characters on board and the potential for varying reactions to the loss of a casualty, the coxswain has to remain strong, but he, too, can be affected. “There are people in the institution that I can go to, but first and foremost you take it home. That’s difficult. Over the years I have learned that it’s part of the job. When you’ve been in those situations multiple times, I’m not saying it becomes easier, but you know what’s going to happen, what the outcome is going to be, so you prepare yourself.”

Later, Steve will join his crew on the boat before bringing Freddie Cooper home and, against all natural instincts of good seamanship, will force the lifeboat up the beach with all its might. “We can’t put the boat on the trailer in the water. So

we steam it up the beach at full speed. The tractor has a winch on the back and it pulls the boat on plastic skids up to the level. Then the carriage is pushed under the back and it’s winched back up. It’s quite a process, and takes about half an hour. Out of 238 stations around the country there are only about 20 that launch like this.”

Today, conditions are benign, but in rough weather and at night the recovery gets adrenalin flowing. “Everyone’s on the deck for recovery, so in heavy weather we are at our most vulnerable, particularly if it’s dark and howling on the beach. There’s no point going off, hopefully having the end result we want, and then being turned over on the beach. There’s no point losing somebody over the side after we’ve done a successful rescue. I’ve got to think of the crew all the time.” Steve will go to sea in rough weather time and again before he hangs up his sou’wester. “It’s lovely to see all the training coming together, everyone pulling together for the one aim of sorting a situation out successfully,” says Steve. “And when it happens, it lights my heart up. It’s all been worth it. This isn’t a job. It’s a way of life.” ♦

