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An Epic of Raging Seas

Fiftieth Anniversary of “New Brunswick” Story of “Bones” Hide and his fellow Lifeboat men



Fifty years ago this week the whole country was thrilled by the epic story of an heroic sea rescue which was effected by the crew of the Eastbourne lifeboat off Birling Gap; and even to-day the spirit quickens as one recalls the bravery of Eastbourne's gallant mariner sons.

We publish to-day a photograph of one of the bravest of those heroes Charles Hide, the coxswain of the lifeboat which went to the rescue of the “New Brunswick” on that fateful day of November, 1883.

“Bones” Hide was the name by which he was known to all and though he died in 1906, at the comparatively early age of 56, he is still remembered by an older generation of Eastbourne people.

A THRILLING STORY

In addition to playing an important part in all the lifeboat rescues from 1880 until the time of his death “Bones” Hide saved no fewer than 74 individual persons from drowning, and the constant exposure to the rigors of English climate which his life-saving work involved undoubtedly hastened his end.

What a thrilling story of the sea this weeks anniversary recalls! It was at 10:30 a.m. on November 25, just as the newly-elected Mayor and Corporation were on their way to church that a messenger arrived with the news that there had been a wreck off Beachy Head. A south-west wind in its severity was accompanied by drenching rain and it was found impossible to launch the lifeboat from the station.

It was decided that the boat should be taken over-land to Birling Gap, a suggestion that this should be done being fully supported by "Bones" Hide who, as coxswain, had an important say in the matter.

IN THE TEETH OF THE GALE

The new road to Beachy Head (not the present Dukes Drive, which was planned at a later date) had just been made, but the boat had to be dragged mounting gradually to 600 feet and thence onward over a succession of smaller slopes.

The lifeboat crew recieved the decision with cheers and immediately brought the lifeboat (the William and Mary) from its station at the east end of the parade and had dragged it by manuel labour as far as South street before horses could be obtained. Six horses ad eventually four others were harnessed to the lifeboat by long ropes. Even with ten horses the tug up to Beachy Head was a terrible struggle in the teeth of the gale and pouring rain, though the exertions of the animals were assisted by the crew and scores of willing helpers on the ropes, stimulated by the hearty seaman curses of "Bones" Hide.

It took two and a half hours to reach Birling Gap where, about three-quarters of a mile from the shore the wrecked ship could plainly be seen amid drifting scud, the sea at times breaking over it and the crew lashed to the rigging, waving signals of distress.

Then a fresh difficulty arose when it was found on inspection that owing to recent storms the water had washed away the sloping road, and there was a fall of fully ten feet between the end of the road and the beach. Then somebody discovered near the Gap a load of timber, and it was determined with the baulks from this to construct a roadway to the beach, and presently a temporary pathway was made, down which the lifeboat was carefully taken.

LAUNCHING THE LIFEBOAT



Difficulties attended the launching of the lifeboat, and even when it had been pulled to the waters edge it was found that the lifeboat carriage had been left at Eastbourne. But "Bones" Hide was not dismayed. "Let her go!" he cried, and as the boat took the water one of the crew cried: "Wish us Godspeed mates and a safe return." The reply was a cheer from the crowd.

Waves mountains high checked the lifeboat's progress and rain fell literally by bucketsful.

ALL WERE SAVED

Everyone on the shore expected to see the lifeboat dashed to pieces, but “Bones” and his fellow seamen battled on against the fury of the elements. For an hour they pulled away before covering the three-quarters of a mile between the shore and the wreck . The boat could not be taken alongside, and a long-line was attached to the wreck and the boat allowed to drift astern. One by one the shipwrecked sailors were the lifeboat - ... ten... and

All were saved, though one mans ribs were crushed.

But the work of the lifeboat crew was not yet ended, she had still to ... their boat up the Gap. ... the rope broke the boat slipped back and several helpers had a narrow escape from injury. At length an anchor was made fast, and with some skill and much labour the good boat “William and Mary” was raised to the top of the cliff in safety as darkness descended.

The wrecked vessel, the “New Brunswick” was a Norwegian barque, bound from Quebec to Sunderland laden with deals from Canada.

OTHER RESCUES

In July of the following year there was an unfortunate climax to the rescue when the whole crew were dismissed because they had claimed and were awarded the sum of £105 from the owners of the vessel, contrary to the rules and regulations of the Lifeboat Institution. The Eastbourne crew were much aggrieved because the Newhaven lifeboat had gone to the scene of the wreck on the morning after and by towing the vessel into harbour with the aid of a steamboat had received salvage money amounting to £300.

This was the most important of the rescues in which “Bones” Hide was concerned. He joined the lifeboat crew in 1879 and soon afterwards took over the coxswains duties from Joe Huggett, and when he resigned in 1883 he was succeeded by Jesse Huggett.

In 1881 “Bones” was coxswain when the lifeboat saved the crew of another Norwegian barque which was wrecked on Beachy Head, jumping from the lifeboat with a rope round his waist to bring the men to safety.

He was also one of the heroes of the rescue of the “Isabella” when it was wrecked off Bexhill, and a member of the crew which saved a party of Hastings fishermen when their boat the “Bantam” sank off Wish Tower. On the same night that the “Bantam” was lost the “Thistle” went down in the Channel, the crew being saved by French fishermen.

He was also one of the crew of the “James Stephens” which answered a summons to go to Hastings when a steamer went ashore. Just as the “James Stephens” was approaching the steamer was able to get clear, and the Eastbourne men’s services were not required. It was on this occasion that old Tom Bonney was washed overboard and although he was saved, his health was ruined by the exposure of that long journey by boat.

“Bones” Hide is dead. But four other lifeboatmen who took part in the rescue of the “New Brunswick” are still with us to tell the story of that thrilling Sunday. They are [William \(“Bollard”\) Hide, a cousin of “Bones”](#), Jack Colstick, “Truppy” Sayers and William (Kelcraft) Erridge.

Charles Hide is remembered by many old Eastbournians as a man of considerable physical bulk. As a small child he was so thin that he was called “Bones” by his friends - a nickname that stuck to the end.

(External Link [Eastbourne RNLI](#))

Evening Argus 31/1/1959

The day they launched a lifeboat at Birling Gap

One of the most popular attractions for visitors on Eastbourne seafront is the well known lifeboat museum at the western end of the Grand parade. The building used to be the lifeboat house and the concrete launching ramp is still used by visitors as an easy way down to the beach.

Many years ago the Eastbourne branch of the RNLI hit upon the idea of using the lifeboat house as a museum in which are housed relics of more than 100 years of the history of Eastbourne lifeboats.

Visitors to the museum are reminded of one of the most famous launches in the history of British lifeboats.

It was in 1883 in the teeth of a howling gale when the best known coxswain of Eastbourne lifeboats, “Bones” Hide, could not launch the boat because of the nature of the tide and wind.

So he said “Right we’ll cart it over Beachy Head and launch it from Birling Gap”.

He called for volunteers and every available horse and in an 80 m.p.h gale hauled the lifeboat uphill and downhill to Birling Gap, where it had to be lowered 30 ft down the cliff face into a boiling sea.

The last of the survivors of that crew, “Tubby” Sayers died at his home in Redoubt Road Eastbourne in 1848.

CREW SAVED

In an interview shortly before his death he recalled the scene as the lifeboatmen jumped into the boat and grabbed their oars.

“Hey Bones this is the last trip you’ll ever make” he cracked to the coxswain. “Last trip be dammed - pull on that oar” yelled Bones. The crew of the Lifeboat, The William and Mary did and safely landed 11 of the crew of the barque the New Brunswick.

The annual report to be put before the Eastbourne branch of the RNLI shows that in 1958 the museum produced an income of £900 from visitors. And that’s after meeting the expenses of maintaining Eastbourne’s lifeboat, the Beryl Tollemache, the branch were able to send a “surplus” of £2,257 (£2,101 of it raised by the Ladies Guild) to less fortunate branches.