

The best tribute to the brave boys who went out that night is that the Penlee lifeboat is still dedicated to life-saving at sea

MIKE SAGAR-FENTON looks at how, despite the devastation to the community of the loss of the Penlee lifeboat 25 years ago, the precious work of saving lives at sea continued - and still continues

NO-ONE who lived in West Cornwall then will ever forget December 20, 1981.

It was a Sunday, and as people turned on their radios or heard from their family and friends that the Penlee lifeboat had been lost with all hands a cold numbness spread through the whole community.

It seemed almost against nature. No Cornish lifeboat had been lost for over 40 years and we were perhaps complacent with the usual pattern that the lifeboats went out, rescued people, and came home again.

Suddenly the last piece of the jigsaw was missing, leaving a shocking gap which still inspires a feeling of emptiness even 25 years later.

Those closest to the tragedy really were in shock. The families, formerly ordinary anonymous Mousehole people, were given no time to begin to come to terms with their loss before they became the target of mass national and international media.

Some were respectful but many were brutally intrusive, leaving a bitter taste. Their dignified response to this, and later to the controversies over the relief fund, was a tribute to the families' strength and sanity in the face of a world turned upside down.

Those left from the lifeboat's operational crew were equally shattered. The lost crew were members of their close-knit team, family, friends often from schooldays, drinking companions, part of the very fabric of the village, suddenly gone along with their boat.

Their response has gone down in history, though it is typical of the spirit of lifeboat men and women everywhere.

The very next day, as the helicopters were quartering the seas outside the harbour wall looking for bodies and wreckage, a new team were volunteering and demanding a replacement lifeboat as a matter of urgency. What if there was a vessel in trouble and there was no lifeboat available to help?

As the press ballyhoo went on, a new crew quietly got on with the job of retraining. Usually a crew grows organically, the older ones teaching the younger, but this time the cream of the station had gone overnight.

An RNLI team came to Penlee to train the replacement crew, and within a couple of months the station was completely operational once more.

It was a huge achievement, and proved for ever that a lifeboat station is neither a building, a boat, or even a crew. It is an idea, and as long as that idea is shared there will always be a Penlee lifeboat.

And so there is. In 1983 the station made a hard parting with Penlee Point in order to accommodate the revolutionary Arun Class *Mabel Alice* in Newlyn. She was designed to lie afloat rather than splash down a slipway, and so took moorings in Newlyn harbour, where she remained for the whole 20 years of her service. Her first coxswain was Kenny Thomas, and he was followed in 1992 by Neil Brockman, whose father Nigel had been lost aboard the *Solomon Browne*.

Neil was one of the youngest coxswains in the RNLI, and he is now one of the most experienced. He was even chosen to go to China to train the growing Chinese lifeboat service on the Arun lifeboats they have acquired from the RNLI.

The 25th anniversary finds the lifeboat station in excellent heart. In 2001 it was decided to add a fast-response inshore lifeboat to Penlee's complement, and an inflatable Atlantic 75 *Paul Alexander* now deals with the many smaller emergencies which naturally arise on a crowded holiday coast - swimmers in trouble, inflatable dinghies blowing out to sea, wind-surfers, jet skis, dinghies and yachts in difficulties, even small fishing boats which might need a tow.



In 2003 she was joined by the state-of-the-art Severn Class *Ivan Ellen*, designed to proceed at speed in all weathers to whatever mishap may require her services.

Despite the increasing work-load, only two members of the Penlee station are full-time employees of the RNLI. All the rest are volunteers, taking time out of their lives not only for the service missions but also for the rigorous training now required, exercises, demonstrations and routine work.

They are supported by a network of shore-based volunteers, some acting as officers and some performing astonishing feats of fund-raising.

Despite having no prominent retail outlet unlike some other stations, Penlee still manages to raise around £50,000 every year towards RNLI funds.

Anniversaries of the tragedy are still difficult times, especially for the families who experience another wave of attention.

The sadness of the event which touched and inspired the whole nation can never fade, and its memory will always be painful.

However the best possible tribute to the brave boys who went out that night is the fact that the station they served still exists, busier and more successful every year, still dedicated as they were to the work of life-saving at sea.

The story of Penlee goes on.

● For those wishing to know more about the Penlee lifeboat disaster, the BBC documentary *The Cruel Sea* is to be repeated on December 19 at 7pm on BBC2. *Penlee - The Loss of a Lifeboat* and *Penlee Lifeboat - the first 200 years* by Michael Sagar-Fenton are available from bookshops.

■ The memorial to the crew of the *Solomon Browne* in Paul Church. ©GSP



■ A member of the Penlee lifeboat crew for the past 10 years, Ralph Curnow is a self-taught artist who took up painting seven years ago. *Below Boscawen* is one of a series of acrylic paintings that Ralph Curnow has completed around the subject of the Penlee lifeboat disaster of 1981. "One of the reasons that I've produced these paintings is that some of the younger generation are not aware of the historic relevance of the event. Hopefully these paintings will help to keep the memories alive because what the crewmen did that night was tremendous. It is difficult to get a visual of what the scene that night was like so I've had to take a lot of artistic licence to get light into the scene. The painting shows the *Solomon Browne* making the first of its runs to try to get a line on to the *Union Star*. I've tried to get it as accurate as I can otherwise the painting is meaningless."

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