

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution: Saving Lives at Sea [B2]

Fondata nel 1824, la RNLI è una delle più amate organizzazioni del Regno Unito finanziate con donazioni. Nel corso degli anni, con l'aiuto di centinaia di volontari, ha salvato la vita di migliaia di persone in tutti i tipi di operazioni di salvataggio in acqua.

This year is the 200th anniversary of the creation of one of the most iconic institutions in Britain. Over the last two centuries, men and women of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution — almost all volunteers — have saved the lives of around 144,000 people in trouble in boats or in seas around Britain. Its famous [motto](#) is quite simple: “Saving lives at sea”. In doing so, however, six hundred RNLI members have lost their own lives.

TERRIBLE LOSS OF LIFE

The RNLI's origins are in 1823 with the philanthropist Sir William Hillary. Shocked by the terrible loss of life in the 1,800 [shipwrecks](#) that happened annually, Hillary suggested the creation of a lifeboat service for Britain and Ireland. The Royal National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck (its name for the first thirty years) was founded on 4 March 1824, at the City of London Tavern in Bishopsgate. It was later called “the best thing to come out of a pub”!

THE RNLI'S BIGGEST RESCUE

The RNLI quickly became a much-loved and respected part of British and Irish life. By 1900, the organisation had saved more than forty thousand lives. Just seven years later came the RNLI's biggest-ever rescue: on 17 March 1907, the liner [SS](#) Suevic hit the Maenheere [Reef](#) off Cornwall's coast. In a strong [gale](#) and dense fog, the local lifeboat volunteers rescued 456 passengers, including seventy babies, over a sixteen-hour period.

WARTIME ROLES

The sea rescue organisation played an important role in both World Wars. In the first war, [lifeboat crews](#) launched 1,808 times, rescuing 5,332 people from ships hit by torpedoes or mines, including hospital ships. Twenty years later, in the Second World War, the RNLI saved 6,376 lives, including crews from [downed](#) British and German [aircraft](#). The organisation also played a big role in the evacuation of Dunkirk in May 1940, which saved Britain's army from ignominious defeat.

NATURE OF THE WORK

The RNLI provides a 24-hour search and rescue service around the coasts of Britain and Ireland. It operates 238 coastal lifeboat stations and 240 beach-based lifeguard units. It also operates [flood](#) rescue teams nationally and internationally. [Training](#) is also key, with thousands of children attending sea and beach safety courses every week. A [charity](#), it depends on voluntary donations and [legacies](#) to [fund](#) its services, which cost more than 200 million euros [to run](#). An incredible 97 per cent of [lifeboat crews](#) are unpaid volunteers.

NEW ROLES FOR THE RNLI

In 2001, the organisation started to provide lifeguards on beaches. Around ten thousand people receive aid every year on one hundred beaches. There are now also lifeboat stations on inland waters. Water activities have increased in popularity, and now the RNLI spends more and more time rescuing paddle-boarders and [wild swimmers](#) inland, as well as fishing boat crews and migrants' boats in the English Channel. Shipwrecks are now rare.

A TURNING TIDE

While the RNLI is still clearly one of the most popular institutions in British life, it has received some criticism in recent years for rescuing people trying to cross the Channel illegally in small boats. The organisation [swiftly](#)

responded by saying that it is “an apolitical organisation [which exists] to save lives at sea”. The public also responded: daily donations to the RNLI rose by 300 per cent, and there was a 270 per cent increase in people viewing the RNLI website’s volunteering opportunities page.

THE MOST FAMOUS RESCUE

In 1899, the RNLI carried out the most famous rescue in its history. In the middle of one of the worst storms of the century, a boat with eighteen crew on board was in serious trouble off the North Devon coast. The seas were so ferocious that it was impossible to launch lifeboats. The local RNLI members knew they had to find a place somewhere on the coast [sheltered](#) from the storm. With the help of a hundred locals and eighteen horses, they dragged their ten-metre, ten-tonne lifeboat across land for thirteen miles during the night until they found a calmer [spot](#). The lifeboat was launched and the members saved the boat and crew.

THE BUSIEST LIFEBOAT STATIONS

Surprisingly, the RNLI’s two busiest lifeboat stations are not actually on the coast; they are the Tower and Chiswick [lifeboat crews](#) beside the River Thames in Central London. The Thames may be one of London’s landmarks and a tourist [hotspot](#), but the river’s tide is extremely powerful and sometimes dangerous. Charles Dickens made the perilous, cruel river a central element in his last complete novel, *Our Mutual Friend*. In fact, there are four stations on the Thames, with crews of full-time members and volunteers offering a 24-hour service. The Tower Lifeboat Station is the busiest of all. In 2013, its crews rescued 372 people and saved twenty-five lives. The river’s history shows that disaster can [strike](#) in water at any time. In the tragic 1989 *Marchioness* disaster, a boat full of [partygoers](#) collided with a [dredger](#), with the loss of fifty-one lives in just a few minutes.

www.rnli.org

Glossary

- **charity** = organizzazione benefica
- **wild swimmers** = nuotatori in acque libere
- **spot** = posto
- **Reef** = scogliera areale, barriera corallina,
- **flood** = inondazione
- **fund** = finanziare
- **to run** = finanziare
- **strike** = colpire
- **swiftly** = prontamente
- **motto** = motto, slogan
- **shipwrecks** = naufragi
- **SS** = piroscafo (abbr. steamship)
- **gale** = tempesta
- **lifeboat crews** = equipaggi di barche di salvataggio
- **aircraft** = aeroplano
- **Training** = formazione
- **sheltered** = ripararsi
- **dredger** = draga
- **downed** = abbattuti
- **legacies** = eredità
- **hotspot** = area di grande interesse, luogo turistico
- **partygoers** = festaioli