

With pix

The current Dornoch Firth inshore lifeboat service, launched 20 years ago mainly to go to the rescue of pleasure boats or swimmers in difficulty, was preceded by a Royal National Lifeboat Institution craft more than a century ago when distress at sea was common.

Two fishing boats foundered in the firth in October 1865, in which all eight crew from Inver and five from Golspie lost their lives. This one appalling disaster, along with more loss of life in earlier years, possibly prompted the RNLI to station a rescue boat at Embo, though it took another 20 years for it to arrive.

The 34-ft long self-righting *Daisie*, with 10 oars, costing £297, was gifted by an anonymous donor. According to contemporary accounts, the boat came north by rail and was unloaded at The Mound station, long before there was a rail link to Embo and Dornoch. It was then towed on a carriage pulled by eight "powerful" horses by way of Dornoch to its launch position about a half-mile from Embo.

The animals were loaned by Provost Fraser of Dornoch, Mr Barclay of Skelbo, Mr Mackintosh of Proncy and Mr Gordon of Embo. Some difficulty was experienced in unloading the heavy boat from the railway wagon, but many willing hands volunteered help, including a number of Embo fishermen, and they succeeded in placing it safely on its carriage.

Among those who assisted were Mr J B Kydd, the Duke of Sutherland's forester, Highland Railways' station agent Mr Symon, and Capt Mackintosh of the Dornoch Rifle Volunteers.

According to a contemporary account, "In Dornoch the arrival of the lifeboat evoked much interest, and several of the buildings were decorated with flags in honour of the occasion. At the west end of the burgh, a triumphal arch was erected which bore the suitable and appropriate inscription 'Welcome *Daisie*.' Flags floated on the Castle, the Cathedral, Bailie Neill's residence and from the building occupied by Mr W S Fraser, merchant, while a flag was also unfurled at the 'Poles' and at the launching point. The effect was pleasing and attractive."

Headed by two pipers, the procession wended its way to the launching station on the beach, followed by a large band of the public. Among those present at the ceremony were Mr Sutherland of Skibo (chairman), Bailie Neill, Dornoch (hon. secretary), Rev Mr Taylor (Dornoch Free Church), Mr Lewis Hoyes SSC, Mr John Mackintosh (Proncy), Mr John Leslie (solicitor), Mr David Peters, Mr A Morrison (hotel keeper), Mr W S Fraser (merchant), Mr Alex Mackenzie (Skelbo), Mr J B Kydd (the Poles), Mr William Sutherland (merchant), Mr Roderick Maclean (Chief Constable), Bailie Ross (Dornoch), Rev Donald Grant (Dornoch Parish Church), Miss Sutherland (Skibo), Mr Barrow and party (Dornoch), Mr Donald Maclean, Sutherland Estates Factor (Rhives), Mr Box (factor, Tongue), Mr Barclay (Skelbo), Mr Fraser (from India), Mr and Mrs Donald Taylor, Dornoch, Mrs Taylor FC Manse, Dornoch, Dr Gordon (Embo), the Misses Mackintosh (Clashmore), Mr and Mrs Mackenzie (Tain), Mrs Pryde (Edinburgh), Mr Mackenzie (Bonar), and the Rev Mr Taylor (from England).

Before the launch, Mr Sutherland of Embo called on the Rev Neil to offer prayer, after which Captain Beddoes RN, as representative of the RNLI, handed over the lifeboat to the local committee.

In front of a large gathering from the surrounding district, Miss Sutherland of Skibo Castle was invited formally to name the *Daisie* on 29th September 1886. The following year a boathouse and a 140-ft wooden slipway were constructed at a cost of £638 6s 1d.

Bailie Neill proposed a heart vote of thanks to the RNLI "for this noble gift." They did not know the name of the donor, but the excellent gift showed that the donor was a humane and generous person and to that person they returned their heartiest thanks.

Thirty-eight men from Dornoch and Embo volunteered to crew the boat, and 10 were selected to man the launch. "Strong, hardy-looking fellows they were," it was reported, "and as they appeared in the boat, attired in their lifeboat clothing, with cork jackets and preservers, their appearance indicated that when called upon to perform active service on the open sea, they could not fail to render a satisfactory account of themselves."

They were Donald "Eban" Mackay, launch coxswain; Alexander Main, lookout; Kenneth "Main" Mackay, John Ross, John Ross elder, Thomas Fraser, William Fraser, Alex "Roy" Mackay, John "Roy" Mackay and Kenneth Ross.

After the naming ceremony, the crowd pushed and pulled the *Daisie* into the water, whaler the crew stood by their oars. "The boat glided splendidly into the water and in a choppy sea, the crew rowed her round to her new station at Embo. Here a number of the fishermen, along with their wives and children, awaited to receive the boat, which glided through the waves in excellent style. The boat was dragged on to the beach, where it will remain until, the completion of the new building to be erected for its accommodation."

Though launched on three occasions to vessels in distress, during 18 years on station, the *Daisie*'s only effective service was on 20th January 1890, when called to aid the Gardenstown fishing boat *Come On*. The open-decked vessel, with six of a crew, had become stranded on a sandbank at the entrance to Loch Fleet. Two members of the lifeboat crew were transferred to assist in refloating the vessel and getting her to safety. The rescue was carried out in darkness, with snow showers, a heavy swell and a south-west gale.

In October 1904, the lifeboat was withdrawn from service and the station was closed. The *Daisie* was sold by the RNLI in 1905.

The East Sutherland Rescue Association resumed an inshore lifeboat service from its base at Dornoch in 1982, following the successful recovery of a little girl floating out to sea on an inflatable mat.

NB The recorder of this piece of local lifeboat history is indebted to Mr George Sutherland from Lybster, who uncovered the manuscript, though its source is unknown.

Captions

This is John Ross from Embo, the first coxswain and superintendent of the Dornoch lifeboat, who served in the post for all 18 years of its existence here.

Mr Donald Ross, Rossdhu House, Gate Street, Embo, is the grandson of John Ross, the Dornoch lifeboat coxswain. Here he is pictured (right) with the framed RNLI certificate awarded his grandfather in 1904 on his retirement, along with his cousin, Mr Donald Macdonald, 5 Church Street, Golspie. Mr Ross also has the training record of lifeboat volunteers, and remembers the family once had the inscribed bell belonging to the *Daisie*.