

Restoring a GL Watson lifeboat



She may not be self-righting but this century-old lifeboat has a new life thanks to local enthusiasm.

Mike Smylie reports



There's something exquisitely potent in the sight of a 100-plus-years-old lifeboat being towed out into the bay. It's to do with the lovely lines of this graceful vessel, her vulnerability to the elements and the sheer fact that this boat, as often as not, set out to sea in conditions when others sought refuge.

Okay, so they aren't setting out into the teeth of a gale and they aren't putting their lives at risk, but as each man pulls on his oars, there is a feeling that the old boat is remembering. The sea is calm while the sun attempts to peer through high cloud after days of wind and rain. The 'old boat' in question is the *Charles Henry Ashley*, built in 1907, recently restored and newly dedicated, and now back in the waters she once put out into to save others in distress. Proud in her blue, red and white colours, she had last been stationed here in Cemaes, Anglesey, 73 years ago.

In 1823 the ship *Alert* was wrecked on the West Mouse, a notorious rock off the north coast of Anglesey, with the loss of 145 lives out of 152 aboard, and over the next few years another 20 or more ships came to grief in the fast-flowing waters that this coast is still renowned for. Whatever else can be said about these unfortunate and tragic events, at least some good did eventually arise, for Frances Lloyd Williams, wife of James, the local rector of the parish of Llanfair-y-Nghornwy and Chancellor of Bangor Cathedral, was so incensed after she and her husband witnessed the disaster that she set about raising money for a lifeboat. She formed the Anglesey Lifesaving



Above: Up oars as the restored *Charles Henry Ashley* takes to the water

Left: *Charles Henry Ashley* under her original sailing rig



Association which in 1828 received its first lifeboat in the form of a Palmer-type, 26ft (7.9m) pulling boat. Designed by George Palmer MP of Nazing Park, Essex, who was also deputy chairman of the Committee of Management of the then recently-formed Royal National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck, the boat was built at Limehouse. The rector's son, Owen William, became the coxswain.

This was the first lifeboat station on Anglesey; it remained open until 1918 though it closed for several years after 1872 when another lifeboat station was established at nearby Cemaes to which the lifeboat *Sofia* was taken from Cemlyn. This vessel was replaced four years later and three other lifeboats were stationed in Cemaes, a small picturesque fishing village with a small tidal harbour nestling behind a stone quay. In 1907 the *Charles Henry Ashley* was brought on station.

Stability

This was a Watson-type lifeboat, an early version of what was to become one of the RNLI's most successful designs. The renowned boat designer GL Watson became the RNLI's consulting naval architect in 1887 and, though he was very much an advocate of the self-righting principle for lifeboat design, he felt that for the larger vessels stability was a more pressing feature of design at the expense of self-righting. Thus the early Watson lifeboats were not self-righting. The *Charles Henry Ashley* was 38ft (11.6m) in length and was built by the Thames Ironworks of Bow

Creek, London, at a cost of £1,090. Watson had designed two versions of the type that took his name in 1890, the 38ft pulling boat and a larger 43ft (13.1m) sailing boat.

So successful was the seaworthiness of these boats that 19 came into service in the six years following 1890. All were rigged with sails, the pulling boat having a much smaller sail area than the larger boat. The *Charles Henry Ashley*, built of double diagonal Honduras mahogany as all lifeboats of this era were, had a small main standing lug, an even smaller mizzen lug and a jib. The larger boats were also lug rigged, with a big dipping lug main.

The *Charles Henry Ashley* must have been one of the last of these lifeboats to have been built without an engine. Watson, who founded the company GL Watson & Co, died in 1904 so did not see this boat launched. However, he had by then already experimented by fitting engines into some craft. The 35ft (10.7m) Watson was deemed successful and purpose built motorised boats were built soon after. Watson was succeeded as head of the firm and as consulting naval architect to the RNLI by JR Barnett, who himself carried on designing new craft up to his retirement in 1947 when RA Oakley took over.

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The *Charles Henry Ashley* had been built with money from a legacy from Charles Carr Ashley (born 1841) who lived in London and later in Menton, Southern France. In all, seven lifeboats were donated, all named after family members, Charles Henry being his father, born 1801.

The boat remained in service, kept in a boathouse at Porth yr Ogof which was around the headland from the village. Some say that the reason the boat was initially brought from Cemlyn to Cemaes was the lack of nearby available crew at short notice, but then one wonders why the lifeboat station was positioned away from the core of the village. However, the boat was only called out on seven occasions – and it actually saved no lives (previously the station had saved 32 lives) – up to the station's being closed in 1932. Presumably, with lifeboats at Holyhead and Moelfre, it was deemed unnecessary and the boat, being non-self-righting, was sold out of service.

Private owners

She became the property of Captain Hewitt and was kept in storage at Cemlyn until he auctioned her for sale in about 1960. Bought for £600 by Alec Robertson, she was motorised with a small diesel engine and used for pleasure trips. By the late 1990s she was ashore in a caravan park at Lligwy as a static display. The caravan park was subsequently sold and the boat was threatened with being burnt until Alec Robertson gave her to the Amŵch Heritage Trust free of charge. Within a few years the boat was back in Cemaes, under

