

Session 7 - BERWICK'S MARITIME HERITAGE

THE PORT OF BERWICK

The Customs port of Berwick upon Tweed stretches for over forty miles from the river Coquet Northumberland northwards to St. Abbs on the Berwickshire coast. It includes the sub-ports of Alnmouth, North Sunderland and Eyemouth, together with several smaller havens like Beadnell, Waren Mill, Holy Island and Burnmouth.

In the Middle Ages, Berwick was Scotland's greatest seaport. Centuries of Anglo-Scottish warfare reduced the trade considerably, but in the second half of the 18th century the Port of Berwick enjoyed a second period of prosperity with the growth of exports of agricultural products from the Tweed Valley to the growing towns and industrial areas of Britain.

Grain was the principle cargo, together with increasing quantities of salmon and a variety of other commodities.

During the 18th and early 19th centuries other exports included beer from the breweries in Berwick and towns in the Borders, and whisky from distilleries at Kelso and Gungreen in Eyemouth.

From the 1790s until the end of the Napoleonic wars, large quantities of eggs were shipped out of Berwick to London. One of the main uses for the eggs was to remove impurities from sugar cane.

Over 40 'egglers' collected the eggs and brought them overland by pack-horse and cart from farms as far away as Selkirk to be transported to the Thames. They were packed into chests, each containing 1,600 eggs, with a little straw between each row. The eggs were checked by the packer, using a candle placed in the middle of the box. An experienced packer could pack a chest of 1,600 eggs in under an hour. To prevent the eggs putrifying, the eggs were buried in salt, or rubbed with butter or tallow. Later, it became common to steep them in a solution of alkali or lime water.

An average of 4,000-5,000 chests of eggs were sent from Berwick to London each year. They were priced at about 7s 6d per 100 chests. Between October 1797 and October 1798, for instance, 5,254 chests were carried, containing 8.4 million eggs worth £21,000.

In 1816, 4,788 chests of eggs were sent to London, but the end of the Napoleonic Wars meant supplies of cheaper eggs became available from France and the Berwick egg trade declined rapidly.

BERWICK SMACKS AND THE LONDON TRADE

The fast, sloop-rigged boats known as Berwick smacks appeared in the second half of the 18th century. They sailed from the quayside below the Old Bridge and their speed cut the journey time by sea to London from five days to as little as 44 hours.

The smacks had a single mainmast, and were about 70 feet in length. Many of them were built in shipyards in Berwick and Tweedmouth. The smacks sailed from the quayside below the Old Bridge.

As well as cargo, they could carry passengers more quickly and cheaply than travelling by carriage on the roads.

The smacks were designed primarily to carry salmon from Berwick to London and a number of them were owned by the Berwick Shipping Company, which later became the Berwick Salmon Company.

The salmon were packed in barrels, or 'kitts', and shipped 'raw' between January and March, and 'cured', or pickled in the warmer months. From the end of the 18th century, the trade in cured salmon had declined and most of the fish were being sent fresh to London, packed in pounded ice.

Some sea trout and young salmon, or grilse, were transported live to London, as reported in 1756 in 'The Gentlemen's Magazine': "Considerable quantities of the smaller fish are also sent to London alive, in vessels called smacks, which are built for that purpose, having a well in the middle bored full of holes for the free passage of sea-water, in which the fish are conveyed without injury."

Although the smacks were built mainly to carry salmon, they also carried grain and other goods. For example, on 14th October 1806 the smack 'Britannia' sailed for London carrying 60 quarter kitts of salmon, 315 bags of wheat, 33 tubs of pork, 50 bundles of paper and 54 chests of eggs.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, great quantities of eggs were brought overland by pack-horse and cart from farms as far away as Selkirk to be transported to the Thames, where they were used in sugar refining. The eggs were packed in salt or rubbed with tallow, or steeped in alkali to preserve them during the sea voyage. About 5,000 chests of eggs worth £30,000 were sent to London from Berwick in 1816.

Oats dominated the grain shipments from Berwick throughout the 18th century, but wheat took over in the 19th century. Large amounts of barley were grown in the Berwick area, but relatively little was carried by sea. Most of the barley was kept on the farms as animal feed, or malted and transported overland to breweries and distilleries in the Border towns and the Lothians.

In the 1780s, Berwick ranked sixth among Britain's grain ports, sending 11,049 tons by coast. The tonnage exported had more than doubled to 28,000 tons by the 1820s, when Berwick ranked as the third largest grain-port.

FROM SAIL TO STEAM

In 1837, steam was introduced on the voyages from Berwick to Leith, Newcastle and Hull. The first vessel was the City of Edinburgh, but she only operated for a short while.

The following year, the General Shipping Company of Berwick-upon-Tweed (est. 1826) purchased the sailing steamers Ardincaple and Glenalbyn. They were large enough to carry at least 100 passengers and a variety of cargo. Ardincaple remained in service at Berwick for nine years, but Glenalbyn proved expensive to run and was sold off after only one season on the Berwick to Hull route.

The Tourist was another steamer that visited Berwick regularly.

The steam-ships provided a faster, more reliable service to London than the sailing smacks, as reported in the Berwick Advertiser of 31st March 1838:

“The Tourist, Captain Morris, sailed from this port at 4 o’clock on Friday afternoon last and reached London at 2 o’clock on Sunday afternoon after a voyage of 46 hours. The Manchester which sailed within half an hour of the Tourist reached London at 4 o’clock on Sunday.”

Berwick Advertiser, 31st March 1838

However, it was the Manchester that eventually achieved the fastest time of thirty-five and a half hours.

Speed sometimes led to accidents, though. The most serious was when the Manchester ran into a sailing barque called the Tyrian off Gravesend. Four of the Tyrian’s crew were killed. Captain Polwart of the Manchester was charged with manslaughter but he was acquitted.

Also in 1838, the Berwick Shipping Company had set up in competition with two steamships, the Manchester and the Rapid.

According to Robson's Directory of Northumberland of 1841, one of the steam-ships of the Berwick Shipping Co., either ‘Manchester’ or ‘Rapid’, sailed every week to London in the summer months. The General Shipping Company’s ‘Ardincaple’ sailed every Thursday morning for Leith.

Each of these vessels carried cargo and livestock, as well as passengers.

On one sailing in August 1844 the Manchester left Berwick with 26 passengers and 480 boxes of salmon.

On 28th March 1846, the Berwick agent for the ‘Ardincaple’, which was now owned by the Tweed Steam Boat Company, advised local farmers: “In consequence of the change of the Morpeth Market shippers of sheep, lambs, &c, will find this a cheap, safe and expeditious conveyance with this very important advantage, that the vessel arrives just in time for the Newcastle Market.”

The steamships were now facing serious competition from the railways and the shipping companies were considering turning back to sail to save costs. Steamers were expensive to run, to maintain and to insure. Shortly after the Rapid returned from her last run from London, in November 1844, she caught fire at the Quayside and was scuttled. The accident was perhaps convenient for the Berwick Shipping Company, who considered the £1,000 costs of repair not worthwhile.

The final nail in the coffin for Berwick’s steamships was the arrival of the railway from Newcastle in 1846. The Ardincaple was sold off soon afterwards. The Manchester lasted until May 1848, when she was sent to the breaker’s yard.

One other steamer, the Eclipse continued to operate until she was withdrawn from Berwick in November of the same year.

In 1850, the Old Berwick Shipping Company merged with the General Shipping Company.

Losses from the shipping business forced the new company to sell off its last three sailing clippers in 1869 and concentrate on its salmon fisheries on the Tweed. The name was changed to the Berwick Salmon Company in 1872.

THE BUILDING OF THE TWEED DOCK

From medieval times, ships had loaded and unloaded at the Quayside.

An Act of Parliament passed in 1808 allowed the harbour commissioners to rebuild the pier, extend the quay and build the stone jetty at Carr Rock to enable vessels with deeper draught to berth.

Despite these improvements, by the 1840s the harbour was proving unsuitable for the larger steamships and the arrival of the railway at Tweedmouth in 1847 took away much of the coastal trade almost overnight.

However, larger ships were attracted to the port, particularly by the needs of new industries such as the chemical factories that were being set up in Tweedmouth and Spittal.

Further, more substantial improvements were needed. Another Act of Parliament in 1872 empowered the harbour commissioners to build a wet dock in Tweedmouth and an embankment from the west end of Berwick Bridge to the Carr Rock pier. The Act also enabled the commissioners to construct coal staithes and negotiate the construction of a railway line to the new dock.

The plans for the Dock were drawn up by the engineering firm of D. & T. Stevenson of Edinburgh (David and Thomas Stevenson were respectively uncle and father of Robert Louis Stevenson).

Construction began in 1873. The dock walls were made of concrete, faced and topped with granite, and the floor of the dock was made water-tight with “peddled” blue clay. The cost of the work was about £40,000.

THE OPENING OF THE DOCK

The brig "Acacia" from Hartlepool was the first vessel to use the new dock, on the afternoon of 19th August 1876.

However, the official opening took place six weeks later, on 4th October.

The Mayor of Berwick, Andrew Thompson proclaimed an official half-holiday in the town and the Town Hall bells were rung to mark the occasion.

The Berwick Advertiser described the scene: "The Mayor and Town Council assembled at the Town Hall at half-past one o'clock, from which place they marched, preceded by the Sergeants-at-Mace, to the Harbour office on the Quay. Here they were joined by the Harbour Commissioners, and a large number of the principal inhabitants of the town and neighbourhood. At two o'clock the company embarked on board the steam-tug "Tweed" and sailed down the river as far as Spittal. The tug was then turned, and sailed down to the Dock which was entered about half-past two o'clock.

As the tug entered the dock cheers were raised by a large concourse of people who had assembled to witness the proceedings.

At the south side of the dock the company landed and marched in procession round the dock, and halting at the dock gate, witnessed the entrance of H.M. Gunboat Tyrian, which is to be accommodated in the dock during the winter. Afterwards the brig Vedra of Sunderland was towed in by the steam-tug Tweed. . . ."

It was expected that the Dock's main trade would be in the shipping of coal, and some of the first ships to use the Dock were colliers, but the coal trade ceased to be of much importance long before the closure of Scremerston Colliery in the 1950's.

The North Eastern Railway branch line linking the Dock with Tweedmouth Station was opened in October 1878. Its steep inclines were suited only to very small trains and it was eventually closed in the 1950s.

A variety of cargoes passed through the Tweed Dock in the 20th century including clay for Tennant's Clay Pipe Factory in Tweedmouth, china clay for the paper mill at Chirnside, timber from northern Europe for use in Allan Brothers wood-yard in Tweedmouth, stone and cement. Chemicals and raw materials such as ammonia, phosphates, potash and bones were imported in large quantities until the manufacture of fertilizers in the factories on Spittal Point ceased in the 1950s. Since then ready-made fertilizers have been shipped in.

The main business of the Dock since its opening, as today, was grain, particularly barley.

Firms such as Simpsons Malt, H. O. Short & Sons, H. G. McCreath and John Prentice & Co. had long associations with the Dock.

By the 1990s, the changing design of ships prompted the Harbour Commissioners to remove the dock gates and widen the entrance to allow access for larger vessels from Holland, Germany and the Baltic states.

SHIPBUILDING AT BERWICK

Dr. John Fuller described Berwick's shipbuilding industry in 1799 in his "History of Berwick":

"There are two ship builders in this place. Mr Gowans on the Berwick side employs from 20 to 25 journeymen and apprentices four vessels upon an average are built here yearly.

Mr Bruce in Tweedmouth generally employs about the same number of hands as Mr Gowans and builds about the same number of vessels.

The largest vessel ever built in Berwick was launched on the Tweedmouth side, on the 15th March last. It is a handsome brig of 375 tons burthen. On the same day there was launched, on the Berwick side of the water, a most beautiful brig belonging to Messrs Burnett and Thomas Greive, burden 300 tons. The justly celebrated character that the Berwick built vessels or smacks have acquired is so well and universally known in all commercial countries as to render an account of them here altogether unnecessary."

Dr. John Fuller (1799), The History of Berwick Upon Tweed

Arthur Byram's Yard

The first large-scale shipbuilding enterprise began in 1751.

Arthur Byram, a qualified ship-builder, moved to Berwick and the Guild of Freemen gave him permission to set up his yard and: "import coastwise oak-planks, oak-timber, blocks, sails rigging and other materials the town cannot supply for carrying on said business at such easy rates as in other towns of England and free of town's duties and water bailiffs fees."

Shortly before his death in 1789, Byram handed the business over to his son-in-law, Robert Gowans. On Robert's death in 1802, his wife, Elizabeth, took over the running of the yard until their son, Arthur Byram Gowan, was old enough to take charge in 1814.

Other 18th Century Shipyards

Several other shipyards were set up in Berwick and Tweedmouth in the second half of the 18th century.

Bruce's Yard was mentioned in Fuller's 1799 History, but closed in the early 1800s.

Although Berwick was an important port in the 18th century it contributed no ships to the Royal Navy from its yards. The only two warships produced before modern times were built by a small and short-lived yard in Tweedmouth.

Joseph Todd was the eldest son of Richard John Todd, a cooper who was admitted as a burgess of Berwick in 1793.

The rise of the salmon trade to London made the coopers in Berwick very prosperous with funds available to enable them to diversify. Joseph Todd decided to open a shipyard.

He entered into partnership with John Miller Dickson, a well-regarded sailmaker, and John Robertson, a merchant.

Todd's yard was located on a quarter of an acre site at the Tweedmouth end of Berwick Bridge, where the monumental stonemason's yard stands today. . On 1st October 1800 the Corporation of Berwick granted him and his partners a 21-year lease on the Tweedmouth site for an annual rent of £15.

Among the vessels built by Joseph Todd were two Royal Navy warships, HMS "Forward" and HMS "Rover".

HMS "Forward" was a 12-gun brig of 179 tons. She was launched in 1805 and began her career on the North Sea station. "Forward" took her first prize, a French lugger, in February 1806. After that she saw service in various waters from the Norwegian Sea and the Baltic to the Caribbean. In 1815, at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, HMS "Forward" returned to Spithead where she was de-commissioned and sold.

HMS "Rover" was completed at Todd's yard in 1808. A "Cruiser" class brig over 100 feet long and with a crew of 111, she was much larger than HMS "Forward".

Cruisers were designed to act as convoy escorts or to raid enemy shipping. "Rover" was designed to carry 18 six-pounder guns, but she was actually armed with 16 thirty-two pounder carronades, a type of gun that was ideal for delivering short-range broadsides.

After fitting out, HMS "Rover" was stationed at Leith to carry out convoy escort duties between Leith and the Baltic. Within a week she had her first success when she retook the captured British schooner Ceres of Burntisland, that was actually carrying herring from Berwick.

The Rover's captain's next commission was to negotiate a trading agreement with Iceland. This was achieved by threatening to bombard Reykjavik with the "Rover's carronades".

The Berwick Advertiser of 28th October 1809 recorded a brave action by the "Rover's" crew during an attack on a Danish vessel close to the Norwegian coast:

"The "Rover" chased so close to the shore, within two feet of her own draught, under the fire of the enemy, the crew having abandoned the (Danish) vessel, and the "Rover's" boats being detached on other service, several seamen of the "Rover" volunteered swimming to take possession of the prize, which they effected, unhurt, under a heavy fire from the enemy on land."

"Rover" later saw service in the waters off Portugal and Spain and, in 1812, she was tasked with carrying gold to pay the British army fighting the French in the Peninsular War.

In September 1814, HMS "Rover" was part of the British squadron attacking the American port of Baltimore. She was, in fact, one of the vessels that fired rockets and shells at Fort McHenry, an event that became immortalised in the lines of the American national anthem:

"And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there"

In 1815, "Rover" was patrolling the Channel when her crew was informed that the war with France was over. The news came from a meeting off Ushant with HMS "Bellerophon", the Royal Navy vessel transporting the captured Napoleon Bonaparte after his defeat at Waterloo.

HMS "Rover" ended her career at Plymouth, where she was finally paid off and sold in 1828.

Despite the success of these naval vessels, Todd's shipyard did not survive the Napoleonic Wars. By 1810, Joseph Todd was declared bankrupt and he emigrated to America. .

A.B. Gowan's Yard

Soon after inheriting the Berwick shipyard, Arthur Byram Gowan negotiated a forty-year lease on the yard, to make it worth his while to make improvements including the building of a slipway that would allow vessels to be hauled up into the yard for repair.

Around four sailing vessels of various types and sizes were built per year, including brigs, clippers, schooners, sloops and smacks.

The launch of one of Gowan's vessels was reported in Soulby's Ulverston Advertiser, of 5th July 1860:

“SHIP LAUNCH.—On Saturday afternoon last, a beautiful schooner, named the *Bridget Smith*, was launched from the building-yard of Messrs. A. B. Gowan & Son, shipbuilders, Berwick. About four o'clock a large crowd, including a number of ladies and gentlemen of the town and neighbourhood, assembled in the yard, on the Quay Walls, and on the adjoining quay, to witness the launch; and a little before five all preliminaries having been satisfactorily arranged, the vessel gracefully glided into the water—the ceremony of "christening" being performed in gallant style by Miss Ramsey, Lilburn Grange. Loud cheers hailed the first movement of the vessel on the ways, and they were vociferously repeated when she dropped anchor in the middle of the stream. She is to sail, we believe, from Barrow, and is the property of the same owners who have purchased the last three or four vessels built by Messrs. Gowan. She is a handsome and substantial craft; well adapted for carrying, and reflects much credit on the builders.”

Arthur Byram Gowan died in 1867 and the business was taken over by his son, also called Arthur Byram Gowan, who made further improvements to the yard in the 1870s.

In 1877, Arthur went into partnership with John Wilson, a former shipyard manager from Tyneside who had experience of building iron ships, and they converted the yard to building in iron. Until then, all the vessels built in Berwick had been made of wood.

The firm, now called Gowan and Wilson, launched four iron-hulled vessels in total, two of which, the Herrera and the Montanez, were the biggest vessels ever built at Berwick.

Unfortunately, there was a rapid downturn in the shipbuilding industry and the yard went into receivership and closed at the end of 1878.

The shallow depth of the Tweed and the position of the Berwick shipyard, hemmed in between the Quay Walls and the river meant that the site would never be suitable for building large vessels and the yard lay dormant for over 70 years.

A later yard was set up at Tweedmouth by the firm of Lee and Wight and built three steam-powered fishing vessels including Anglia. Launched *in* 1889, she was probably the first steam drifter built in England, although several had been built in Scotland previously.

William Weatherhead and Sons

The old shipyard of Byram and Gowans remained closed until 1950. On 2nd February that year the Berwick Advertiser announced: "Messrs Wm. Weatherhead and Sons of Cockenzie and Eyemouth have obtained a lease of land at the Berwick Quayside as from February 1st".

Weatherhead's first boatyard was established in 1841 by James Weatherhead, who was born in Tweedmouth in 1814 and had been apprenticed to the local boat-building firm of James Lee. Together with his uncle, James Hall, Weatherhead set up a boat-building business in Eyemouth.

James's eldest son William left in 1880 to set up his own business at Port Seton before moving to Cockenzie. In 1946 the company took over the original family yard at Eyemouth from their cousin James for a nominal fee.

During the Second World War, Weatherhead's had developed a close relationship with Fairmile Marine who specialised in fast steel-hulled motor launches. After the war Fairmile encouraged Weatherhead's to build in steel, but the Cockenzie and Eyemouth yards lacked the expertise and facilities for this.

After receiving: *'one hundred percent support from the Council'* at Berwick, Weatherhead's obtained the lease of the old shipyard area at the Quayside and the first vessel, the motor barge "Naughton" was launched on 16th May 1951.

In August 1953, Weatherhead's yard was sold to the Fairmile Construction Company who continued to run it until 1972.

During that period a wide variety of vessels were built at Berwick including barges, pontoons, fishing boats, tugs, ferries, luxury yachts, launches and some military craft. Berwick-built vessels were to see service throughout the world.

In 1973, Fairmile ended their interest in the Berwick shipyard. Several boats were built under different ownership between 1973 and 1979, when the last vessel, the three-master luxury schooner "Audela" was launched. The Berwick Advertiser of the 5th April 1978 described how, 'Huge crowds watched the launching of the schooner the biggest and certainly the most graceful of any vessel built at the yard'.

The demolition of the yard's crane the following year signalled the end of shipbuilding at Berwick.

BERWICK'S WHALING INDUSTRY

Between 1807 and 1837, the port of Berwick was engaged in a small way, in the Greenland whaling industry.

Two whalers were based in Berwick, the "Norfolk" and the "Lively".

The "Lively" was built in New York. After some successful years working alongside "Norfolk", she was caught in ice and lost off Greenland with all hands in April 1826.

The first whale-oil factory was located on Pier Road, but it was later converted to a malting and the processing of the whale blubber was moved to Spittal.

On returning from the Arctic, the vessels dropped the barrels of blubber overboard to float to shore and then be taken to the whale-oil manufactory at Spittal Point. There the blubber was boiled for two or three hours to produce oil that was used for a variety of purposes including in the sail- and rope-making industries and to light the homes of Britain, until the introduction of coal gas in the 1820s.

Whaling was a dangerous business. The ships and their crews faced many dangers including being crushed by pack ice or the risk of fire aboard a vessel filled with inflammable whale blubber. Privation during long voyages and exposure to severe cold could lead to scurvy or frostbite and Spring gales could overwhelm a ship. In 1822, the "Norfolk" had lost her master and three seamen washed overboard in a storm.

Whaling was also an uncertain enterprise. Fortunes could be made, but many more were lost as

For example, after three successful seasons between 1832 and 1834 when the "Norfolk" took a total of 84 whales, the 1835 expedition brought home only one.

The voyage of the "Norfolk" to the Arctic in 1836/37 signalled the end of Berwick's whaling industry.

Many of the crew were from Berwick, Tweedmouth or Spittal, and some were old hands including Thomas Hall, who had been harpooner aboard the vessel for 24 years. She was commanded by Captain George Harrison, who had been master of the "Norfolk" for nine years.

In January 1837, the Norfolk and four other British whaling ships became trapped in pack ice.

Here are some extracts from the diary of Robert Nicholson who was aboard the "Norfolk".

"January 15th 1837 The frost is very severe, and the ice has been pressing to a great height all around us. I must say that everything is mixed with mercy. To look around us anyone would think it impossible for a ship to drift down this Strait in safety in such a body of heavy ice. If anything were to happen to our ship at this time the Lord knows what would become of us for a man could not survive many hours upon the ice owing to the severity of the weather. We have not heard any word from the other three ships."

^January 17th At 7 pm the ice closed very rapidly towards our ship, pieces from four to six feet thick turning one over the other from three to four tons in weight, which put us all in a great alarm. We got our provisions on to the ice, and put our sick men into a boat which we covered over with canvas to keep them from the cold winds and snow as some of them were unable to walk, and it was impossible to get them to any of the other ships."

“January 21st,” The four ships are all in sight today. Our coal is getting scarce.

A fox was seen alongside our ship today but before the gun was got ready he escaped. These animals travel a long way from the land. We are all becoming very weak owing to our poor diet. Most of our men have sore mouths and all are struck out with spots on the legs.”

The “Norfolk” was one of almost 20 whalers caught in the ice that winter and two other whaling ships, the “Lord Gambier” and the “Lady Jane” were sent to search for them.

On March 29th, the “Norfolk” finally escaped from the ice and fortunately met with the “Lord Gambier” the next day.

James Johnson, one of the crew, wrote to his wife: “I have to thank God that I have the opportunity of writing to you again; but if we had not fallen in with supplies from the Lord Gambier we should have been all down. All we had to conduct the ship was fourteen in number, but we came very fast about after receiving fresh food, with the help of God.”

Re-provisioned, the “Norfolk” set sail southwards.

The Berwick Advertiser of 4th May 1837 described the arrival of the “Norfolk” in her home port:

“The news that she was in sight flew like lightening, the surgeon and some of the crew landed at the pier which was covered with people from mouth to mouth; and the ramparts speedily became a scene of great bustle, being crowded with a number of delighted gazers. At 6 o’clock Captain Harrison, the surgeon and some of the crew landed at the pier which was covered with people – all anxious to greet the adventurers with a hearty welcome.”

The “Norfolk” had got off lightly having lost only 8 men dead, including Thomas Hall, the veteran harpooner from Tweedmouth. Of the 250 men aboard the five trapped whalers, 140 perished.

The “Norfolk” made one more expedition later in 1837, taking only one whale. She was sold the following year, bringing an end to Berwick’s whaling industry.

170 YEARS OF LIFEBOATS AT BERWICK

Berwick's first lifeboat was stationed at Spittal in 1835, as the result of a disaster that took place within short distance from the shore.

The "Christina" of Stockholm was approaching the Tweed with a cargo of bones, tar and deal boards. Her sails torn she was being driven landward by a fierce north easterly wind. The pilot was unable to get out to her and as she crossed the bar less than a quarter of a mile from the pier she was capsized by a huge wave. As a crowd watched from the shore, the vessel sank within ten minutes, taking her 8 crew with her.

An appeal was made to the Royal Society for the Preservation of Life, which had been formed in 1824, but they could not grant the £200 necessary to station a lifeboat at Berwick. The money was raised instead by local subscription to fund a ten-oared, 20 foot boat.

The lifeboat effected its first rescue in 1837, when the Margaret of Dundee, carrying coals to Scotland from Shields developed a serious leak and her master ran her aground on Spittal beach. Attempts to fire a line to the ship using rockets failed. The lifeboat crew could not be found, so Lt Rhymer of the Revenue Service gathered a scratch crew and reached the vessel to bring off four seamen and two boys. However, a brave attempt to rescue the Margaret's captain by James Swinny, a local blacksmith, was unsuccessful and the captain was swept overboard.

Lt Rhymer was awarded the Lloyds Silver Medal for his actions.

The last rescue by that first lifeboat was in January 1853.

The schooner "Gleaner" had lost her bowsprit in heavy seas as she left Berwick for Hartlepool. Forced to turn back, the "Gleaner" was driven onto Spittal Point. Although the lifeboat was now considered to be in a "ruinous condition", the crew of the "Gleaner" were brought off safely in two trips, during which the lifeboat crew had to bale constantly to keep afloat.

The steersman Andrew Davidson, together with crewman John Wilks, had been aboard the lifeboat during her first rescue of the crew of the "Margaret" in 1837. Davidson had taken part in 8 rescues and helped save 32 lives.

Half the cost of a new lifeboat was given by the Royal National Lifeboat Institute, as the renamed Royal Society for the Preservation of Life was now known. The new boat was larger than the first. It was 36 feet long and with twelve oars and raised air cases at front and stern.

It was first called out in 1857 and spent an hour at sea saving the crew of a Dutch vessel carrying wheat from Rostock to Leith.

A lifeboat house was built at Spittal in 1859.

The lifeboat was very active on the night of 26th October that year when the worst storm for 20 years wrecked 96 ships and drove ashore hundreds more vessels around the British coast. Three of these ships were stranded at Spittal, but without loss of life.

A third lifeboat, the "Albert Victor" went into service in 1864 and seven more were to follow.

A new lifeboat house was built beside the ferry landing at Berwick Quayside in 1901, but the lifeboat returned to Spittal in 1919.

The present lifeboat, the "Joy and Charles Beeby" is a Mersey Class boat, supported by an inshore boat named "Howard and Mary Broadfield".

During their 170 years of service, Berwick's lifeboats have saved over 350 lives.

