

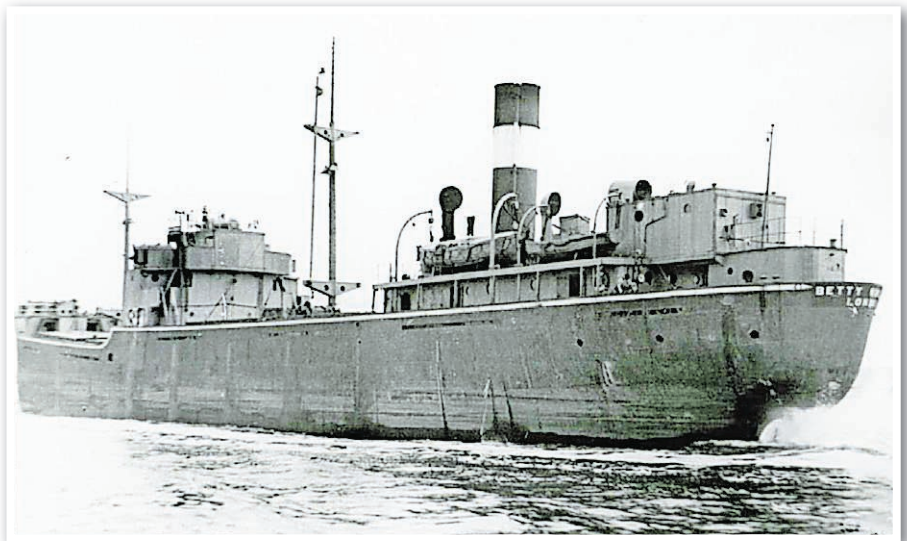
rescue crews of convoy FS 559

■ Convoy saviour: a postcard photograph of the Cromer No 2 Lifeboat, the Harriet Dixon, which shared in the rescue of crewmen from the Estonian-registered Taara. The crew and shore helpers pictured include no fewer than 11 men who took part in the 1941 rescue, including Henry Blogg, seventh from the right, and Second Coxswain Jack Davies, seventh from the left, who was awarded a Silver Medal for his part in the convoy rescue.



“ I don't know how he got alongside because at that time it was all white water - nothing more or less ”

■ Below, Scars of war: H F Bailey displaying her damaged bows while undergoing repairs at Oulton Broad following her August 1941 heroics.



■ Above, Ill-fated: the SS Betty Hindley was lost on her maiden voyage, but all 23 members of her crew were saved by the H F Bailey.

It was the dangerous moment. Any second any one of the heavy seas could have overwhelmed her: Survivors and lifeboatmen crammed aboard watched with alarm as a big sea reared up and rolled towards them.

What might have spelled their destruction actually proved their salvation. Rather than swamping them, the huge wave lifted the lifeboat like a giant hand and dropped her into open water.

It was around 1pm. Blogg's crew had been working ceaselessly for more than three hours during which they had achieved the seemingly impossible.

All told, 134 out of 171 men had been saved, 119 of them by the lifeboats and of those no fewer than 88 owed their lives to the skill and daring of Blogg and his lion-hearted crew.

Naval officers who witnessed the lifeboats' rescue operation were unstinting in their praise. One described it as "do-or-die" effort.

Another, referring to Blogg's daring manoeuvre to reach the Oxshott's survivors, called it "the finest piece of seamanship I have ever seen". As for his crew, they were all "100 per cent men".

In admonishing the convoy commodore, the escort commander and a number of the officers of the merchant vessels involved in the disaster, an Admiralty inquiry commended in the highest terms the "skill, courage and perseverance" exhibited by lifeboat and naval rescuers alike.

Official recognition duly followed. Among a flood of honours were medals for every member of the gallant crew of HMS Vimiera's whaler which had begun the rescue effort before the arrival of the lifeboats.

There were also seven awards made by the RNLI to their own civilian volunteers for what was regarded as one of the most gallant and prolonged services undertaken by lifeboatmen during the Second World War.

The Admiralty clearly concurred. Having listened to "the most superlative adjectives... employed by every witness in describing the magnificent

seamanship" displayed by Blogg, the senior officers forming the Board of Enquiry offered their own epitaph to an exploit that all but beggared belief.

Among so many acts of selfless bravery, the Cromer coxswain's performance was the most "outstanding" display of "fearlessness" of all and was considered worthy of "special recognition".

The result was the award of a British Empire Medal for gallantry to add to his George Cross and, from the RNLI, a record-equalling third Gold Medal.

Yet, heroic though it was, his epic mission had been a close-run thing. A damage assessment following H F Bailey's return to base revealed multiple 'wounds'.

As well as holes puncturing her port bow and buoyancy air cases, the Cromer No 1 Lifeboat's stem had been torn off along with a 20ft stretch of fender and bow padding.

But such things didn't seem to bother Blogg at all. As 'Shrimp' Davies later remarked: "He never ever worried about damaging the lifeboat. It was getting the people that mattered..."

made for the Deerwood on the north-western edge of the Sands.

By then, noted Blogg, "both ends of the ship were under water" with only the bridge showing. From there, 19 survivors watched their approach with a mixture of astonishment and hope. "To say she was a sight for sore eyes would be an understatement," wrote Dick Harman, a Royal Navy seaman drafted to the collier as a gunner.

Once again Blogg faced a struggle to hold the H F Bailey alongside, with the lifeboat rising and falling with the waves "at terrifying speed". As Harman looked on, the boat was thrown against Deerwood's shattered bulwarks tearing off more chunks of wood.

"The coxswain then told us that he intended to heave-to as close as possible to leeward," wrote Harman. "We were then to jump in pairs when he gave the word. When he had got into position, he gave the order and, like the animals into the Ark, two by two, we jumped!"

"He timed the jumps to coincide with a big wave hitting the ship. In this way, the force of the wave helped us to swim clear enough to avoid the backwash dashing us against the ship's side."

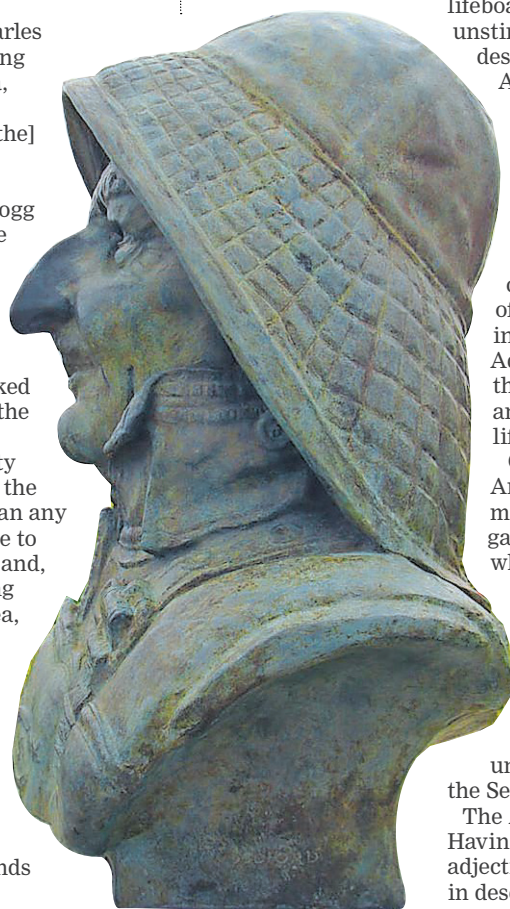
In this way every one of the 19 men were pulled to safety and with them all aboard Blogg moved on to the next ship. Reaching the Aberhill, he found the Gorleston lifeboat, the Louise Stephens,

under her coxswain Charles Johnson, already standing alongside in a heavy sea, taking off 23 survivors from "midships, aft of [the] funnel".

Pushing on across the Middle Haisborough, Blogg came to the Taara where he found Harriet Dixon in the process of rescuing the eight men remaining members of her crew. He, therefore, back-tracked over the sands to reach the last steamer.

As a new ship, the Betty Hindley had stood up to the sea's battering better than any other and Blogg was able to lay alongside the wreck and, with his engines working and head to wind and sea, hold position while the 22 crewmen sheltering on the bridge jumped aboard.

The drama, however, was not quite over yet. As the lifeboat, weighed down by 41 extra bodies, drew away she bumped onto the sands twice before grounding.



■ Above, Saved: Robert Pickering was Chief Officer of the Oxshott and one of those rescued by the H F Bailey.