

James Beeching 1788-1858

James Beeching was born at Bexhill in Sussex in 1788 to a family who had connections with the smuggling trade and served an apprenticeship in nearby Hastings as a boat builder. In 1809, he married Martha Thwaites (1789-1831), daughter of shipowner Thomas Thwaites - they went on to have nine children. Beeching and a partner ran a shipbuilding yard in Hastings for several years until it went bust in 1816 and was purchased by Thomas Thwaites. He then went over to Flushing in the Netherlands, and built many craft, including several involved in the English smuggling trade such as the famous smuggling cutter known as "*Big Jane*", launched in 1819.

He eventually returned to Great Yarmouth and began to build beach yawls and fishing boats and eventually produced a lifeboat for Capt. Manby of Gorleston.

In the first half of the 19th century, the overall condition of Britain's lifeboats was found by the admiralty to be very unsatisfactory. In 1848, of the 100 boats available only 55 were found to be in good repair and many of these were compromised by being of too heavy construction; 21 boats were found to be unfit for use. Lifeboat design was not standardised and the boats available, though an improvement on ordinary vessels, were still all too vulnerable to the inrush of water on heavy seas which could lead to capsizing and loss of life amongst crews. Hence, in 1851, attempts were made, under the auspices of Albert the Prince Consort, to revive the activity of the National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck, the affairs of which had fallen to such a low ebb. A competition was initiated by the Admiralty for a new, improved lifeboat which would meet criteria of: (a) being self-righting, (b) being of lighter construction than before and easier to launch and transport, (c) able to free itself of water faster (i.e. self-draining) and (d) lower cost.

Fig. 1.

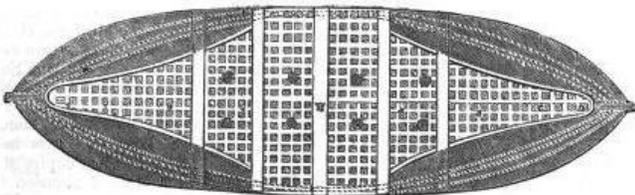


Fig. 2.

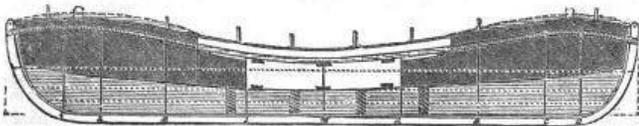
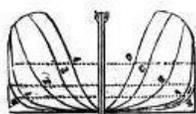
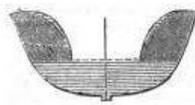


Fig. 3.



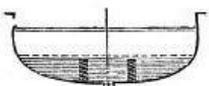
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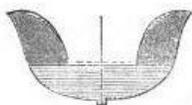
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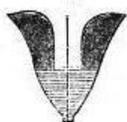
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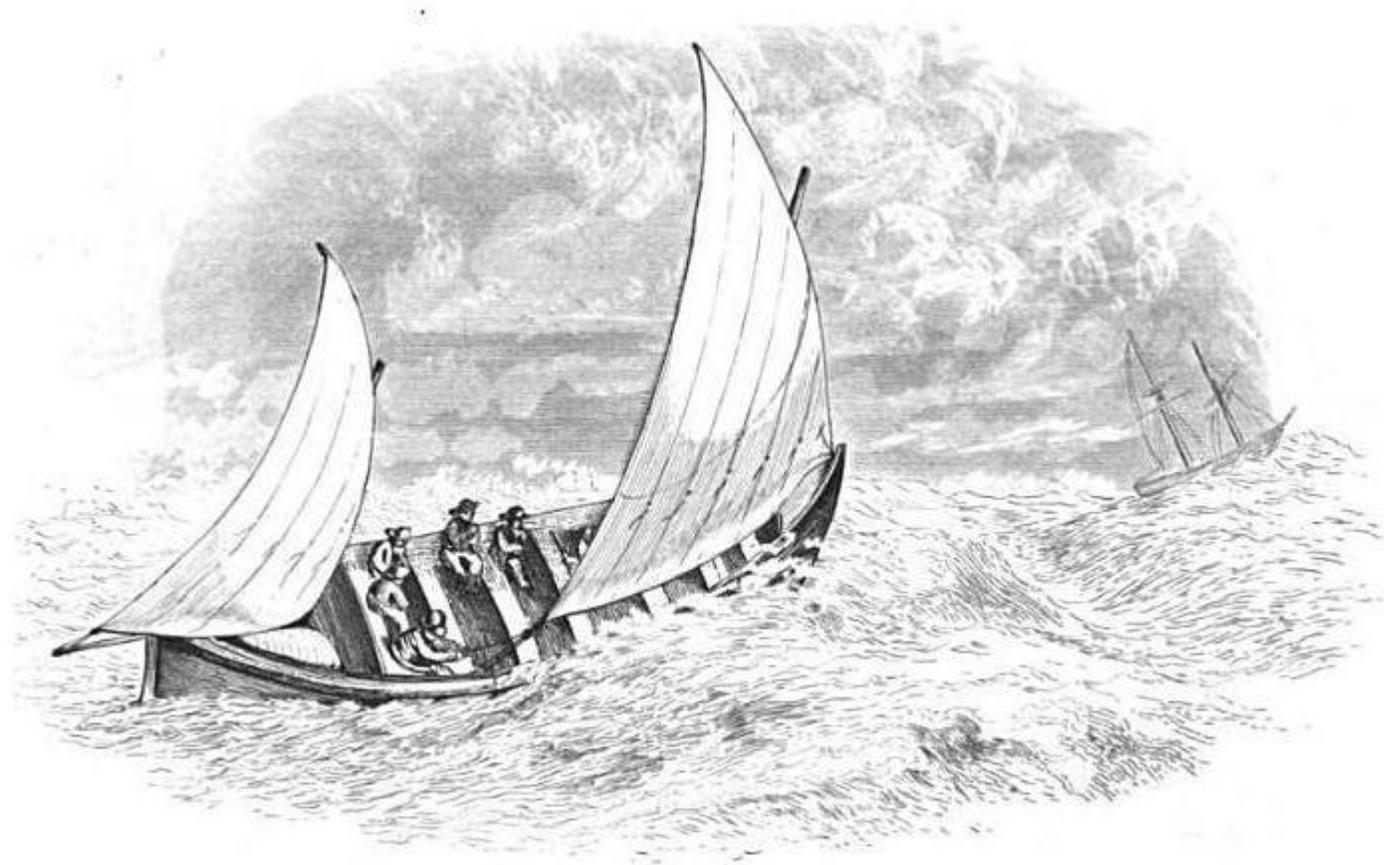
The Duke of Northumberland, president of the Institution, offered to fund a prize of £100 for the best scale model of a new lifeboat, and another £100 towards the cost of building it. Out of 280 models sent in from all parts of the world (a selection of which were displayed at the famous Crystal Palace exhibition of 1851), Beeching's "self-righting" design was awarded the prize. With a few slight modifications made by James Peake, who was a master shipwright at Woolwich Dockyard and one of the competition judges, this design became the standard model for the new fleet of lifeboats acquired by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. It was known as the Beeching-Peake SR (self-righting) lifeboat.

Legacy

Beeching's self-righting lifeboat, together with other changes instituted by the RNLI, greatly improved Britain's lifeboat service in the latter half of the 19th century. The number of boats was increased from 96 in 1850 to 242 in 1874, and their improved reliability contributed to the saving of countless lives of both mariners and lifeboatmen.

James Beeching died on 7 June 1858, aged 70. The firm, "Beeching Brothers" (founded in 1795) continued to build ships in Great Yarmouth after his death well into the 20th century, including a number of 'Norfolk & Suffolk' type lifeboats etc. All that have survived had 'joggled timbers' and this includes vessels built by his sons at the Gt. Yarmouth yard that became Beeching Bros and closed in 1919.

Joggled timbers are steamed and cut to fit the plank lands inside clinker boats. The process is quite unusual as it implies building the hull 'back to front' - putting the timbers in beside the moulds before the planking, instead of planking up around moulds and then fitting the timbers last. This would make an open beach boat hull more resistant to the 'wringing' effect that could be imposed by anything up to three masts. Conversely, the absence of gaps around the lands to let the water out increases the tendency to rot and makes the timbers virtually impossible to replace in later life.



James Beeching's self-righting Lifeboat (1851)