

THE SPALDING SHIPWRECK SOCIETY

by
RUBY HUNT

Left: Mr E. I. Royce Stapleton, one of the most colourful characters to be President (d. 1933).

ALTHOUGH surprisingly little-known locally, the Spalding Shipwreck Society—or to give it its full title, 'The Spalding Society for Mutual Relief in Case of Shipwreck'—is a living reminder of the days when Spalding depended for its prosperity, not on its rich agricultural hinterland, but on the lusty shipping trade attracted here by the navigable Welland. Way back in the 14th century the Prior of Spalding had wines and delicacies unloaded on to a wharf near his summer residence, Wykeham Abbey, and many a fine fenland church owed its massive structure to barges ferrying Ancaster stone between Stamford and Spalding. But it was not until after the widening of the river by the Drainage Adventurers that Spalding's trading importance really grew.

By the middle of the 19th century as many as 500 loaded vessels annually plied their way up and down the Welland, and the establishment of sturdy granaries and wealthy merchants' houses on the riverside were proof of the town's growing prosperity. Although Fossdyke herrings were no longer sold from the steps at the bottom of Herring Lane and oysters, once plentiful on the Lincolnshire coast, had vanished from the Fish Market in Double Street, Spalding gradually assumed the robust and jovial hardiness of a port town—although one which, despite repeated protests, was always designated as a sub-port to Boston.

Riverside porters bustled about, loading and unloading not only coastal-borne cargo but timber from the Baltic and produce from many a foreign soil. Sometimes the river was frozen for weeks on end and schooners and billy-boys, as the local barges were

called, were fast packed together as far as the town's High Bridge. The bustling activity was stilled and sea-going crews and bargees alike hung around waiting for the welcome thaw. In the Market Place, the old White Hart, aware of the influx of these restive crews, placed the Calcutta Room at their disposal, but it was in the riverside pubs that these stranded seafarers found solace for as long as the money lasted. Financial security was a chancy affair and it was against this uncertain background, long before the days of Social Security, that the Friendly Societies began to flourish as a means of self-help in times of dire distress.

The Spalding Shipwreck Society, formed in 1844, was one of 33 similar organisations throughout the country but today only three are believed to remain, the other two being Bristol and Boston based. The aims of the Association were clearly set out in a list of 27 Rules which, with slight amendments in 1938, remain the same as when they were first promulgated over 130 years ago. Compensation, usually to the total of £10, was and is assured to any seaman deprived by shipwreck and, should loss of life occur, the widow is granted a lifetime's pension of 1s per week or £10 in settlement of same. In 1913 the passing of the Unmarried or Widowers Resolution assured the next of kin of similar sympathetic consideration.

By present standards the compensation is but a token gesture. But in the Society's early days the benefit of the pension is evident by the alacrity with which the claims were made. Society members must have attained the age of 16 and fall into one of two categories—Benefit or Honorary. The former consists of those whose

livelihood came from the sea while the latter is made up of local people whose seafaring interests are fostered through an interest in the Society's welfare. Originally, Benefit members whose fully paid up subscription had been overset by no claim over the previous ten years were, by the payment of threepence at the March Quarterly meeting, entitled to a bonus of a year's free subscription. Today, members so qualified pay 15 new pence, those whose length of membership is shorter 40p, while the subscription levied on Honorary members is 35p per year.

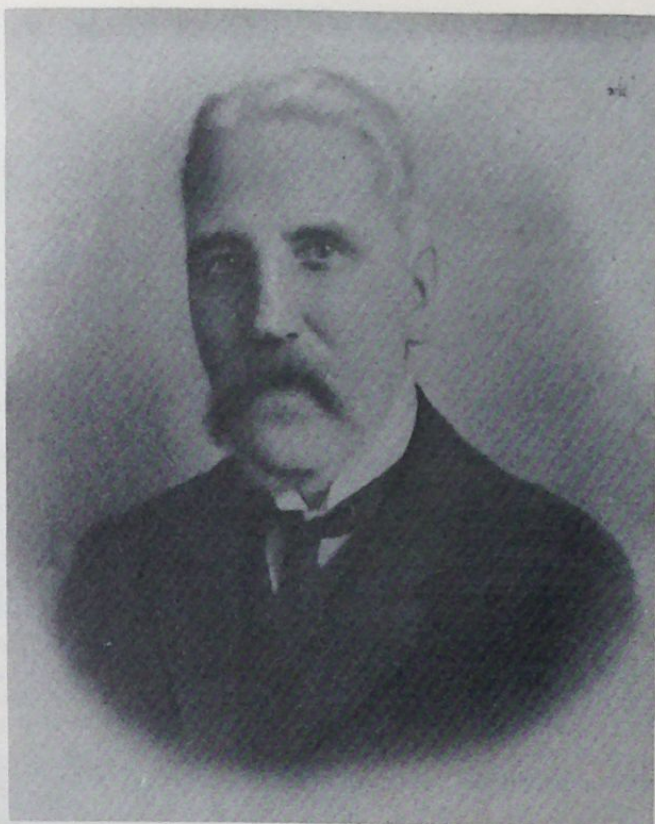
SWEARING

A newly joined Benefit member is expected to pay sixpence for a Book of Rules, one of which states that fines and penalties will be strictly enforced "*should any member on a Quarterly Night swear or in any way disturb the order of the Society after silence has been demanded by the Chairman*". While somewhat of an anachronism today, the rule was probably frequently invoked when hard drinking old salts came swarming into port, often having left their boats at Weston when the tide was too low to get into Spalding, and walked all the way to their mecca—a riverside pub in Albion Street. The street, once known as Bark Row, originally boasted two hostelleries, the Ship Active and the Ship Albion and it was to the swinging sign of the latter that the sailors directed their steps.

Maybe the word Albion—synonymous with England—reminded them that they were home or maybe the beer was better for the old inn, part of which dates from the early part of the 18th century, once had its own brewery. Where better then to obtain a pint in exchange for the threepenny tear-off slips once to be found on all membership receipts? Or for those of more demanding palate to hoard their tickets and eventually claim a bottle of the 'hard stuff' for 12s 6d? Today the Ship Albion is still the Society's Headquarters and since 1844 landlords have accommodated members in the same room in which it all began. The Inn and the 'Shipwreck' have always been intertwined. Before the turn of the century, Benefit member Robert Hutchinson married the landlord's daughter, Ellen Draper, and in 1850 a Mr Thomas Draper acted as President of the Society.

Management of the Society rests in the hands of a President, a Committee of nine Spalding residents, two Stewards, a Secretary and three Trustees. Of the latter, three names run unbrokenly through much of the Society's long history. Mr Samuel Kingston, elected to Trusteeship on the death of his father in 1912, had completed over 60 years service before his resignation in 1972, Mr E. H. Gooch served from 1936 until his death in 1962 and Captain E. J. S. Maples was in office from 1927 (latterly shared with Mr R. Thompson and Mr H. A. C. Moore) until his death in July this year. In 1922 an increase in the number of Boston members necessitated the appointment of a third steward and a Bostonian, Captain William Jessop, was elected. It was highly desirable that stewards should be readily available, not only to collect subscriptions but to personally see to it that sailors compensated for loss at sea used the money for replacement gear instead of yielding to the temptation of squandering it in the nearest alehouse!

By some mischance the earliest Minute Books are missing, but from notes scribbled on a 1912 Balance Sheet we learn that three generations of the Capps family did yeoman service in promoting the Society's welfare, grandfather Samuel being a Founder Member



Cornelius Dalrymple Hall, Hon Secretary of the Society for over 30 years (photo taken 1912).

and grandson William secretary in later years. In passing, it is of interest to note that the father of one of the Society's arbitrators in 1850 was Thomas Albin, Spalding's very first printer.

FINANCE

Financially the Society has thrived although in 1868, with 11 widows and one orphan to support, the annual account showed a loss of £10 5s 3d in spite of subscriptions from 60 sailor members. By 1890 Secretary Capps reported Society assets amounting to £979 and a membership list of 53. Today, 56 Benefit and 49 Honorary members belong to an association with £2,038.20p in hand, a creditable sum when taking into account that since 1939 benefits for loss at sea, pensions and Christmas gifts to widows have amounted to £1,919.35p. The widow's Christmas bonus, which for many years remained at £1 per head, now stands at £12 for each of the five widows on the Society's books.

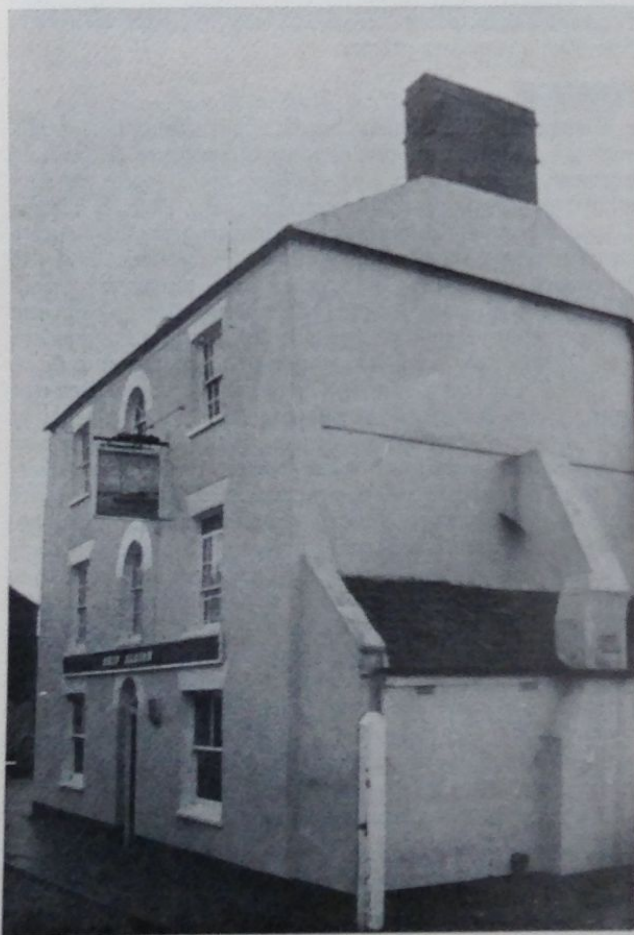
Sailors are notoriously open-hearted and the members of the Shipwreck are no exception. Subscriptions are paid to such sea-orientated charities as the National Life Boat Fund, the Royal Shipwreck Mariners Society and the Port of Hull Orphans Home, but now and then a note of parsimony creeps into the Quarterly reports as in the case of Widow Pakey. In 1912, Mrs Pakey, a pensioner since 1885, was taken into Spalding Infirmary, old and ill. Both Christmas bonus and weekly pension—doubly welcome in that cheerless institution—were immediately withheld and in 1914 she died, 78 week's pension overdue. Belatedly making amends, the Society agreed not only to pay the Board of Guardians funeral bill, but refund, too late, the money due.

Time and again, familiar Spalding names run through annals of the Society. John Hayes had, at his death in 1912, been a member for over 40 years. Member brothers, Robert Arthur and John William

Hayes, owned the steamer *Speedwell* which traded regularly along the East coast until bought by the Admiralty during the First World War and used as part of Hull's boom defences. Mrs Kedward, daughter of Captain Robert presented the Society with a ship's model made by an earlier John Hayes who was a Founder Member. The Gostelows and the Royces were names well known to the Society, being engaged in the river trade over the years. In 1894 the Gostelow's boat, the *Mary Jane*, went down when bringing coals from Newcastle to Spalding Gasworks and the owner's widow was on the Society's books for over 40 years while the fortunes of the Royce family's boats, the *Hope*, *Laurel*, *Violet*, *Roarer* and others, were closely followed by fellow members of the local Friendly Society.

The death in 1925 of Joseph Royce, retired pilot from Fosdyke Bridge, ended a membership which had its beginnings in the late 1870s. Mr Fred Turner, one of today's Honorary Committee group, is a grandson of early member Captain Turner, Harbour Master for many years, while a Turner forebear fought at Trafalgar in 1805. A Turner on the distaff side, born two years before the Society began, married a ship's chandler whose home-made ships biscuits supplemented the salt pork tack stored in most of the vessels lying in Boston Deep's en route for foreign waters. An output of a quarter of a ton a day, made with the aid of horse-driven machinery, seemed proof enough of the sailors' preference for a local product which was said to remain maggotless in any climate. The chandler's name was William Blades whose namesake was President of the

The Ship Albion. Meeting place of the Spalding Shipwreck Society.



Shipwreck after the death of Mr E. I. Royce Stapleton, one of the more colourful characters in the Presidential list. President Blades left the district at the end of the war. In proposing a vote of thanks "to the seamen of the Commonwealth for the work done over the past six years", he declared that he would return for the delayed Centenary dinner "wherever he was between Land's End and John o' Groats".

In 1952, following the death of Mr Cecil White, the Presidential chair was occupied by Mr George F. Birch whose firm's boats were the last to make extensive use of the Welland. In the 1940s, Birch motor barges plied between Spalding and Fosdyke loading and unloading larger vessels which then went on to Hull. One of their earlier vessels, 'The Lizzie and Annie'—named after daughters of the family—was first registered in 1877, converted from steam to motor power in 1912 and eventually had new engines installed in 1935 when she had already plied her trade of gravel carrying from Hull to Bridlington for many a year. Of all the names belonging to the Birch boats—the *Agriculture*, *Pride of Welland* and those named after female members of the family, that of the *Mary Birch* made most inroads into the Shipwreck's funds for on two occasions, in 1947 and again in 1954, crew members Strickson and Jessop claimed the £10 re-imbursement paid out after loss at sea. Maize, cotton cake, wheat and the coal which fed the Spalding Gasworks were all ferried up the Welland and the *Fern*, skippered by its Spalding owner, Captain J. C. Atkins, was one of the last to supply the town with this vital commodity. In 1940 most of Spalding's river boats joined the flotilla sent to rescue our troops stranded on the Dunkirk beaches, and from that time onwards shipping on the Welland virtually ceased to exist.

THE SECRETARY

The success of any Association depends largely on the competence of its secretary and in this respect, with one outstanding exception, the Society has been most fortunate. Before the turn of the century, Cornelius Dalrymple Hall accepted the office which he held, unpaid, for over 30 years. A fervent Quaker, often attending Peace Conferences at the Hague, he carried on an auctioneering and shipping agency in New Road. This agency had been started by his father, once a humble carpenter, whose abrasive tongue earned him the nickname of the Wholesome Blister! Mr Hall was well connected on his mother's side, the former Miss Dalrymple claiming 11 relatives in Westminster—seven in the House of Commons and four in the House of Lords. His early reports outline vividly the dangers and difficulties experienced by those whose livelihood is connected with the water. In 1912 poor conditions in the Welland were said to "very much hinder the shipping trade" and a Shipwreck Society's deputation was sent to support the Welland Drainage Trustees proposals to improve the waterflow. That same year, while writing that "the year has been one of the most disastrous to the Mercantile Marine Shipping", resulting in "such wrecks as S.S. Titanic, the Oceana and others" he rejoices that the Society "has been highly favoured at not having a single claim for loss".

During the next two war years, despite the fact that "the Ocean has been strewn with floating mines, making navigation dangerous through having to keep the Lighthouses unlit at night" and that "over 150 steamships and sailing vessels were sunk", the Society suffered only one death and one claim for loss through shipwreck. In 1916 Benefit member Captain B. J. Binks claimed



SOME OLD STANDARDS

Standing (L to R): —, —, J. Sketcher, T. R. Hack, H. R. Wimhurst, J. T. Atton, E. I. R. Stapleton, W. Horton, Captain Turner, B. Pepper.
Sitting (L to R): G. P. Kingston, E. Royce, S. Culpin, Captains Levesley, Chester, Hayes, Mr T. C. Stubbs.



Early
Life Boat
crew

This photograph
hangs in the
Society's
meeting room.

Society members
in the grounds of
Willesby House,
home of
Captain
E. J. S. Maples,
Society Trustee,
1949.





Society members 1976

L to R: G. Hemfrey (Merchant Navy gunner, dc'd). N. Myers (Royal Navy), C. E. Short (Hon Secretary), Captain F. Hall (rtd), F. Turner (great grandson of founder member Captain J. Turner), G. Crunthorn (former landlord of the Ship Albion).

(Photo by courtesy Lincolnshire Free Press).

Mr C. E. Short
reading the minutes,
1958
(Photo by W. Waldock).



Society Dinner 1977
Mr Fred Culpin,
President on left.

the usual £10 re-imbursement from the Shipwreck's funds after his vessel, the *Theodora*, had been wrecked off Flamborough Head. Dutch fishermen took the crew to Rotterdam where the Captain was supplied with new boots by the British Consul. His luck ran out later when his vessel, the three-masted schooner *Lambit*, was wrecked off Happisburgh causing his wife to lose not only her husband but her brother-in-law, a member of the hapless crew.

Dinners were held annually, the only exceptions being some of the war years when not only had "the great European War increased the price of foodstuffs beyond the usual limit" but "the short hours for holding same and the tax on music" added to the difficulties. Presented with a Smoking Cabinet in 1919, the Secretary promised to use it at the dinner to be held after the Allies had signed the Peace Treaty, when Mr W. S. Royce, MP, was to take the Chair—an office he fulfilled on several occasions before his tragic death in London in 1924. Mr Hall died in 1926 and lies buried in the graveyard of the Friends Meeting House, borne thence by Messrs Hayes, Sketcher, Atkin and James—all stalwarts of the Shipwreck Society.

Today's secretary, Mr Charles Edward Short, is a kindly man to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for so much information so readily given. A former Army man awarded the M.S.M. in the First World War, Mr Short was appointed Hon Secretary of the Shipwreck in 1937 and has rubbed shoulders not only with the river men but sea-going members such as Captain J. A. J. Williams of Donington, Commodore of Convoys during the '39-'45 war and Captain Frederick Hall, former skipper of the largest crude oil tanker ever built in Britain, the 100,000 ton *British Admiral*. Legal problems present no problems to a man who, for almost 40 years, was managing clerk to Messrs Maples and Son, Solicitors, while, on the lighter side, one of his pleasures is in arranging the Annual Dinner when once again the pictures taken when old salts lived in and sailed from the town are hung around the walls of the old Ship Albion. Although the cost of the dinner has rocketed—in 1938 a menu of roast pork, beef, boiled mutton and caper sauce, steak and kidney pie, vegetables, plum pudding, pastries, cheese and biscuits and celery could be had for 2s 6d per head—one of the requirements when fixing the date is still that "the tide is right" so that those who still earn their livelihood on the water can be home for the great occasion.

Today's Vice President, Mr Fred Oliver Levesley is the grandson of Master Mariner George Levesley who, on a note scribbled on a Balance Sheet of 1903, is referred to as "the grand old man of the Society". Before becoming his own master, he was captain of a boat belonging to a Spalding brewer named Henry Bugg whose son later changed the name to Burg. Mr Bugg's boat often sailed from Fosdyke to the Continent in search of cheap spirits and tobacco at a time when smuggling seems to have been somewhat of a growth industry in this part of the world although hauls were occasionally made by the often hoodwinked revenue authorities.

Although few of today's members are full-time seamen working in the Wash, the President, Mr Fred Culpin, comes of sea-faring stock, some of whom were founder members of the Society. Himself a lively nonagenarian, he well recalls when it was possible to walk from deck to deck of boats tightly packing the Welland from High Bridge to Chain Bridge and remembers, as a schoolboy, stuffing his pockets with sweet locust beans thrown on to the river bank by the Egyptian crew of



Two old salts—George Strickson and Harry Brown—celebrating in 1958.

a boat supplying the cattle spice manufacturers who occupied the premises now known as Plowman and Sons. He can also vouch for the one time appearance of whales in the Wash, having had a frightening encounter with one of the bottle-nosed Grampus variety when a passenger in a boat on an expedition to the Deep.

Mr Culpin's great grandfather Richard built a huge warehouse in Double Street in which he kept merchandise brought by his boat from Hull and Newcastle—the boat which was reputed to have carried the wood used to build the old Fosdyke Bridge, long before the railways came. A great character, who always carried his gold in a long seaman's stocking, he once attended an auction in Hull and bid for an old brougham which the auctioneer commanded be knocked down 'to the old tar'. Known as Culpin's Black Trooper, it was landed at the old Gasworks Quay where a cheering crowd saw it pulled through the town by a wagon and horses, great grandfather sitting aloft. Mrs Culpin often accompanied her husband on his voyages when her commodious crinoline was sometimes used to conceal dutiable goods from the prying eyes of frustrated Customs officials. She was one of several women who went with their husbands to sea. One of the most colourful, a Mrs Payne, often took the tiller in wet weather with umbrella aloft—much to the delight of Spalding's youths who were always on the look-out for the formidable lady!

Today the Shipwreck Society needs an influx of younger members, not only to carry on a great tradition but to keep alive the memory of old seafarers such as great grandfather Culpin whose epitaph in Spalding's churchyard speaks for them all—

*"My sails are split,
My main mast gone,
My soul has fled the deck,
And here beneath this cold damp stone
My body lies a wreck.
But still the promise stands secure
It shall repeated be
To sail the seas of endless bliss
To all eternity".*

(Old photographs kindly copied by Mr A. K. James)

Next month:

Lincolnshire & South Humberside Wing
AIR TRAINING CORPS