

TENBY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The 1905 Lifeboat House

by Neil Westerman

The 1905 lifeboat house is the fourth boathouse to be used by the RNLI to house the Tenby lifeboat. The earliest one is located on the harbour beach at Penniless Cove against the harbour wall. The second boathouse was located on the path leading to the Castle Sands (built 1862/1863, demolished 1895), while the third is located further down the same path closer to the beach (built 1895). This boathouse can still be seen today and is identified with a blue plaque. In 1902 the boathouse had to be modified to accommodate the new heavier and larger lifeboat the 'William and Mary Devey'. Launching of the lifeboats from the Castle Sands was a complicated and costly affair. The boat had to be hauled on a launching carriage across the beach by a large number of paid helpers (at least forty). The state of the tide and prevailing weather conditions were factors that affected launches. This state of affairs was clearly unsatisfactory and the local management committee of the RNLI identified the need for a new and better-located boathouse that led eventually to the construction of the fourth lifeboat house at Tenby in 1904/1905.

In 1904 a lease was granted by Tenby Corporation with the consent of Sir Charles and Lady Philipps, the owners of the Castle Hill for the construction of a boathouse and slip on the northern side of the Castle Hill near Butler's Horse. Work commenced in August 1904 and was completed in July 1905. The chief engineer of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution Mr W. T. Douglas who visited Tenby to inspect the work in July 1905 designed the structure.

The station consists of a boathouse and launching slipway reached from the pathway leading to the rocks. A flight of steps ascends to a 140 feet long, 5ft 6ins wide gangway with railings on each side that leads to the boathouse. Originally the boathouse stood on wooden piles 14ins by 14ins driven 15 to 17 feet into the sand. The floor of the house is 42 feet above the level of the beach and the roof 58 feet. The boathouse was constructed of pitch pine with an outer lining of galvanised iron. The interior dimensions in 1905 were 52 feet by 20 feet. The upper part of the floor is level and on this stood a powerful winch fitted with a wire hawser to raise and lower the lifeboat. At the sea end a ladder leads to the loft provided for the use of the men while waiting to be called on for service. Looking out to sea over the main entrance is a window before which was fixed a powerful gas light and reflector to light the slipway. The building was well lighted by side windows and the large skylight along with four large gas lamps. The lower part of the floor of the house is on an incline fitted with a keelway of steel joists and rollers for the boat to run on. A trapdoor lead to a stage underneath the boathouse from which the keel of the boat could be examined. The boathouse was provided with a water supply.

The launching slipway has a total length of 333 feet at a gradient of one foot in eight. Like the boathouse supports the slipway was originally constructed of wood. Jarrah and Karri wood was used throughout for the 12ins by 12ins piles with joists and cross braces. One side of the slip is decked and protected by a railing for about half its length the other side being open. A particularly long slipway was needed to reach the low water mark.

The contractor was Mr William Fasey of Manor Park, Essex who paid frequent visits to Tenby during construction. His son Mr William Fasey, junior, was resident in Tenby the whole time. The engineer in charge of the work on behalf of the RNLI was Mr Damer Dawson. The cost of construction of the boathouse and slipway was £3872.

The Tenby and County News newspaper reported that some time after the work had begun objections were raised to the dis-figuration of the bay which it was said that the structure would cause. The shape of and materials used for the boathouse also came in for criticism. The town council discussed the objections but the original plans were proceeded with without alteration. The paper commented that 'It may be frankly conceded that the structure is not a thing of beauty' (Tenby and County News July 5, 1905).

The inauguration of the new station took place on Thursday July 6, 1905. At 1530 hours the lifeboat was launched from the old station on the Castle Beach and at 1615 the boat was made fast to the hawser and winched up the slipway. The first launch of the lifeboat from the slipway was then made with special guests Dr. Bryant (Hon. Secretary), Captain Chadwick R.N., Mr Dawson and Mr Fasey onboard. The boat was then re-housed in the new boathouse. The Tenby and County News reported that the launch was watched by 'many hundreds – we may perhaps say thousands – of spectators on the Castle Hill'.

During the one hundred years the station was operational major alterations were made to the boathouse and slipway. For example in the early 1920's the boathouse was extended forward and the slip strengthened while in the late seventies a new galvanised steel sub structure was built beneath the boathouse and the slipway was replaced. An extension was also built on one side of the boathouse.

The 1895 Lifeboat House

The disused lifeboat house that stands at the bottom of the slip to the Castle Sands was erected in 1895. It is the third lifeboat house to be built in Tenby and replaced an earlier boathouse demolished the same year. Mr W. T. Douglas, responsible for the design of the 1905 lifeboat house, was also the architect responsible for the 1895 building. The contract to demolish the second lifeboat house and erect the new building was awarded to local builder Mr William Davies of 15 Culver Park, Tenby in July 1895. The building work was completed by December the same year. Mr W. T. Douglas visited Tenby to inspect the station in December 1895 and expressed himself 'well pleased' with the new structure.

The structure is built of local limestone in rock faced ashlar. The recessed south front, with its limestone elliptic arches pierced by solid segmental-headed windows has a very striking effect. The high doors at each end are a feature. The floor of the building is of concrete twelve inches thick and the roof open timbered. A floored loft covers a portion of the lower end for use as storage. At the seaward end a wooden slip thirty-one feet long made of pitch pine was provided (since removed). Pembrokeshire County Council now owns the disused building. (N.W.).

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