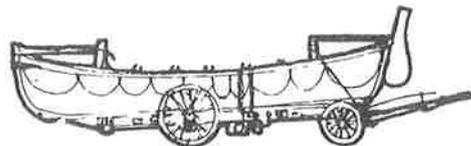


Bristol Life-boat Museum

Ginny Barnfield

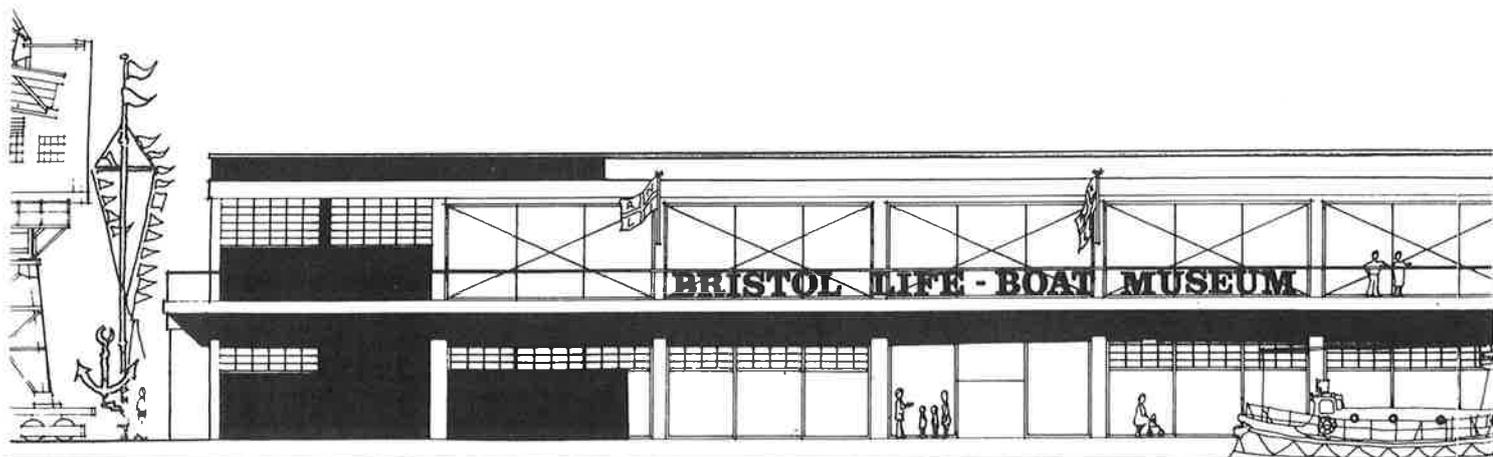


The National Life-boat Museum has leased from Bristol City Council the ground floor of the disused dockside transit shed, L Shed as it was formerly known, adjoining the City's own Industrial Museum on Prince's Wharf. With the withdrawal of commercial shipping and the Docks having since been designated a leisure area by the City Council, the museum will be part of the plan to develop a comprehensive maritime recreational centre.

The museum, alongside the Wharf where Brunel's *SS Great Western* was built in Patterson's Dock in 1837, aims to form a representative collection of ex-RNLI lifeboats, together with ancillary equipment such as launching carriages and tractors. Although some individual lifeboats are preserved in their boathouses, such as the surf lifeboat at Poole, Dorset, a station which celebrates its centenary next year, the National Lifeboat Museum is, as its name suggests, the only one of its kind covering the wide range and timespan from the early pulling and sailing days to the modern in-shore lifeboats. Special emphasis is placed on the traditional wooden boats, gradually being withdrawn from service and replaced by GRP (glass-reinforced plastic) and steel models. The permanent display will show the history, development and present work of the RNLI and hopes also to include equipment used by the other rescue organisations, HM Coastguard, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force. It is envisaged that the museum will provide facilities for teaching water safety, and archives library and workshop.

Because it is at present staffed entirely by volunteers the museum is only able to open at weekends and first admitted the public in May 1981, with a temporary exhibition area created at one end of the building. The exhibits include:

- 1 A 19th century horse drawn lifeboat launching carriage, found in an orchard in Kent. This carriage is of the standard RNLI pattern of the period, such as would have been used to launch the *Lizzie Porter*.
 2. *Lizzie Porter*, the 1909 35ft self-righting pulling and sailing lifeboat, from Holy Island and North Sunderland, awaiting restoration. Weighing some 4 tons, plus an additional 2½ tons for the carriage, she required a launching crew of a minimum of 60 people, many of them women and children during her service on Holy Island (1909 – 1925) where there were no horses available. She had a crew of 13 to man her oars and lugsails.
 3. *BASP*, a 1924 single screw petrol engined 45ft Watson cabin class lifeboat which served at Yarmouth, Isle of Wight and Falmouth, Cornwall before entering the reserve fleet. *BASP* was sold out of service in 1955 and her private owner has placed her on permanent loan at the museum, where she is now being restored by a team of volunteers to the 'cosmetic' appearance of 1935. Her unusual name, *BASP*, was derived from the initials of four people whose legacies financed her construction. They were Mr Blackburn, Mrs Armstrong, Mrs Smart Mrs Price.
- Both the above examples show clearly the traditional lifeboat construction of double diagonal Honduras mahogany planking on English oak frames.
4. *Susan Ashley*, a 1948 41ft 6in twin-screw Watson cabin-class lifeboat and the first to be fitted with a Birmabrite alloy superstructure. She served at Sennen Cove, Cornwall until 1972, then as the Barry Dock No 2 lifeboat until 1979. During 1980 she was used as a boarding boat on the Tyne,



NORTH-WEST ELEVATION

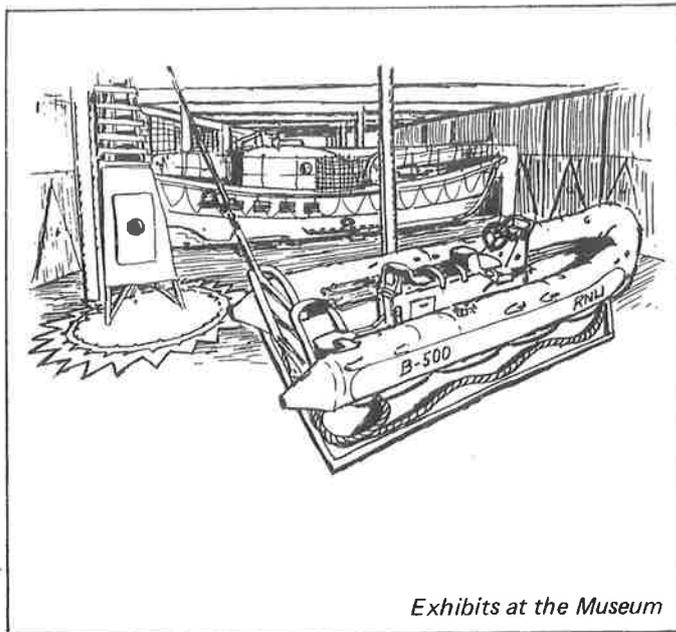
then withdrawn from service and, still in her RNLI colours, arrived at the museum on permanent loan on 17 June 1981. She is gradually being fitted with as much original ancillary equipment as possible and conducted tours of the boat, including the survivors' cabin with its self-heating cans of soup and cocoa, are very popular.

5. The D Class inshore lifeboat, *Blue Peter IV*, purchased from the proceeds of the 1966 Blue Peter appeal, which provided 2 D Class and 2 Atlantic 21 inshore lifeboats for the RNLI.
6. The Atlantic 21 inshore lifeboat B-500, the first of its class, developed by the RNLI with Atlantic College, South Wales in 1970. The wooden hull (replaced by GRP in current models) and twin 40hp motors (now 60hp) gave a speed of 29 knots, unmatched by any previous lifeboat.

Models, line-throwing and life-saving equipment and graphic displays, including many photographs from the RNLI archives, complement the larger exhibits.

The conversion of the building is very far from complete, some £200,000 being required for the ground floor alone. The museum has a three-year option on the first floor, which is currently being used by the Industrial Museum for storage purposes.

The RNLI has welcomed and encouraged the museum project from its inception and, like the RNLI itself, the museum is a registered charity funded by voluntary donations and subscriptions. A Founder Members' Society has been established to enable individuals to support the creation of



Exhibits at the Museum

the Museum. The entrance fee is £5 and the annual membership subscription also £5, with life-membership available for £100. Members will be entitled to free admission and will receive a twice-yearly newsletter plus invitations to special Founders' Days. Admission is at present free to everyone, as insurance requirements make it impossible to charge until the building work is completed, but it is intended that the museum shall eventually be self supporting, with any profits being donated to the RNLI.

