

Lifesaving in action

In 2008, rescue hovercraft launched 60 times and rescued 24 people. In total, RNLI lifeboats launched 8,293 times, rescuing 7,612 people – an average of 21 people a day.

A tragic day

Morecambe hovercraft crew were among the RNLI volunteers called to the tragic scene of the 20 missing Chinese immigrant workers who died in February 2004 after becoming trapped by rising tides while picking cockles in the notoriously dangerous bay. RNLI crews worked for 18 hours, rescuing one man and recovering 11 bodies.

Hovercraft Commander Harry Roberts said: 'The

RNLI volunteer crew worked with the search and rescue helicopter on scene and, after the helicopter found one of those missing, the inshore lifeboat was able to quickly get to the same area and found one person alive. The hovercraft went out to meet the lifeboat and brought that person directly to shore to a waiting ambulance.

'The rest of the rescue was very difficult as we went on to recover bodies from the water,

some of which were young people. They didn't have any safety gear and some of them were naked because they had taken their clothes off to help them swim. It was very distressing for all involved and our hearts go out to the families.'

The search continued the following day and the incident was widely reported in the media. Later reports suggested that another five people were still missing.



Photo: Tony Baverstock



Photo: Nigel Millard

The crew

The lifeboat is the key piece of equipment that the RNLI provides its volunteer crews. There are over 4,500 lifeboat crew members in the UK and RoI. It is thanks to their willingness to exchange leisure, comfort and sleep for cold, wet and fatigue, and to spend many hours of their own time training to become highly skilled and efficient, that such a high proportion of the RNLI's money can be spent on first-class rescue craft and equipment, not on salaries. Without their courage, determination and skill, lives cannot be saved.

Photo: Nigel Millard



RNLI

RESCUE HOVERCRAFT

The RNLI provides, on call, a 24-hour lifeboat search and rescue service to 100 nautical miles out from the coast of the UK and RoI.

Introduced in 2002, the hovercraft has extended the RNLI's ability to carry out its vital rescue work to areas inaccessible to conventional lifeboats.

The hovercraft operates on mud, sand and very shallow water, making it particularly useful for shoreline searches. Transported from location to location by road, hovercraft can launch from any flat area such as a car park or beach, provided there is enough room.

Typically, the hovercraft operates on large areas of tidal mudflats or sand where the surface is too soft to support land vehicles and the water too shallow for boats. Each year, these areas see a number of incidents where people are caught out by the rising tide or trapped in quicksand or soft mud. Unless help is provided rapidly, such situations can result in tragedy.

Until now the only method of rapid access to these areas has been by helicopter, and surface access has been limited to walking using mud mats and crawling boards. Hovercraft can rapidly search large areas of mud, sand and shallow water. Once the casualty has been located, she can settle alongside and provide a large, stable platform.

Different classes of lifeboat and rescue craft are needed for various locations, primarily depending on geographical features, the kind of rescue work that the station is asked to do and the cover provided by neighbouring stations. The RNLI carries out a 5-yearly review of lifeboat stations looking at the incidents they launch to and the changing patterns of marine activities to ensure that the existing and future lifeboat coverage are appropriate.

RNLI designers and engineers continually make improvements to existing craft to meet the changing needs of the lifeboat service and develop new classes of lifeboat and rescue craft as required.



Lifeboats

To find out how to visit our lifeboat stations go to rnli.org.uk/rnli_near_you

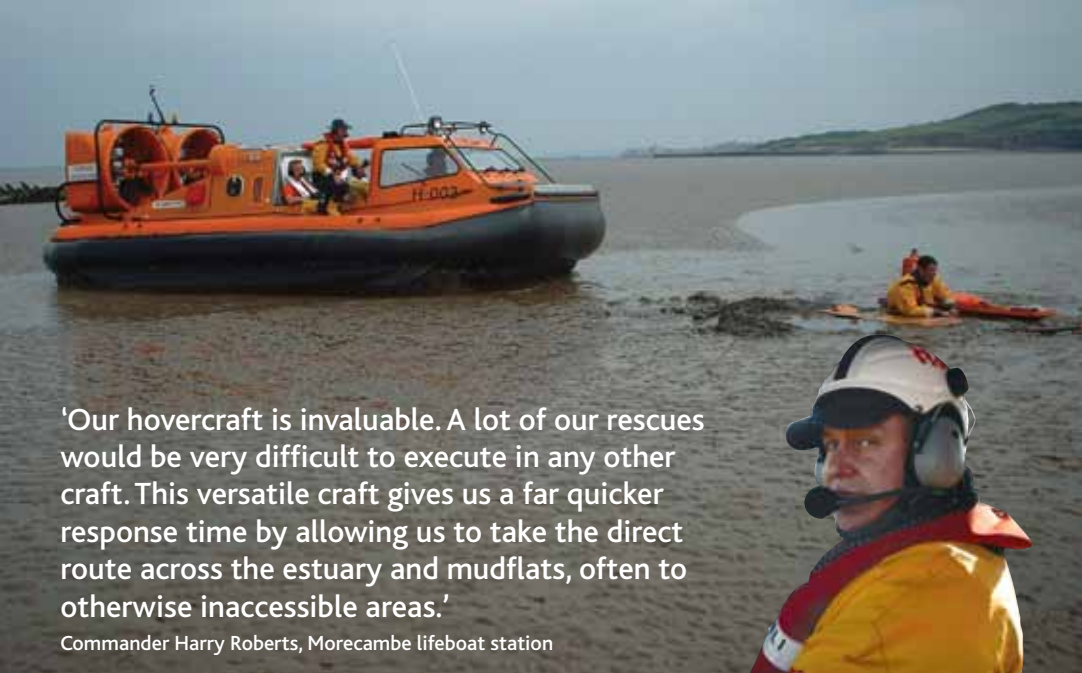
The RNLI is the charity that saves lives at sea

Registered in England and Wales (209603) and Scotland (SCO37736). Charity number CHY 2678 in the Republic of Ireland

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'Our hovercraft is invaluable. A lot of our rescues would be very difficult to execute in any other craft. This versatile craft gives us a far quicker response time by allowing us to take the direct route across the estuary and mudflats, often to otherwise inaccessible areas.'

Commander Harry Roberts, Morecambe lifeboat station

- Date introduced:** 2002
- Displacement:** 3.86 tonnes
- Launch type:** From transporter
- Number in fleet:** 7
- Fuel capacity:** 127 litres
- Length:** 6.88m
- Crew:** 2-4
- Beam/width:** 3.36m
- Max speed:** 30 knots
- Draught/depth:** N/A
- Range/endurance:** 3 hours at full speed
- Construction:** Marine-grade aluminium with moulded fibre reinforced composite
- Engines:** 2 x VW 1.9 turbo diesel
- Survivor capacity:** 6



Photo: Tony Baverstock

The finer details

Introduced into the fleet in 2002, the RNLI's inshore hovercraft has been developed to improve search and rescue capabilities in specific areas, such as tidal mudflats or sand, where conventional techniques are difficult, slow and hazardous.

The RNLI hovercraft has been modified from a basic design. These changes include stretching the original, removing part of the side deck and adding two inflatable sponsons. These provide stability and additional buoyancy and offer a soft edge for survivor recovery. The sponsons can be deflated, reducing the overall width for travel by road on specialist vehicles. The craft's skirt is also higher than the basic design to increase ride height and improve sea-keeping.

Lift is provided by two fans that build up air pressure under the craft, and thrust by two large fans mounted on the back that act in the same way as aeroplane propellers. Steering is provided by aerofoil-shaped rudders located at the rear.



Photo: Nigel Millard

The hovercraft carries specialised mud rescue equipment to release a trapped casualty as well as basic first aid equipment. The craft is kept mounted on its own transporter, which allows it to be rapidly dispatched to wherever it is needed.

In return for their dedication and commitment, the RNLI makes a pledge to its volunteer crew that the rescue equipment is maintained to the highest standards and able to respond to emergencies at sea. The hovercraft refit process sees the entire craft stripped and rebuilt with any part found to be worn, torn or broken being repaired or replaced.



Photo: Nigel Millard



Mersey class



Trent class



Tamar class



Severn class



Tyne class



B class



D class



E class



Inshore rescue hovercraft

All-weather lifeboats

Inshore rescue craft