



RICHARD ALBERT OAKLEY, MBE, MRINA.

Richard Oakley was a quiet modest man and it was only a chance remark that revealed he had been responsible for the saving of many lives.

There does not appear to be any documentation to help build a picture of his early years nor has it been possible to connect his family with the other Oakleys in Lingfield – Dorothy Oakley who served as a VAD in the first World War. The only facts we have are that he was born in 1906, lived in Headland Way in the 1980s and died in March 1988.

From 1918 his working life is well documented.

He joined S.E. Saunders Ltd in Cowes on the Isle of Wight, thus starting both a career of boat building and a life-long association with the Royal National Lifeboat Institution.

The first RNLI boat he worked on was built for Gorleston and was then transferred to Lowestoft. He also became great friends with Uffa Fox, who had also started his career with S.E. Saunders.

In 1928 he joined the RNLI as the only Permanent Assistant Surveyor which meant he had to travel all over the country to deal with hull repairs and saw the construction of over 300 boats, including those which gave protection to the crews, the early boats being entirely open which meant the men were already cold and wet when arriving at the scene of a rescue. In 1936 he became chief hull draughtsman then the title of his post changed to Naval Architect. In 1940 he was appointed Surveyor of Lifeboats. He retired in 1978 but continued on a part-time basis. However, his fame rests on solving the long standing problem of designing a successful self-righting boat and it is for this that he was awarded the MBE in 1959.

Capsizing is a great hazard and for the first thirty years the RNLI had only non-self-righting boats available and then in 1849, following an accident to a South Shields boat in which 20 of a 24-man crew died, the Admiral the Duke of Northumberland, offered a prize for the best model of a lifeboat which was won by James Beeching, a Yarmouth boat-builder, for designing the first self-righting boat which was launched in 1851.

This was to prove a great life saver but it was also to lead to many years of controversy. The problems arose because although the older boats, once capsized, could not be refloated, trapping men beneath them, they were still more stable than the self-righters, the design of which it was felt had compromised other safety features.

The older boats were more stable but the new self-righter meant that men survived a capsized. Unfortunately this did not always work and so the crews' reluctance to sail in them was reinforced. The RNLI decided to confine the self-righters to inshore work, using the large boats for rescues out at sea.

At the start of the second World War the matter had not been resolved but after 1945 the RNLI was faced with having to restore a fleet which had deteriorated during hostilities and a long spell of excessively bad weather resulting in a rising death rate concentrated attention once more on finding a way to marry the stability of the non-self-righting boat with the ability of the self-righter to recover from a capsized without the aid of the crew. This had meant a large watertight deckhouse and a low vertical centre of gravity.

In 1953 Richard Oakley was appointed to lead the team to design such a vessel. The specification was for a 37ft. boat (11 m) with an 11ft 6 in (3.51 m) beam. It was to be designed to launch from an open beach and to be taken to the launch site on a tracked carriage which meant that as well as reconciling the differences of self-righting and stability attention had to be given to the weight restriction of 9.5 tons.

Oakley's solution was to incorporate a self-filling and draining water ballast tank into the double bottom below the engine room and adding a second immediately under the deck into which, by the arrangement of self-operating valves, ballast was transferred as the boat rolled over. The offset weight of the transferred ballast, together with the asymmetry in the engine casing provided the self-righting capability.

The prototype, named the *J.G. Graves of Sheffield I*, was launched in 1954 and sent to Scarborough in 1958 after various tests had been completed. This is the boat which is now on display at the Chatham Dockyard

The fleet, built between 1958 and 1971, was in service until 1993, during which time various improvements were made, not least the addition of radar, which necessitated further tests to ensure this did not affect the self-righting ability.

In 1962 the RNLI extended the Oakley 37 design to a larger vessel for slipway launching or lying afloat and so the Oakley 48 was born.

All of the RNLI's fleet became self-righting and Richard Oakley received many letters of appreciation from coxswains.

Over the intervening years further improvements have been made, better and safer boats have been built and equipment and clothing design has advanced, all adding to the comfort and safety of the crews. However, nothing can ensure complete safety in such an environment but Oakley's solution of reconciling stability with self-righting resulted in a huge fall in fatalities.

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Sources

RNLI Archives

RNLI Magazine *The Lifeboat* (which has now been digitalised)

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