



# Granite Journal

*The University of Aberdeen Postgraduate Interdisciplinary Journal*

---

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

## Lifeboats in cities: engaging the public through a cross-class, charitable appeal (1891-1897)

**Catherine Malvina Smith**, Department of History, University of Aberdeen

---

**Abstract:** This article looks at the establishment and initial growth of the Lifeboat Saturday Movement (LSM) in Manchester, 1891, by Charles Macara, a cotton businessman. The LSM encouraged public support and knowledge of the work of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) and its mission within cities. The movement involved campaigns which often lasted for several days, consisting of street parades, factory and door-to-door collecting. The London-based RNLI central committee, composed of a cohort of ‘royal, aristocratic, and ecclesial personages’ who oversaw distant coastal lifeboat stations, were not enthused about the idea of shifting their fundraising appeal from its traditionally upper-class reliance on donations and subscriptions. Consequently, the LSM grew somewhat separately from the RNLI until, much to Macara’s frustration, the movement was taken over by the RNLI committee, and the headquarters moved to London in 1896. To understand the process whereby the RNLI came to embrace the broad-based public fundraising appeal, we first look at how the RNLI was funded initially, and who Macara was and in what ways he wanted to change how RNLI funding worked. We then study the early growth of the LSM, reflecting on what the LSM had in common with contemporary charitable campaigns.

---

**Keywords:** public engagement, charity, RNLI, Charles Macara, LSM, fundraising

---



# 1 Introduction

The Lifeboat Saturday Movement (LSM), which started in Manchester in 1891, was set against the backdrop of wider changes in public fundraising appeals, though it has been largely ignored by historians. However, there is some scope within recent historiography outlined in this introductory section to relate the LSM to other charitable schemes. Overall, this article introduces how the LSM targeted fundraising across classes and aimed not only to raise money for lifeboatmen and their families, but also to increase public awareness of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI). The central figure of the LSM was its founder, Charles Macara, who was a cotton merchant based in Manchester. During the late Victorian period, more charities were created and appealed to middle and working-class municipal communities for money; however, such campaigns were usually organised by members of the upper class. As a result of competition, organisations saw a change towards what historians Sarah Roddy, Julie-Marie Strange and Bertrand Taithe have called ‘charitable consumption’, where donors often received a token gift in return for their contribution, including receiving some kind of entertainment value (Roddy et al. 2018). The LSM was part of the change toward expecting something in return for a donation.

Lifeboat Saturdays were patriotic occasions, and the processions included the crowds singing ‘God Save the Queen’ and ‘Rule Britannia’. Local crews and lifeboats were brought to the cities to participate in street collecting processions, and union flags were flown from the boats. For many spectators, the LSM events would have been the first time they saw a lifeboatman, and knowledge of the function of the RNLI was brought to city people who had only a peripheral understanding of lifesaving work. If there was a convenient place to do so, such as a large pond, the crew would perform a demonstration of some of their skills or the functions of the boats and other technologies (such as lifejackets) in front of large crowds. Schoolchildren and other local societies also took part in the parades. Collection boxes were placed across the town or city, often for three days or more, and collecting tins on poles were held during the processions to reach people watching from the tops of trams or first-floor windows.



Aside from being part of the ‘charitable consumption’ shift, the LSM was modelled on a similar city-based working-class hospital contributory ‘Saturday’ welfare fundraising scheme founded in the 1870s. Social historian Steven Cherry has written on how collections at church services, known as ‘Hospital Sundays’ or ‘Hospital Saturdays’, which included house-to-house and street collections or factory-based ‘works collections’ of overtime wages, interacted with one another to raise money for hospitals. Cherry describes the movement overall as ‘alarmist, top-downwards and class-polarised’ (Cherry 2000, p.461-488). As has been alluded to, the LSM followed a similar pattern of being led by the upper-class. Regardless, the LSM included *parade-style* street collections, which were a new idea.

Throughout this article, it is worth bearing in mind the quote by public health historian Martin Gorsky who examined British hospital contributory schemes including Hospital Saturdays: ‘Philanthropy was inherently insufficient and geographically uneven, because of its spontaneous nature, its reliance on wealthy givers, and its lack of coordinating mechanisms meant that supply could not match demand’. (Gorsky 2020, p.181-220). The nature of the LSM meant it could never reach the entire public in an equal manner, and although it attempted to appeal to a wider public audience, it was still maintained by wealthy persons who could afford the time to organise public events. Additionally, the associated cost of street collecting could also be high – for example, parades depended on the weather to go ahead and required a great deal of advertising to be successful.

## 2 RNLI Funding Prior to the LSM

The forerunner to the RNLI, The National Institution for the Preservation of Life and Property From Shipwreck, was founded in 1824 ‘for the preservation of human life from the perils of the sea’ (Hillary 1823, p.1). William Hillary and Thomas Wilson, the prime movers of the Institution, lobbied the aristocracy to gather funds for the new society, which boasted six royal patrons. The Institution aimed to support the saving of life and property from shipwreck, including awarding medals to persons who participated in rescues, regardless of whether they had any prior connection to the Institution. It built on a pre-existing network of lifeboat stations and societies across the country, many of



which, at least formally, remained independent. Over the next thirty years, the initially growing finances of the Institution gradually dissipated, and the original, enthusiastic committee became inattentive to new socio-cultural and economic circumstances that the charity could, perhaps, have responded to in order to remain viable.

From 1841 to 1854, there were no structured attempts from the national lifeboat institution to appeal to a wider funding audience, and the income of the Institution was extremely low. From 1849-1850, the income was only £354 17s 6d, and less than 12 lifeboats were usable (out of 96) (Lewis 1874, p.20-21). Although the Institution remained an independent organisation, the Board of Trade later granted funds from the Mercantile Marine Fund to the newly renamed Royal National Lifeboat Institution for fifteen years (1854-1869). The number of stations and lifeboats grew rapidly with the government funding, and these new responsibilities meant more money was required to sustain the Institution, with the expenditure far exceeding the revenue by 1890.

### 3 Charles Macara and the Creation of the LSM

Charles Macara was a Fife-born businessman who moved to Manchester in 1862 and was involved in cotton industrial disputes throughout his work as a cotton spinner and textile merchant. In 1875, he married Marion Young and, through her family, became a managing director of Bannerman and Sons Mills in 1880. He fought a major factory strike in 1884 and adamantly held out for victory. Already somewhat a public figure, from the late 1880s, Macara set on a venture of wider public work and engagement, becoming a philanthropist who organised fundraising campaigns. He envisaged captivating working-class donors to allow as many people as possible to feel like they were contributing to important causes. Such appeals included a Lancashire-wide relief fund for the Indian Famine in 1897, as well as the LSM. In 1904, Macara became chair of the International Cotton Federation, through which he travelled across Europe, America, and Egypt, meeting with a variety of royal families and politicians (Mills 1917, p.128).

Macara was interested in the work of lifeboatmen after making friends with the St Anne's station's crew, nearby to where he owned a sea-side home. In December 1886, the *Mexico* disaster resulted in the loss of 27 RNLI crew members, resulting in 16 widows and 50 fatherless children. After discovering that the widows would be granted only £100



each by the RNLI following the loss of their prime breadwinner, Macara led a fundraising campaign to support the victim's families by posting appeals for subscriptions in the northern popular press, which raised over £33,000 in two weeks (Mills 1917, p.182). Spurred by the success of the *Mexico* appeal and an investigation into the dissipating finances of the RNLI, Macara organised the first Lifeboat Saturday Fund in Manchester in 1891.

The LSM, Macara believed, should have been instituted by the central committee without his efforts, and he remained critical of their lack of innovation in his memoirs:

‘Timidity had prevented the Lifeboat Institution from taking its proper position in the affairs of the nation prior to the establishment of the Lifeboat Saturday Fund, and ignoble fears seemed at one time more likely to ruin the chances of another great movement...’ (Macara 1921, p.151-152).

## 4 Growth of the LSM

The first Lifeboat Saturday, in Manchester and Salford in 1891, raised £5,454 1s 4d. The money raised included subscriptions and donations, which were published in detail. Subscriptions included collection boxes in streets, theatres, warehouses, factories, corporation departments and railway offices. Donations were gathered within banks and insurance offices, churches and Sunday schools, as well as from football clubs and at matches. Macara did not work alone – he relied on a ‘small staff... for prompt action and enthusiasm’, as well as his wife, Marion (Macara 1921, p.154). As a leader of the movement, Macara personally attended several of the LSM events, including in Manchester in 1891 and 1892, as well as in Preston in 1892. Reporting on the second Lifeboat Saturday in Manchester and Salford in 1892, the RNLI *Life-boat* journal stated “‘Life-boat Saturday’, like ‘Hospital Saturday’ may now be said to have established itself as an annual event in our local history” (*The Life-boat* November 1892, p.243).

Lifeboat Saturdays were organised locally, and although the central RNLI encouraged the creation of events by November 1892, they offered no formal help, the committee stated:



‘Why should not such institutions exist throughout the length and breadth of the United Kingdom? ... All are dependent on the sailor for the common necessities of life’ (*The Life-boat* November 1892, p.242).

The 1892 *Annual Report* further urged the creation of Saturday and Sunday collections:

‘... with the view of affording the masses an opportunity of contributing to the support of a work in which all classes of the community have a common interest’ (*Annual Report* 1 May 1893, p.296).

In 1892 there were Lifeboat Saturdays in Brighouse, Bury, Clacton-on-Sea, Crail, Douglas, Dundee, Ilfracombe, Montrose, Preston, Redcar, Runcorn, Stockport, Teignmouth, Tynemouth and Warrington, as well as special collections and Lifeboat Sundays. Sunday collections were held in a variety of denominations of churches; they generally raised small funds in the region of £3-5, and the RNLI listed them among special contributions.

In 1892, an ‘Organising Inspector’ position was established by the central RNLI committee, ‘whose principal duty it will be to promote special collections for the cause and to form new inland branches’. Although the role was paid, Macara possibly approved of the ‘Organising Inspector’ because they offered some official management for the LSM, as he later claimed:

‘A great part of the credit was due to the working classes who, as I had pointed out, were generous when appealed to for a good cause, the only thing necessary to secure their contributions being proper organisation’ (Macara 1921, p.155).

In 1893 Lifeboat Saturday Funds included events in Aberdeen, Barry, Cardiff, Clacton, Colchester, Dundee, Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester and Salford, Nottingham, Southampton, Stockport, and, Walton-on-the-Naze. It is difficult to place precise numbers on how many events were held, since the Annual Reports describe ‘demonstrations’ or ‘Sunday’ events rather than ‘Saturday Funds’, which can be misleading.



Table 1: 1893 RNLI Collections

Aberdeen “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Ashton-Under-Lune Etc. District “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Barry District “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Belfast “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Birmingham “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Blackburn “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Blackpool “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Bolton Branch And “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Bradford “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Bristol “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Burnley “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Cardiff “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
The “Covent Garden” Life-Boat Fund  
Dewsbury and Batley “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Dumbarton “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Dundee and District “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
East & West Riding of Yorkshire Life-Boat Demonstration  
Edinburgh, Leith and Granton “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
The “Forester”, “Foresters’ Pride” and “Samuel Shaw Cross” Life-Boats Fund  
Glasgow “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Grimsby and Cleethropes “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Halifax “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Huddersfield and District “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Hull “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Leeds “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Leicester “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Manchester and Salford “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Ladies’ “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund. – Manchester, Salford and District  
The “Manchester Unity” Life-Boat Fund  
“Mark Lane” Life-Boat Fund  
Newport (Mon.) “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Nottingham “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Preston “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Rochdale “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Sheffield “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Shipley and District “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Southampton “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund  
Warrington “Life-Boat Saturday” Fund

The first Lifeboat Saturday event held in London was in 1894, and in the same year, a committee was appointed with the Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gothe as president. The Duke was Queen Victoria’s second son, Alfred, who excelled in his naval career and was popularly known as the ‘Sailor Prince’. The movement raised £33,815 14s 4d in 1894, and a very detailed report of “Lifeboat Saturday’ and other collections’ was included in the *Annual Report* (see below), and it was claimed that:



‘... the Institution being of such a national character has in the past been too much dependent on the contributions of the generous few, and the numerous Life-boat Saturday demonstrations which have taken place during the past three years have not only proved the immense popularity of the Life-boat service, but have opened out a new source of revenue, at least one which had not formerly been taken full advantage of, and as the needs of the Institution are increasing year by year it has been found necessary to appeal to all classes of the community to contribute to its support’ (*Annual Report 1 May 1894*, p.573).

In response to the rapid growth of the LSM, the RNLI central committee approached Macara in 1895 to organise a new system to be moved to London. The following districts were created: Northern, Scotch, Midland, Western, Eastern and Southern, London, and Irish. Three paid positions were also created – secretary, organising secretary and assistant organising secretary, as well as an official banker and auditor appointed. However, Macara wanted the headquarters to remain in Manchester, separate from the central committee, and instead favoured representatives of the LSM to be appointed to the RNLI committee. Regardless, although some of Macara’s suggestions were adopted, he resigned and was no longer formally involved with the movement.

With the appointment of the new Lifeboat Saturday Fund London-based committee, the expenditure of the LSM increased. Expenses included salaries and travel expenses, payment to lifeboat crews who attended events, rent for storage and office supplies. Around a third of the money raised by the LSM in 1895 was expended, and £10,790 was carried forward. The 1896 Annual Report was difficult to follow, though it claimed 103 funds were held, raising £16,205. In 1897, after criticism of the RNLI for hiding its income and expenditure from Macara and Edward Bayley (a liberal politician), a parliamentary select committee was appointed to explore the idea of the Institution being taken over by the state. Although nothing substantial resulted from the report, the scrutiny that the RNLI received changed part of how it was managed. For example, the annual reports displayed the finances with greater clarity, with a particular emphasis on





making it easy for the public to see how their donations from Lifeboat Saturdays were allocated.

## 5 Conclusion

Only a short introduction relating to public engagement with the Royal National Lifeboat Institution within British cities through the Lifeboat Saturday Movement has been outlined in this article. Although donors did not receive anything material, the exciting events, which often involved a lot of expenditure, were surely part of Roddy, Strange and Taithe's concept of 'charitable consumption'. Similar in nature to Cherry's contributory hospital schemes, the LSM did not escape upper-class control from central London. However, to understand further how the LSM fitted within Gorsky's thesis of unequal distribution of philanthropy, further study, particularly of the parliamentary select committee, will be necessary.

Overall, the public certainly engaged with the movement, and regardless of how much money was raised by the LSM with respect to the amount of effort that was put into it being raised, the public in the cities were now engaged with life boating, which many would not have known about without the LSM. The initial goal of Macara to raise funds for and the profile of the RNLI was met, though it moved toward a high expenditure he wanted to escape.

## 6 References

1. Hillary, W. (1823). *An Appeal to the British Nation, on the Humanity and Policy of Forming a National Institution, For the Preservation of Lives and Property from Shipwreck*. London: G. and W.B. Whittaker.
2. Lewis, R. (1874). *History of the Life-boat, and its Work*. Oxford: Macmillan and Co.
3. Macara, C. W. (1921). *Recollections by Sir Charles W. Macara, Bart.* London: Cassell & Company Ltd
4. Mills, W. H. (1917). *Sir Charles W. Macara Bart.: A Study of Modern Lancashire*. Manchester: Sherratt & Hughes.
5. *The Life-boat*, November 1892.
6. *Annual Report*, 1 May 1893.
7. *Annual Report*, 1 May 1894.



8. Roddy, S., Strange, J., and Taithe, B. (2018). *The Charity Market and Humanitarianism in Britain, 1870-1912*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
9. Cherry, S. (2000). Hospital Saturday, Workplace Collections and Issues in late Nineteenth-Century Hospital Funding, *Medical History*, (44) 461-488.
10. Gorsky, M. (2020). "Public, Private and Voluntary Hospitals: Economic Theory and Historical Experience in Britain, c. 1800-2010", In *The Political Economy of the Hospital in History*, ed. by Martin Gorsky et al, Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press, pp. 181-220.