

WILLIAM RILEY & THE BIRMINGHAM AND LEAMINGTON LIFEBOAT

One of the largest, if not the largest, monuments in Leamington Spa cemetery at Brunswick Street is that of William Riley.



At the top of the monument there are 3 faces, 2 are engraved and the 3rd is blank. One of the faces shows an engraving of a panoramic view that includes a dog, a horse, a stretch of water, a tree and a hillside or mountain in the distance; perhaps this was a favourite place, so to include this is quite understandable? The other face is engraved with a ship and a lifeboat in the middle of a storm but what has this to do with Leamington, after all, we are about as far away from the sea as it is possible to get? And, who was William Riley anyway?



William Riley was born in Drayton Bishop, Staffordshire on 9th January 1815 and died on 1st May 1904 at the age of 89.



He lived for some years at Florence House, a large house at 41 Leam Terrace, Leamington Spa after moving from Birmingham.

Several years before his death, he had erected the monument in Leamington Cemetery; maybe this was to do with his sixteen-year-old son Adolphus William Riley who had died in 1867? In his will he left instructions for a marble bust of himself to be carved in Florence and placed on top of his tomb; a request which unfortunately was never carried out. One of the strangest things that he did was to leave instructions to be buried in two coffins, one of lead weighing 4lb to the square foot, and the other to be of oak with brass handles. Only copper nails or screws were to be used.

He bequeathed his portrait to one of the hospitals in which he had endowed a bed, maybe this was at Warneford Hospital? - and he 'desired' that all dumb animals belonging to him shall be well cared for whilst they live.

Having already made ample provision for his son, Baron Riley, of San Francisco, he did not bequeath him anything else in his will.

He left £100 each to his executors, Mr. James Wright Hassall, solicitor, and Mr. Harold Mason, medical practitioner, both of Leamington, and £100 to his friend and housekeeper, Ann Jane Knight. There was provision for his wife regarding his property and the income from his property as well as £100 plus an annuity of £100. However, his wife Sarah pre-deceased him

dying at the age of 78 on 21st June 1901. Income from his properties were to be kept in trust to provide £200 for the Birmingham branch of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, £100 for the Leamington branch of the same society, £800 for the Warneford Hospital for a “William Riley of Birmingham and Leamington” bed, £1,000 for the Queen’s Hospital at Birmingham to provide a “William Riley of Birmingham and Leamington” bed, and £1,250 to the Birmingham General Hospital for the same reason.

£3,050 was left to the Royal National Lifeboat Institution with £1,050 of it to provide a “William Riley lifeboat” on the Lancashire coast or on the coast between the mouths of the Humber and the Tees, and £2,000 in trust for the maintenance of the lifeboat.

The residue of his estate was held in trust for the purchase of land for three “William Riley Almshouses”, two for Birmingham and one for Leamington. In the end four houses were built on Maas Road in Northfield Birmingham and two in Prospect Road Leamington. His estate totalled £16,995. 18s. 10d. gross and £16,880. 19s. 3d. net. The initial amount available for the almshouses was around £6,000. The Leamington properties in Prospect Road are still owned by the Trust.

The William Riley Lifeboat - This 2.7 ton 34 foot Rubie class lifeboat, which was built in 1909 at a cost of £722. 9s. 1d. by the Thames Iron Works, Canning Town London, was initially stationed at Uppgang near Whitby and named ‘The William Riley of Leamington & Birmingham’. It arrived on 27th July 1909. At full capacity the boat took a crew of 13 – 10 oarsmen, a bowman for navigation, a coxswain and an assistant. The photograph was taken at the naming ceremony.

The William Riley took part in one of the RNLI’s most dramatic rescues, that of 154 people on board the 7,114-ton hospital ship HMHS Rohilla which was wrecked off Whitby in October 1914.

The steamship Rohilla, which had been completed in 1906, had originally been built by Harland and Wolff in Belfast for the British India Steam Navigation Company.



On 29th October 1914 the Rohilla left Leith, near Edinburgh, with a complement of 229, including surgeons, nurses, St. John’s ambulance men and attendants bound for Dunkirk. She had just been fitted out as a hospital ship in order to pick up and evacuate wounded in France. For safety she had been painted white with a green stripe and red cross of a hospital ship.

She sailed south in awful weather, a fierce gale was blowing, and because of the First World War blackout, no lights were visible along the coastline. Just after 4.00am on 30th October 1914, the hospital ship Rohilla ran aground and foundered on a treacherous reef on the rocks off Saltwick Nab, just south of Whitby harbour, known locally as "Whitby Rock". Fatally wounded the Rohilla lay grounded despite being just five hundred yards from the shore. The ship's bell was tolled to alert the lifeboat crews.



The crews of the Whitby lifeboats made two daring attempts to reach the grounded vessel, but due to the enormity of the storm the boats couldn't be launched in the normal way. In the first of these attempts, the Whitby No2 lifeboat, the "John Fielden" was dragged over an eight-foot harbour wall and across a rock scar before being launched into the "boiling surf".

Seventeen survivors were taken off during the lifeboat's first run, and another eighteen were rescued on its second; there were still many others on board. However, by this time the lifeboat itself was holed and too badly damaged to continue the rescue.



The lifeboat men then came up with a very courageous and extremely difficult plan – the William Riley lifeboat was hauled an incredible three miles overland to the clifftop adjacent to the Rohilla to assist in the rescue. Six horses and over a hundred people were used in what must have been a most impressive sight. The lifeboat was precariously lowered down a two-hundred-foot perpendicular cliff face. It was lowered in just two and half hours – an amazing feat that even with today’s equipment would be an extraordinary achievement. After a 50-hour rescue by two Whitby lifeboats and other lifeboats from Teesmouth and Scarborough, one hundred and fifty-four people were saved but ninety-two lives were lost including some lifeboat crew.

One member of the Whitby lifeboat crew was awarded a gold medal by the RNLI and two other crew members were awarded silver medals for their efforts. In all the RNLI awarded five gold and three silver medals for gallantry and it remains one of their most famous rescues.

In November 1919 the Uppingham lifeboat station was closed and the lifeboat was transferred to the Whitby No2 station where she served until the boat was decommissioned in 1931.



The RNL's Whitby Museum building was Whitby's No2 lifeboat station between 1895 and 1957.

No doubt she was used for a variety of purposes over the years but around 1960 she was converted to a single engine four berth cabin cruiser. Later, after almost a century, the old ten-oar boat was spotted in 2005 on the EBay auction website. This still basically sound boat, but with three large holes, and in need of restoration, was on the edge of the River Taw estuary in Barnstaple, Devon. It was initially bought for £1,200 by Dave Charlton, who with a number of other enthusiasts arranged for it to be transported back to Whitby.

Later, the Whitby Historic Lifeboat Trust was set up and restored it to sea-going condition; it was test launched in April 2008. Re-dedication day was 1st June 2008. It is now one of a small number of surviving rowed lifeboats.

The William Riley was one of a large number of boats that took part in the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations on the River Thames from Barnes to Tower Bridge on 5th May 2012.

On a visit to Whitby in September 2016, the restored lifeboat was on display in a car and coach park close to the harbour.







Allan Jennings & Alan Griffin

September 2016

Acknowledgements

- **RUBIE** – The newsletter of the Whitby Historic Lifeboat Trust
- Whitby Historic Lifeboat trust information leaflet
- Leamington Spa Courier 1st July 1904
- Leamington Spa Courier 22nd November 1907
- Exeter Express and Echo article dated 25th May 2009
- <http://www.officialwilliamriley.org.uk/history/rohilla-rescue/>
- <http://rnli.org/aboutus/historyandheritage/pages/hope-in-the-great-war/updates-tab/the-rohilla-story---a-blow-by-blow-account.aspx>
- <http://www.wvbritainssurvivingvessels.org.uk/vessels/william-riley-of-birmingham-and-leamington->

Photographs

- Brunswick Street Cemetery monument [3 photos] ©Allan Jennings 10th January 2014
- Florence House Leam Terrace ©Allan Jennings 24th September 2016
- William Riley lifeboat [naming ceremony] courtesy of Whitby Historic Lifeboat Trust
- S.S. Rohilla's ships bell courtesy of RNLI Whitby Museum ©Allan Jennings 20th September 2016
- S.S. Rohilla painting courtesy of Whitby Historic Lifeboat Trust
- RNLI Whitby Museum ©Allan Jennings 20th September 2016
- William Riley of Birmingham & Leamington lifeboat [5 photos] ©Allan Jennings 20th September 2016