

'Money for old rope'

Introduction

Nearly everybody knows that the Royal National Life-boat Institution organises the life-boat service of Great Britain but very few people have more than a very vague idea of how it functions. In general there is tremendous admiration for the life-boat crews and when a disaster occurs and lives are lost there is widespread sympathy and a generous response to appeals for a fund to assist the dependents. It is almost certain that very few of those who help to provide the very considerable sum of money necessary to keep the rescue service effective ever realise what a complex organisation this is. They probably assume that the money buys a life-boat, the crew is enlisted locally, the whole outfit is voluntary, and that is that.

In fact it is very far from that. There are 138 major life-boat stations around the coast of Great Britain and the Irish Republic and over 100 inshore life-boats. At the majority of the ~~major~~ stations there are life-boat houses with slipways and big winches for hauling boats out. The design and building of the boats, together with their maintenance and that of all ancillary equipment, demands a highly trained and experienced technical staff in order to ensure ~~their~~ ability to deal with extreme conditions.

The volunteer crews, to whom the splendid record of the service is due entirely, not surprisingly tend to be rugged individualists who may be led but who refuse to be driven. The maintenance of good relations and harmony between the management in London and the crews and

committees all round the coast calls for a good deal of tact and understanding. On what may appear to be a minor point local feeling can run high and it is necessary to make allowance for the genuine conviction behind it.

A modern life-boat is a sophisticated piece of equipment costing upwards of £50,000 and very different even from those of the 1950s. The large fleet of inshore life-boats, born of the need for ~~the~~ quick rescue off beaches of swimmers and sailors, was expected to reduce the ever mounting cost of maintaining the main fleet. Alas, in the event it would appear that instead this new service became an additional charge on the RNLI funds and one which has tended to escalate, like many others.

So from the general idea of a simple set-up of life-boats, volunteer crews and a money-raising organisation to support them we find in fact a highly complex, technical institution, working in close harmony with a large number of splendid seamen who risk discomfort and even death in the service of their fellow men. The day to day working of this unusual partnership produces a host of human problems, some humorous, some tragic but all very real.

This book describes the domestic life of the rescue service as experienced by a professional seaman in the employ of the RNLI.