

Cllr Jim Millard: Hello and welcome back to Talk Richmond. In this week's episode, I'm joined by Matt Allchurch, Lifeboat Operations Manager at the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, Teddington Lifeboat Station, we'll say RNLI for short from now on I think, and I'm going to be asking Matt all about Teddington Lifeboat station, how the station operates, what its responsibilities are, and I've got to ask him about the famous minke whale rescue. So, without further ado, Matt, a very warm welcome to talk Richmond.

Matt Allchurch: Thank you Jim. It's a pleasure to be here and to have the opportunity to talk about what we do in Teddington on the river.

Cllr Millard: Yeah, well, brilliant thank you and could we start just by asking you to give us a sort of brief introduction to the RNLI itself for those who might not know much about what the charity does?

Matt: So, the RNLI is entirely funded by voluntary contributions. It's a huge charity, I think it has around about 40,000 people working for it. Most of whom are volunteers and Teddington Lifeboat Station is run entirely by volunteers. And yeah, we are tasked to save lives on the sea, which is a bit of an anomaly because we are located in Teddington on the Thames. Uh, you could argue that the part of the tidal Thames where our lifeboat station is tidal and therefore it's part of the coast, but it certainly doesn't feel like the coast.

Cllr Millard: Yeah.

Matt: So, we are tasked to look after river between Richmond and Hampton Court. And sometimes we'll go a little bit below Richmond and sometimes will go a little bit above Hampton Court and we are here really to help people out who get into trouble on the river for one reason or another.

Cllr Millard: I still find it amazing that it's entirely, you know, charitable, because it's such an important part of our emergency response, and it's an amazing it's sort of part of our fabric of our nation as an island nation, though, isn't it surrounded by sea that we all hold the RNLI so dearly, and the amount of volunteer efforts you know I have to say is just quite breath-taking. And we're all, of course, I'd like to say about half of all the listeners and the Council, we're very, very grateful for everyone so bravely and selflessly, giving their time and effort and energy to it. And you obviously touched on this It's fascinating because it is quite an unusual lifeboat station it is one of I believe 4, is that right that cover the Thames and you know, pretty unique in that respect, what are the stations responsibilities?

Matt: So first and foremost, and most importantly we are tasked to get to a casualty within 15 minutes and in order to get hands on a casualty in that kind of time scale and Hampton Court being our furthest distance on our patch, we have to get through Teddington Lock. Yeah. So, you could imagine you need to move pretty quickly, and we all need to live, work or be playing within 3 minutes of the lifeboat station in order to be able to get to that person. So that's three minutes from pager going off, being at the station, another two or three minutes to launch the light boat, and that leaves us only with eight or 9 minutes to get up to Hampton Court by river, so you know, pretty impressive, really.

Cllr Millard: Indeed, and just to help us get in our heads. I'm local to Teddington and I'm a Hampton Wick Ward councillor so I know it well, but the lifeboat station is very near Teddington Lock, isn't it?

Matt: Lifeboat Station is just opposite the Wharf restaurant, if you know where that is. So, the boats and we have two D class boats which are the smallest lifeboat but a very capable lifeboat, just over 5 meters in length with 40 horsepower engines and capable of 25 knots, which is 30 miles an hour.

We're actually the only RNLI station with two D classes, and we have two D classes because our biggest hazard really is Teddington Lock and Teddington weir. You know we could get someone caught on the top of the weir above the weir and in that situation, we would put one boat above and one boat below in case that person goes through the weir, and we catch them below. So that that's one of the big reasons. The other fantastic thing about that is we have a boat that can go down to Richmond while another boat goes up to Hampton Court. If you've got a simultaneous shout, two different places.

Cllr Millard: So, this is, you know, and you said that you need to be within 3 minutes of the station. How does the station operate in terms of crew?

Matt: So, we need around about 27 crew, operational crew. We only have about 23, we're in the process of recruiting new crew, which has been quite difficult in COVID, but now we're coming out of that, we're able to recruit, and we've got six or seven new people that we've just engaged with and starting to train. So, we were all volunteers, 3 minutes. I mean I could be as an architect when I was operational and not operational now but when I was operational, I could be in a meeting around the table in my office where I'm sat at the moment with Barkley homes or developers, running a meeting and my pager goes and I've got to go, and I've got to get to the station in in three minutes. From here I can get there in a minute and a half. So usually, I was one of the first people to turn up. And speed is of the essence.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely. So, I mean, you've described, you know, having two boats around the lock in case someone on top of the lock has that happened and what do lifeboats and crew get called out for on the Thames?

Matt: For Teddington, it's mostly people, so most of our shouts are two people, and very often it's people in the water. Ah, or people you know on Bridges threatened to go in the water or. That that type of thing. We rarely get called to boats in trouble because it's not really that kind of waterway you're not that far from the bank. But uh, as an example of a shout that we went to a couple of years ago, we had a doctor, as it turns out, who'd been out canoeing in the winter, very strong streams. Uh, and I think he was fairly new to canoeing and had managed to capsize his canoe up against the top of the weir. And because of the stream, the flow of the stream the canoe was pinned against the weir, he was out of the boat holding onto the boat, cold water. Uh, and he said to us afterwards, and this is a situation where we had one boat below, one boat above, boat above managed to grab him in fairly quick order. He said to us afterwards that he thinks he had just moments that he could hold on, you know he was just losing his strength. The cold sucks your strength. And that coming from a Doctor Who knows, you know about metabolism of the human body. And he had hypothermia and was in hospital for quite some time. Uh, and afterwards when he recovered, he came to see us to thank us for what we've done, but. And you know, that's the sort of situation where we help someone out with water sports. There are also people get into trouble because they've been drinking or cold-water shock, which people don't fully understand. Uh, you know that you can get cold water shock even in the summer and that can significantly affect your ability to swim.

We also have people who have, you know, vulnerable people who maybe want to self-harm who are on a bridge, it might be a cry for help. It could be a mental health issue. But you know, they're people who deserve you know to have that second chance. And there are many times when we pulled people from the river. Who maybe were intent on not going on, but. You know, we've given them a second chance. And it has been extremely busy year where we've had 65 or 70 shouts this year already.

Cllr Millard: Gosh.

Matt: It looks like it'll be our busiest year.

Cllr Millard: It must be quite extraordinary to be involved in those moments where you have a decisive role in in all those people's lives.

Matt: Very much so. I mean I, I myself would pull people out of the water who, who have said, you know, I don't want to go on, you know, put me back. Yeah. But you've then handed them to the ambulance and their family say you know, thank you. It's very difficult, isn't it? But I think particularly in COVID in this last 18 months it's put like huge amount of pressure on people's mental health. And one of the places that they think they can resolve, that is, is the river. And that's why I think we've been so busy in the last time last 18 months.

Cllr Millard: So, you've been busier than normal.

Matt: Yes, yes, it's been. I mean, certainly the first six months this year is our busiest patch. I mean hugely, hugely busy.

Cllr Millard: There was a sort of put her perspective of figure or some sort of idea of how much busier you are.

Matt: So, the first, sort of three or four months of this year, we were probably having twice as many shouts week as we would normally have. You know, we might guess we might have been getting six or eight shouts or week. For that period where we would normally expect maybe two or three in the winter. And now when we're back over this summer period, going back to about two shouts a week, which is fairly normal.

Cllr Millard: One of the things that we were all very aware of and the RNLI Teddington Lifeboat Station came to lots of people's attention and something that affected us all. I bet you weren't expecting to be called out to help rescue and minke whale. What was that like for those involved? It must have been a long, and I imagine a very emotional day.

Matt: Yes, I mean think it was pretty mixed because it was initially quite fantastic to be able to see this, you know beautiful creature swimming in our bit of the river. You know, quite surreal. And so that was, you know, initially we were there, you know, to observe and keep an eye, because crowds and crowds were gathering to watch. You know that with the word had got out by the world's media. Yeah. I mean, I was getting texts from America and New Zealand and. Canada asking me am I involved because it had gone across the world and people started turning up, so we were we were there really to make sure that people don't get in trouble. Uh, but as time went on. More and more people turned out more and more cameras and the bridge was absolutely mobbed. And you know, we were then in touch with the marine animal rescue people who ultimately came out and we helped them, but it was certainly very stressful because we had I don't know 1500 people watching us. Plus, you know Sky TV BBC Reuters. Everyone, all of all the newspapers were there. And all my crew were very aware that they were being watched and every movement was being watched so. Uh, they must. I think it was quite stressful in that respect. I mean that that that was just stressful. And then, of course, the extremely sad when the whale was euthanized. My crew were with the whale at the time and the marine rescue people had said look, put your hands on the well because it will like that kind of it. You know it, it will sense that and then it's calming for it. But it meant that they were right there in the end. But the debrief was probably the most emotional one that I had seen, because all nearly all the crew were involved. Maybe about 18 people in shifts over a 24-hour period, and it was really. There was a lot of emotion in the room and it you know you might question

that when we you know we deal with so many people, but it was just the whole day. I think the length of the shout, the observation from the world and then the loss of this beautiful creature. So yeah, and then we were asked, once the whale had been euthanized, it was then left, and it was on our or on the foreshore out here below the bridge. And it's not really our job then to move the whale, but I've had some there wasn't anyone else that could do it so we were asked if we would move the whale. So that it could be taken for an autopsy at London Zoo. And amazingly, we managed to find a local scaffolder who was here at the cafe, and he said he would use his lorry to move the whale, so at 2:00 o'clock in the morning the next day, when the tide rose, we toed the wale and recovered it and it was taken to the zoo for an autopsy.

Cllr Millard: So terribly sad. It makes me want to ask you know, how do you look after each other? How do you help each other sort of process and recover from these difficult experiences?

Matt: That's a very good question. I mean we are. As a team at Teddington, we are very supportive of one another. Where we're, you know, there's we're very small team with 30 people. We look out for each other. We look for changes in people's personalities or people are struggling with talk. You know we talk. We follow up. We do all of that and we do that very well, I think. Even in COVID we were able to at least call people regularly. . The RNLI also the online offer counselling to crew up so the crew will know there's a phone number that they can use should they need it. We also have a chaplain, Reverend Joe. Together with his colleague Chris came and led a sort of a group chat. We sat in the Hall, 30 of us, and he explained, split us up into little groups to have a chat and then share stories afterwards and it and they and he sort enabled the whole thing and it's really quite cathartic I think to be able to talk about things like that just in a really open way, and to have someone who's not. He's not with us and he's not doing shouts with us all the time, but he's there and he comes and helps.

Cllr Millard: Well clearly, we owe you a huge debt of gratitude and you know you're a bunch of absolute heroes I just wanted to come back to the fact that. You know, for our listeners, I think we're aware water safety is a big thing for Richmond upon Thames, we've got I'm told 21 miles of Riverside and we straddle with the only London borough that has spans both banks of the river. I know you've touched on this already, but this is a good opportunity, just to reiterate, what should listeners be aware of when it comes to staying safe around the River Thames?

Matt: Well, I mean the primary thing is cold water shock and I think what people don't perhaps realise is you can quite quickly get to situation where you lose the ability to move your limbs, and that's because the cold your body reacts to the cold by bringing the blood your blood into the core of the body. So, it takes effect if it takes the blood out of your limbs and the muscles. Muscles need that blood to be able to operate. And so, people, even in the summer and particularly early parts of the summer, before the water warms up, so it might be a hot day in April or May in, and we had really warm weather this year in April, but actually the water still very cold and you can get into trouble quite quickly. There's the first part of cold-water shock is when you first go into the water. And you can't really help but take in an involuntary breath. And if you do that when you're underwater, you immediately take in 2-3 litres of water into your lungs, and that's game over effectively. And if that doesn't happen and the water is not cold enough for you, you've managed to hold your breath or whatever. You then got the situation where you're in cold water and you could then start to lose that ability to swim, and we've had it in our borough where good young swimmers have drowned trying to swim across the river. Uhm? Uh, we and we've heard stories afterwards where they swam across the river. They've got halfway back, and they've gone under. Ah, and you know very often that's where you find them, the police divers later. So, it's not to be taken lightly, if you if you are, I can understand why people want to go in the river. If they do want to go in the river.

Choose somewhere safe. I don't swim across the river. Swim along close to the bank so that you can escape if you get into trouble or swim in shallow water, or take a float floating marker with you, you'll see a lot of the open water swimmers have floats with them and so if they get in trouble, they can grab hold and it's also a great marker for other boats to be able to see that someone swimming in the in the river.

It's good that people use the river, but they need to use it safely and responsibly.

Cllr Millard: Well said, thank you, that's very clear and we've got to take a note of these things. It's been fascinating to talk to you. Just lastly, if there's an emergency if you see something in the water so we need to get hold of the RNLI, what should they do?

Matt: So, if you see someone in the water dial 999 and ask for the Coast Guard.

Cllr Millard: OK.

Matt: Might be counterintuitive because you're not on the coast. But we have London Coast Guard. London Coast Guard is based down near Thames Barrier. They know this part of the river extremely well.

Cllr Millard: Thank you well, I've said it before, but thank you so much Matt for everything you've done and thank you for taking the time to come and speak to us at talk Richmond.

Matt: Jim it's an absolute pleasure. Thank you for the invitation. It's just nice to get the word out there, you know.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely.

Matt: It's amazing that some people still don't know that we exist, but we are here, and we want to help.

Cllr Millard: And we're pleased to do our bit and helping to spread that word. And as we've heard, the RNLI charity does incredible lifesaving work across the country and in the River Thames. In the in the middle of our borough. I'm really proud to have one of their stations in our borough. I'm sure you are too. If you'd like to make a donation, you can go online to [rnli.org/donate](https://rnli.org/donate). Help the RNLI continue to help us. Huge thank you again to you Matt and all your colleagues for everything you're doing. Really amazing and for anyone who's been listening who's affected by any of the things that we've heard about. If you're feeling vulnerable, if you need help, you can always of course call Samaritans or speak to your GP to your doctor. There's lots of help available. Thank you again. Let's all stay safe. Let's enjoy the river but respect it. If you've enjoyed this episode, please leave a review. And, you know, make a splash and subscribe. Thank you very much. I'm Jim Millard. Thanks for listening.