

Editorial

Inland Waterways - the Cost of Messing About on the River.

Northern Ireland is blessed with some beautiful lakeland and coastal scenery so if it's a nice day, many of us enjoy visiting areas like the Fermanagh Lakelands or North Coast.

There is however a much darker side to our contact with water.

In 2014, a total of 338 people drowned in the UK from accidental or natural causes.

Only 14 of these deaths occurred in the open sea. 102 occurred close into the coast. 32 died in canals, 29 in lakes and 100 in rivers, streams and burns.

Many did not intend to be in the water at all – the most common activity before drowning was walking or running alongside water.

So far, I have only counted accidental and natural causes - suicidal intent accounted for a further 210 water-related UK deaths in 2014.¹

The Coastguard (officially the Maritime and Coastguard Agency – MCA) and RNLI respond to emergencies at sea and close inshore, but who looks after emergencies above the tidal high water mark, i.e., in rivers and waterways?

A standard 999 call is the way to summon help, but the Police and other statutory emergency services can call on or “task” voluntary search and rescue groups when required - this includes Mountain and Cave rescue teams with specialist high altitude and subterranean skills and equipment. Everything below the mountains and above the sea (or caves) falls into the category of Lowland Search and Rescue (LSAR).²

In the Province, there are several voluntary Search and Rescue groups who support the emergency services. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Association is a forum composed of the major groups and the statutory emergency services who regulate activities.

Community Rescue Service was formed in 2007 and as well as assisting with water rescue, members are trained in rural and urban search, for example, providing search teams to assist the Police if an elderly or vulnerable person goes missing. Often, rural searches include water-logged culverts, ponds and drainage ditches. They cover a wide area including the River Bann and adjacent North Coast, Antrim Glens, Newry Canal, Strabane and Craigavon.³

Lagan Search and Rescue supports operations in Belfast Harbour and the Lagan as far inland as Lisburn.⁴

Given the land-locked nature of Loughs Neagh and Erne,

it is perhaps surprising to learn that the Coastguard is the statutory emergency service for any incidents on the water. RNLI maintains a lifeboat on Lough Erne (one of only two “inland” RNLI lifeboats) and Lough Neagh Rescue support the Coastguard Rescue Team upon request.⁵

Foyle Search and Rescue Service is the oldest group and was set up in 1993 in response to a large number of drownings in the Foyle around that time.⁶

The Foyle is one of the fastest flowing tidal rivers in Europe and can reach a flow of 8 knots (twice walking speed). This means that within a few minutes, someone entering the water at the level of the Peace bridge could be carried as far as the Craigavon bridge (or vice-versa). Its tidal nature means that the Foyle also maintains a reasonably constant low temperature of about 6 degrees throughout the year - hypothermia becomes an important issue after 10 minutes immersion. Spinal care is also important when handling and transferring patients.

I spoke to Mr. Colm O’Neill, Operations Officer at Foyle Search and Rescue Service about their setup.⁷ Sixty-one volunteers provide a round-the-clock service. At “peak” hours – Thursday to Saturday nights between 9pm to 3am – a three-layered response of jet-boat patrols, walking teams and vehicles maintain vigilance. There is radio communication with a shore base and from there to the emergency services. At other times, a 12 strong pager team is available with a back-up 6 person team if required.

Three jet-boats (propellers could injure people in the water), jet-skis and dinghies have to be continuously serviced and ready for use (Figure 1).

Basic training as a foreshore volunteer takes 10 weeks and includes first aid, CPR and public access defibrillation. More



Fig 1. Foyle Search and Rescue jet-boat “Spirit of Adrian”.

advanced training is required to work on the river. Within the group are swift water and flood response specialists who may be tasked to major incidents anywhere in the Province. Some have received additional first responder training.

In 2014, Foyle Search and Rescue responded to 191 incidents (125 at night):

- 94 Causes of concern – e.g., people in a state of distress or lost near the river.
- 74 People escorted away from dangerous areas such as the river edge or bridges.
- 18 People taken out of the water alive.
- 4 Bodies recovered
- 1 Animal rescue.

The majority of cases are male and mental health issues are common.

When most of us think of the emergency services, our thoughts turn to Police, Fire and Ambulance. A second's pause and we would include the Coastguard and RNLI but few would consider the inland waterways as a greater hazard than the sea.

Its sobering to think of the size and complexity of these volunteer organisations funded predominantly by charity who strive to keep us safe.

Here's to a peaceful and safe 2016 for us all.

John Purvis
Honorary Editor

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