

## Source 8: HMS *Vigilant*

The *Manx Advertiser* newspaper article on 10 October 1822 describes the wreck of HMS *Vigilant* on St Mary's Rock in Douglas Bay, Isle of Man, 4 days earlier. It shows how Sir William Hillary had first-hand experience going to rescue people from shipwreck.

A resident of Douglas, Hillary watched the wreck from the harbour with a gathering crowd. Compelled to help those in peril, he urged bystanders to help him row out in the harbour's pleasureboats to rescue the ship's crew, offering them money from his own pocket as a reward.

It was Sir William Hillary's experience of coordinating this rescue that convinced him of the need for an organised nationwide lifesaving institution.

The newspaper extract goes on to describe two further wrecks caught in the storm to which Sir William Hillary gave assistance.

Later in the same year, in December 1822, HMS *Vigilant* was the very ship that HMS *Racehorse* came to escort back to England when it was wrecked off Langness Point (see also Source 2).

The wreck of HMS *Racehorse* prompted a letter from Sir William Hillary to the Admiralty requesting that the families of the Manx men, who had lost their lives going to rescue HMS *Racehorse*'s crew, would be provided for.

As a result, the Navy awarded pensions for these men's families and payments for the men who had gone to the rescue of HMS *Vigilant*, but Sir William Hillary still wanted to do more to improve the safety of those at sea.

In February 1823 he began his campaign by publishing his famous pamphlet: *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*.

On Sunday night last, His Majesty's Cutter *Vigilant*, Captain Reid, in attempting to get under weigh, (having been at anchor in this Bay) was ran foul of by a heavy laden sloop, which sprang the cutter's bowsprit, and lay so completely across her bows, as to prevent her shooting a-head. The *Vigilant*, thus entangled, and beaten by a heavy sea, drifted astern until she tailed on St. Mary's Rock, where her rudder was unshipped and she became totally unmanageable. In this perilous situation, her anchors all coming home, and after every possible exertion to get her off had been made by the officers and men, it was deemed necessary, for the safety of the crew and the hull of the *Vigilant*, to cut away her mast; which being done, she was warped off the rock, and we are happy to add, was on the following afternoon, towed into Douglas, with comparatively little or no other damage, and where it is calculated she can in a few days be put in such a state of temporary repair as will enable her with safety to proceed to some of the King's dock-yards to refit. The spars and rigging have all been saved, and her mast was so judiciously cut away, as will enable it to be set up for an excellent jury mast. —Upon signal guns of distress having been fired from the *Vigilant*, several boats put off from the shore, to offer any assistance in their power; among those most forward in this laudable and dangerous

enterprize, we noticed Sir Wm. Hillary, Bart. Lieutenants Graves and Burbridge, R. N. and Mr. Matthew Hanby, landlord of the White Lion and York Hotel.

The sloop *Merchant*, of Frasenburgh, from Dundalk, laden with Oats, John Thompson, master, bound to Dublin, was driven on shore, on Monday night last during the gale, opposite Castle Mona. The crew saved themselves by climbing up the mast until the ebbing of the tide; but the vessel and cargo were a total wreck.

It is always with sincere pleasure we avail ourselves of an opportunity to express our approbation and our gratitude, to such persons of rank residing among us, as are prompt to exert themselves in the cause of suffering humanity. We understand that Sir William Hillary and a few other gentlemen have been very active in extending aids to the distressed seamen of the brig *Two Sisters*, of Newry, James O'Hagan, master, which came to anchor in this Bay, on Sunday night last, having endured much hardship, and lost two men off the Calf of Man. She was towed into the harbour yesterday morning. The same gentlemen have since generously forwarded a subscription by way of reward to the boatmen, who bravely ventured out in the storm, while the vessel lay at anchor in the bay.

Extract from the *Manx Advertiser*, 10 October 1822  
Courtesy: Manx National Heritage

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1. What impact did this rescue have on Sir William Hillary and the local men, both in the short and longer term?

2. Hillary's motto was 'with courage, nothing is impossible'. How did he and others live up to this and why is the motto important to his campaign?

3. Back in the 1800s, emergency services as we know them today did not exist. What emergency services exist today? Why do these exist now? Which of them would not exist without the support of volunteers?