

# The Goodwin Sands Education Project

## A Hero of the Goodwin Sands

My name is Richard Roberts, the year is 1887 and I live in the seaside town of Deal in Kent opposite the infamous Goodwin Sands. I am the coxswain (skipper / man in charge) of the North Deal lifeboat; a strong self-righting boat powered by sail and oars and crewed by 13 volunteer men plus myself and a second coxswain.

North Deal is one of three lifeboat stations along this stretch of the East Kent coast - the other two are Walmer and Kingsdown. Our different locations mean that at least one lifeboat can always be launched whatever the wind and tide.

At 2am on May 15th I was woken from a deep sleep by a runner from the Coastguard station saying they had seen distress rockets fired from the East Goodwin lightvessel stationed on the far side of the Goodwin Sands.

I dressed quickly and rushed down to the beach to ring the bell - the call to 'man the lifeboat!' I picked my crew from the first men to arrive at the lifeboat station, whilst others would clear the shingle and lay out the greased skids for the boat to slide down the beach on. We clambered into our oilskins, sou'westers and cork life jackets. It was always a struggle to move in so many clothes!



We were soon hoisting our red sails and heading out into the darkness and a NE gale, firing a green rocket high into the sky to tell the distressed sailors that the lifeboat was launched and on her way. We could already hear the roar of the surf over the Goodwins and knew that we were in for a rough ride.

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We reached the East Goodwin lightship just as dawn was breaking and could see the three-masted schooner *Golden Island* stuck fast in the sand. She was lying on her side with huge seas breaking over her. Her masts were still standing upright but her rigging and sails were all in tatters, flying about all over the place and making a hideous noise.

I counted seven people on board all crouching for shelter between the masts - one of them much smaller than the others.

The Ramsgate tug *Aid* had also been called out and was the first to arrive on the scene with the Ramsgate lifeboat in tow. We watched while the lifeboat tried to get alongside the *Golden Island* but just as she was about to do so a huge wave caught her and tossed her up in the air and beyond the ship. We all thought she would capsize! However, she righted herself but by now was too far away from the *Golden Island* to get back, due to the strength of the wind and the tide.



It was now 4am and I knew the tide was about to turn. We took down our sails and used just the oars to get us close to the stranded vessel. Carefully, we inched our way towards her, trying to ensure we didn't get smashed to pieces in the process.

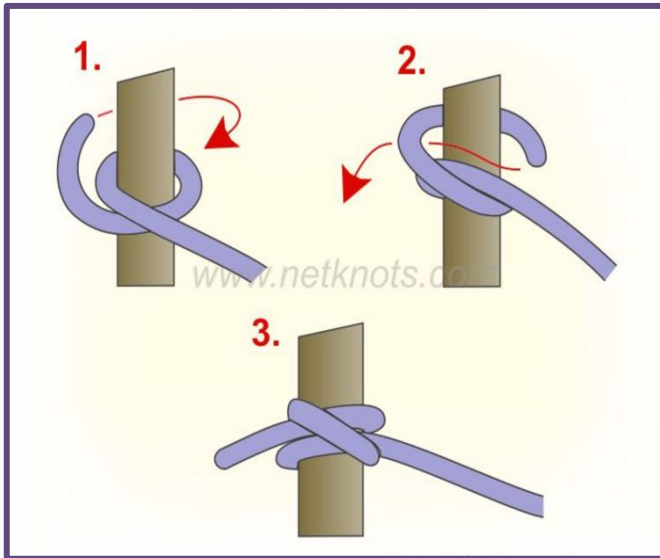
Communication with the ship was extremely difficult above the noise of the wind. We eventually managed to make the crew understand that we wanted to throw them a rope so we could pull them off the ship into the lifeboat.

We now realised that the smaller member of the crew was a young lad about 13 years old, who turned out to be the Captain's son. We decided he should be the first to be rescued, but he was terrified of being separated from his father.

My sturdy crew mate John May shot a line across the seething sea and it was caught by one of the crew. The men would tie a clove hitch knot around themselves and the line then pulled across to the lifeboat. The clove hitch is an extremely useful knot which you might want to practice at home - see the diagram below.



The lad was eventually 'persuaded' over the side by the rest of the crew and although we swiftly pulled him into the lifeboat, he got a right dunking underwater. As we hauled him onboard a huge wave engulfed us and I was smashed against our mast. Luckily, I was saved from serious injury by my thick cork life belt.

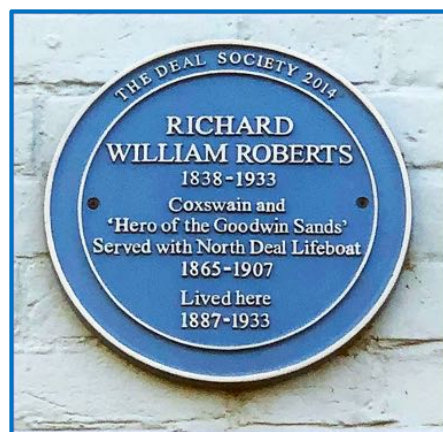


After we had safely pulled everyone across, the Captain coming last of course, we shared out our rations before starting the long eight-mile journey back to Deal.

As we neared the lifeboat station we hoisted the red ensign to show those waiting on the beach that all the crew had been rescued. We roared up onto the beach on the crest of an incoming wave and jumped out onto the shingle, cold, wet and exhausted but proud of another job 'well done'.

This story is taken from a true account written by the Reverend Thomas Stanley-Treanor and included in his book *Heroes of the Goodwin Sands* published in 1904.

**Note:** Richard Roberts served on the North Deal lifeboat for 42 years. He was awarded a silver medal for 'long and gallant services' and retired when he was 68. He died aged 95 and there is the blue plaque on the house in Deal where he lived.



**Activity: Put the statements in the correct order to tell the story of the rescue of the *Golden Island***

- As we neared the lifeboat station we hoisted the red ensign to show those waiting on the beach that all the crew had been rescued.
- At 2am on May 15th I was woken from a deep sleep by a runner from the Coastguard station saying they had seen distress rockets.
- Communication with the ship was extremely difficult above the noise of the wind. We eventually managed to make the crew understand that we wanted to throw them a rope so we could pull them off the ship into the lifeboat.
- I picked my crew from the first men to arrive at the lifeboat station.
- We watched while the lifeboat tried to get alongside the *Golden Island* but just as she was about to do so a huge wave caught her and tossed her up in the air and beyond the ship.
- We were soon hoisting our red sails and heading out into the darkness and a NE gale, firing a green rocket high into the sky to tell the distressed sailors that the lifeboat was launched and on her way.
- We reached the East Goodwin lightship just as dawn was breaking and could see the three-masted schooner *Golden Island* stuck fast in the sand.

**Use the statements which tell Richard Roberts' story and draw a comic strip to tell the story of the lifeboat rescue.**



