RESCUE ME

If you're in trouble on the Mersey estuary, pray someone calls the Mersey River Rescue service.

Words David Ward Photographs Len Grant

We are taking a tour of familiar trouble spots on the River Mersey. The boat noses first round the cattle sheds, decaying, rotting timber landing stages close to the Pier Head in Liverpool. Anyone, alive or dead, swept into here, with its maze of piles and supports, will be hard to find.

Then we swing across the mile-wide, dun-coloured waters of the Mersey to the Birkenhead side, making the most of the view over the boat's wake to the Three Graces behind us. The famous ferries are shuffling across the river and containers are being loaded onto cargo boats, one from Northern Ireland, one from Bari in southern Italy.

We take a close look at the black landing stage at which they are moored. "People can easily get sucked under there," explains Ken Scott, station officer with the River Mersey Inshore Rescue Service, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. "Depending on the current, they could come up at the other side but it wouldn't be a journey I would recommend."

We cruise up river to the oil terminal at Tranmere, where tankers are unloaded every day at a mess of steel in which pleasure boats that slip their moorings can become entangled (often with unaware owners, sometimes sleeping, sometimes drunk, still on board). Two landing stages are still in use; one, derelict with a rusting crane, is redundant and becomes an attractive and dangerous climbing frame for kids in summer.

It's time to return to base, a couple of basic Portakabins next to the ferry terminal at the Pier Head. Chief operations officer Andy Fell opens up the throttle and the prow lifts. The three of us are tilted backwards as the twin 250-horsepower Honda engines drive the 7.4 m Avon Searider back across the river at 40 knots.

That's fast: fast enough to propel the rescue team to most casualties within three minutes of call out.

"Time is of the essence, particularly because of the effects of cold water," says Scott. "This boat is set up for a single purpose - to save life on the River Mersey."

It's packed with kit, medical and technical, plus stretcher, blankets and a slide raft - an inflatable boat for 60 or so survivors. "If we had a major emergency such as an aircraft ditching in the river or a ferry sinking, the raft would enable us to help rescue large numbers of casualties very quickly," adds Scott.

The boat skims past the Albert Dock, riding the flat water like a Grand National champion at full gallop, and then glides into its moorings behind the Portakabins.

The 12 staff of the rescue service guard 26 miles of water from Runcorn, round the Wirral and up to Crosby day and night all year round.

Depending on the tide, the river can run at speeds of up to 12 knots. Parts will be navigable, or reduced to stretches of water separated by sandbanks. The worst flows can be on the flood rather than the ebb, with large flat areas covered very quickly. On top of that, there are patches of treacherous quicksand. If you become trapped and are knocked over, the water will keep you there and you won't get up again.

"In winter, it's cold, often wet, and conditions can be very harsh," said Scott. "Wind is the biggest factor when operating on open water. It can be a real test of training and commitment."

Mersey River Rescue is unique - an independent charity with no connection to the lifeboat or coastguard services. Sometimes its finances sail very close to the wind and when Scott is not out on patrol on the river, he is searching for funds to keep the service afloat.

"I had had no experience of boats till I came here," he said. "I did a degree [continued over]

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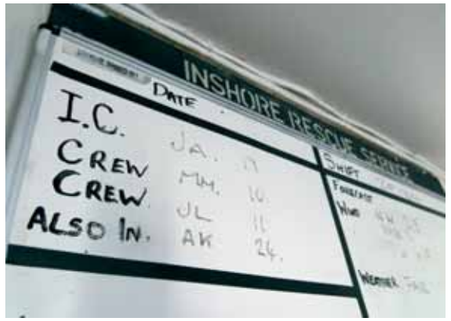

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in business studies at [Liverpool John Moores University] but could not find a job for two years. I then fell into a scheme to get graduates into employment and was given a six month placement here to help with fund raising. I wasn’t aware of the rescue service till then.

“I was offered one temporary contract after another and eventually I was offered a place as a crew member when one became available. The rest is history.”

“I would never have imagined myself doing this job. Sometimes I get moments, usually in the middle of the night out on the river, when I ask myself, ‘How the hell did this happen?’”

The rescue service was established in 1984 and since then has dealt with 3,500 incidents and 3,500 casualties. It has helped almost 2,000 vessels as well as assisting the occasional ditched hot air balloon and stranded dolphin. Its original function was to protect visitors to the international garden festival on the Liverpool bank of the river. “The organisers were concerned that large numbers of people were going to be visiting Liverpool’s waterfront and thought they would provide a limited rescue service as a temporary measure,” said Mike Cummins, who was there at the start and is now the service’s chief officer.

“During the festival, a number of lives were saved in incidents which had nothing to do with the garden festival. We thought that suggested a need for a permanent rescue service in the area.”

It started with one small boat that cost about £2,000 (today’s speedster will cost £120,000 to replace) and was funded first by a charity and then with grants from the now-defunct Merseyside County Council, the Manpower Services Commission and Merseyside Development Corporation.

When what Cummins describes as the funny money began to run out, he and his team looked to Liverpool City Council for support. The city remains the principal funder, with other grants from Sefton and Wirral councils, Merseyside Police Authority, Mersey Travel and Liverpool John Lennon Airport.

“We have gone from providing a service for eight hours a day to a service that operates for 24 hours a day all year round. And we also provide a water-borne rescue service for Liverpool airport,” added Cummins. “But the grants from local authorities never fully meet the cost of providing the service. So there is always a gap that we have to bridge through charitable donations and fundraising events. This year we will probably have to raise £75,000 ourselves. We are always taking a gamble each year that the money is going to come in.”

“There is a serious problem because the board of directors cannot set a budget based on variable income,” said Frank Vaudrey, chairman of the service’s board. “It has to be on guaranteed income - otherwise we are breaking the law. So we have come quite close to the wire a few times.”

But there is a glimmer of hope on the horizon. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency, recently criticised by MPs over reductions in its service, is funding a risk assessment of search and rescue capability on the Mersey which is likely to be published towards the end of this year. Its recommendations will not be binding but if it finds gaps and makes suggestions for plugging them, it would be difficult for local councils not to be seen to react. Cummins also hopes those recommendations will help him provide a better service to the airport, which has a booming number of movements on a runway that runs parallel and close to the river.

The potential hazards of the setting were made apparent four years ago when five people were killed when an air ambulance from the Isle of Man came down in 20 ft of water on its approach to the airport.

“Recovering the bodies and the wreckage took a long time,” said Cummins. “The aircraft broke up on impact and the area was difficult to work in. There is only access by water at certain stages of the tide.”

This tragedy suggested to Cummins what could happen if a large aircraft with more than 200 passengers came down in the river. “Merseyside fire service has a policy of not going onto the water. This raises the issue of what would happen in the case of a major disaster. Their unofficial position is that they will attend - but they are not equipped for that job nor trained for an incident on the water.”

His message is blunt: “In the event of a major air disaster we are not collectively prepared. Unless you prepare, equip and train for that contingency, you are not going to be effective.”

The rescue service is the smallest player in all this but prides itself on its innovations. Andy Fell went off to Geneva to see how the airport there coped with the dangers of aircraft approaching and taking off over the city’s beautiful lake. They told him about the slide raft which he introduced on the Mersey and then recommended to the Port of London Authority for use on the Thames after the Marchioness disaster.

Most of the people the rescue service helps have got into trouble through accidents or incompetence and are delighted to see an experienced rescuer.

But those who come to the river in a bid to end it all - about 50 a year - are not always so pleased. “The people of Merseyside also have an emotional attachment to the river and I think that feeling is more intense than anywhere else in the country,” said Scott. “I have spoken to people who have tried to enter the water and they have often said, ‘I just wanted to slip beneath the waves and see the seagulls fly over me’. They have this romantic idea of what it is like to be in the Mersey. It’s almost a child-like perspective.”

The serious ones come at night and their bodies are pulled out of the water the next morning. For others, rescuers have to be counsellors, urging those about to jump not to do it. And even if they jump, the result may not be what they expected.

“One of my first and most difficult rescues was just at the back of the landing stage here,” said Scott. “At low water in the middle of the night, a woman had jumped into an inlet. But because the tide was out, she fell 40ft into deep mud and lay there unconscious and facedown.

“When we arrived, the fire, police and ambulance crews were all there but no one was in a position to be able to help her. We were the only people who could reach her.

“I left the boat and moved through a mix of deep mud and water, plus obstacles such as scaffolding poles and shopping trolleys. When I reached the woman, she regained consciousness after I dug her out and freed her airway. She was helped by the fact that she was quite drunk. When she came round, she looked at me and I introduced myself and told her why I was there.

“She said: ‘Kenny, you’ve ruined my night. I really wanted to die tonight’. It was quite surreal but it’s often the case that you will get no thanks when you are dealing with people who are emotionally disturbed.”

Scott helped her on her way, cleaned himself up and went back to the river.

MORE INFORMATION:
Ken Scott, Station Officer, 0151 236 1186
www.merseyrescue.co.uk