On 14 December 1822, the ship HMS Racehorse was on its way to Douglas, capital of the Isle of Man. Its mission was to escort back to England the partially repaired HMS Vigilant, which had run aground 2 months earlier on the treacherous St Mary’s Rock in Douglas Harbour. In the early evening, not too far from its destination, HMS Racehorse’s pilot mistook a shore light for that of Douglas Pier so he unknowingly caused the ship to head for the rocks, which she struck violently. Captain Suckling dispatched two boats from the ship to seek help. They reached nearby Castletown at about 1am.

Local men rushed to help but only one boat could launch through the rough surf. The brave rescuers rowed out several times to the shipwreck to collect its crew, almost all of whom were saved. Tragically, on its last attempt to reach shore carrying the final group of survivors, a large wave overcame the boat. The nine men onboard drowned, including six crewmen from HMS Racehorse and three local men – Norris Bridson, Thomas Hall and Robert Quayle – who had selflessly gone to the rescue. They left behind families with young children who had been dependent on them for their income and survival.

Even when people who witnessed shipwreck could help, the story of HMS Racehorse shows how they risked everything to do so.

The images show a selection of artefacts found by archaeological divers on the sunken shipwreck of HMS Racehorse near Langness Point on the Isle of Man. These objects were used by men serving in the Navy in the early 19th century.

Gravestones of people that died as a result of the shipwreck of HMS Racehorse in December 1822 can be seen at Malew Church graveyard on the Isle of Man.

The families of naval crewmen who died in service were provided for with pensions from the British Navy. For example, the orphaned son of Charles Caggett (a crewman onboard HMS Racehorse who died in this wreck) was sent to the Greenwich Hospital School.

However, the families of Norris Bridson, Thomas Hall and Robert Quayle, the Manx men who died, were left at risk of poverty after their providers had been taken from them by the sea.

Manx resident Sir William Hillary thought it was highly unfair that the families of men who risked their lives to rescue others from shipwreck should not be provided for. Just 2 months earlier, when the Navy ship HMS Vigilant had first gone aground (see above), Sir William Hillary had himself gathered volunteers and rowed out to help rescue survivors. He knew first-hand the risks taken by those selfless enough to rescue.

So Sir William Hillary wrote to the Admiralty to request financial assistance for the Manx men’s families.

1. Who would have been affected by this shipwreck? Write a list of people, starting with those most affected and ending with those least affected.

2. Who do you think would have been held accountable for HMS Racehorse being shipwrecked?

3. How can having people to blame for wrongdoing be useful to campaigns?

4. The story of the rescue from HMS Racehorse and its aftermath powerfully demonstrates community action. What local examples of communities taking action to make things better can you think of?