Sir William Hillary, founder of the RNLI
Courtesy: RNLI
Heritage Trust


Sir William Hillary was a man with a mission to save lives at sea. He had witnessed terrible scenes of shipwreck, recruited volunteers to battle stormy seas in heroic rescues and successfully championed the plight of families left destitute when their loved ones were drowned. But Hillary recognised that more could be done to preserve lives.

In his appeal pamphlet, Hillary outlines his idea to create a national organisation responsible for saving lives at sea. He had a vision that help would be given automatically to all those in need of rescue all around Britain’s coastline.

He outlined that the way to achieve this would be to:
- provide lifeboats to stations around the coast
- man them with trained crews ready to rescue at any time
- provide incentives to encourage brave volunteers, such as payments if they were injured, or payments to their bereaved families if they were killed at sea.

He published and distributed hundreds of copies of the first edition of his appeal and targeted the Admiralty Board as the likely organisation to make his vision a reality.

In order to reach a wider, even international, audience, Sir William Hillary then printed a second edition to which he added an emotive introduction stressing the extreme urgency of forming a National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck.

1. How would you describe Sir William Hillary’s choice of language in the first extract? Make a list of words to support your decision.
2. How does Hillary draw attention to the problem of shipwreck? List the rhetorical devices he uses to persuade others, giving examples for each one.
3. Which emotions is Hillary trying to evoke?
For many years, and in various countries, the melancholy and fatal cases of shipwreck which I have witnessed, have excited a powerful interest in my mind for the situation of those who are exposed to this awful calamity; but the idea of the advantages which would result from the establishment of a national institution, for the preservation of human life from the perils of the sea, has only suggested itself to me since my residence on a part of the coast often exposed to the most distressing scenes of misery, and where the dreadful storms of the last autumn prevailed with usual violence.

On some occasions, it has been my lot to witness the loss of many valuable lives, where, if there had been establishments previously formed for affording prompt relief, and encouragement given to those who might volunteer on such a cause, in all probability the greater part would have been saved. At other times I have seen the noblest instances of self-devotion; men have saved the lives of their fellow-creatures at the peril of their own, without a prospect of reward if successful, and with the certitude that their families would be left destitute if they perished.

From these circumstances, I have been induced to wish, that the results of the experience, talent, and genius, of the most distinguished commanders and men of science should be united in the formation of one great institution, which would in itself embrace every possible means for the preservation of life from the hazards of shipwreck.

Though many distinguished officers have employed their time and attention, and often exposed their personal safety for this object, yet, throughout nearly the whole of the most dangerous parts of the coast, no means have been adopted, no precautions taken for affording assistance in cases of shipwreck. Winter after winter, we have the most distressing details of the deplorable consequences; lives have been lost, which might otherwise have been saved; acts have even sometimes been perpetrated in which humanity shudders, and which have caused other nations to cast reproach and opprobrium on the British name.

But individual efforts, however meritorious in themselves, are unequal to produce all the benefits, or remedy all the evils, attendant on one of the most inevitable perils to which (in the present state of society) human nature is exposed; and which is most likely to fall upon those who are in the very prime of manhood, and in the discharge of the most active and important duties of life. From the calamity of shipwreck we can say that he may at all times remain safe; and whilst he is now providing only for the safety of others, a day may come which will render the cause his own.

These are not arguments founded on the visionary contemplation of remote or improbable dangers. Their urgent necessity must be obvious to every mind. So long as men shall continue to navigate the sea, and the tempests shall hold their course over its surface, in every age and on every coast, disasters by sea, shipwreck, and pest to human life, must inevitably take place; and with this terrible certainty before our eyes, the duty becomes imperative, that we should use every means to

4. Why do you think Hillary was motivated to write this appeal?
5. How does Hillary create an impression of his credibility?
6. What solutions to the problem of shipwreck does Hillary suggest?

7. Sir William Hillary’s proposed aims of the institution are shown in order of priority from highest to lowest. What values do the proposed aims of the institution illustrate?
8. What are the values of today’s RNLI? Use RNLI.org to find out.