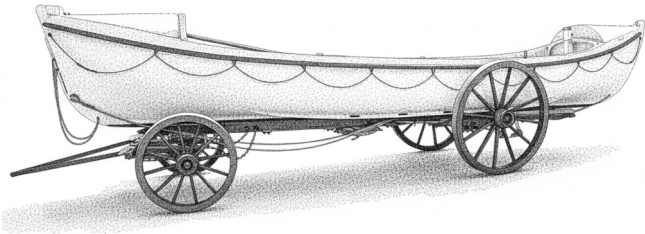
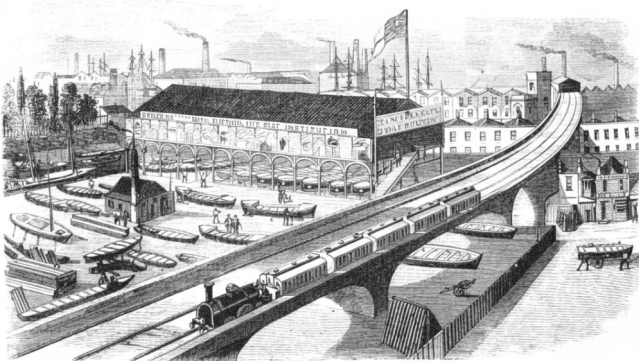


Wuhoo Timaru

1862 Alexandra Lifeboat of Timaru - More Than a Vessel - She is a Monument.



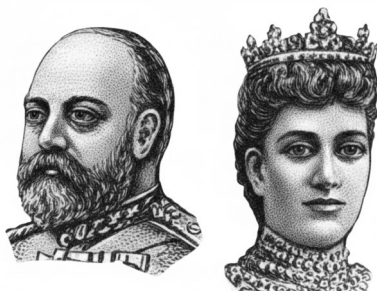
Built in Britain in 1862 and brought to Timaru in 1863, the Alexandra lifeboat was ordered by the Canterbury Provincial Government for the people of this town. At the time, Timaru's coast was exposed and unforgiving. Ships anchored offshore in the open Roadstead, and when the sea rose suddenly, lives were often at risk.



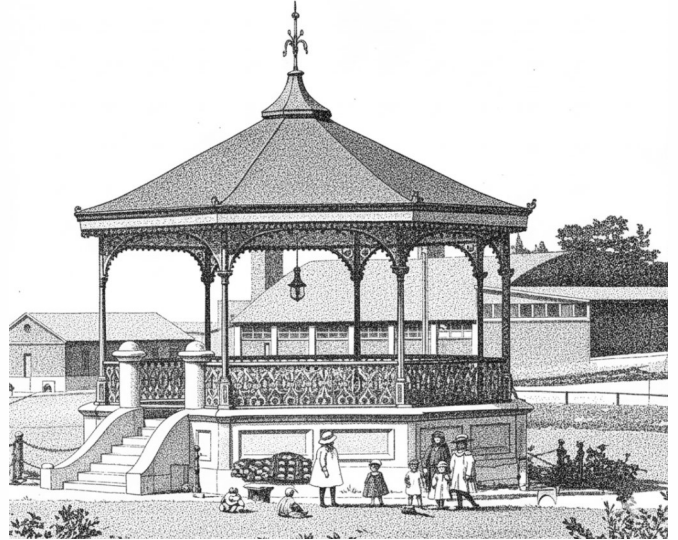
Shipyard where the Alexandra was built, Britain

The Alexandra arrived at a moment of global change in sea rescue. In 1854, Queen Victoria granted a Royal Charter to the National Lifeboat Institution, later known as the RNLI, giving authority to a new, coordinated approach to saving lives at sea. Central to this was the development of self-righting lifeboats, designed to survive capsizing and heavy surf.

One of the strongest supporters of this work was Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts, a leading Victorian philanthropist who helped fund lifeboats, equipment, crews, and seafarers' welfare. Through this combination of design, organisation, and philanthropy, lifesaving technology advanced rapidly and spread far beyond Britain.



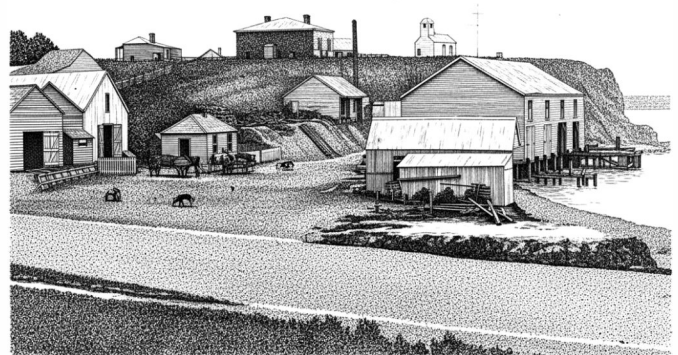
Prince Albert Edward "Bertie" and Princess Alexandra of Denmark



The band rotunda and town square in Timaru named after Princess Alexandra.

Timaru was one of the earliest ports internationally to adopt this new generation of lifeboat, placing the town at the forefront of lifesaving practice at a time when many communities still relied on open surfboats. The lifeboat was christened Alexandra, in honour of Princess Alexandra of Denmark, who married Queen Victoria's eldest son, Albert Edward, in 1863. Her name became associated with humanitarian values and modern progress. Timaru's lifeboat and Alexandra Square were named in her honour, reflecting the town's connection to Britain.

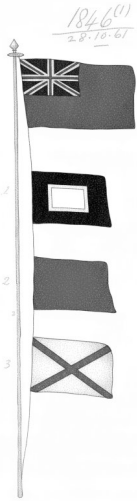
Before the harbour existed, Timaru lived by the sea and suffered because of it. Rescue depended on strength, skill, and judgement, often carried out by volunteers launching into heavy surf with little protection. While the Roadstead posed constant danger when swell or storms arrived, not every wreck was caused by weather alone. Some vessels were poorly maintained, damaged, or unfit for conditions. Others suffered shifted cargo, mechanical failure, or human error.



The Landing Service at the foot of Strathallan Street, was known as Cains Landing.

In 1857, mariner Captain Henry Cain established a landing service at the foot of Strathallan Street, using surfboats to transfer passengers and goods between ships anchored offshore and the shore. It later came under government control and formed the backbone of Timaru's early port operations.

1862 Alexandra Lifeboat of Timaru - More Than a Vessel - She is a Monument.



Belfield Woollcombe's harbour flag instructions.

From the cliffs above the Roadstead, lookouts watched constantly for trouble. Flags were raised to warn ships, signal changing conditions, and summon assistance. Without radios or engines, judgement and timing mattered. A delay of minutes could cost lives.

While the Roadstead posed constant danger when swell or storms arrived, not every wreck was caused by weather alone. Some vessels were poorly maintained, damaged, or unfit for the conditions. Others suffered shifted cargo, mechanical failure, or human error. The risks of ship-to-shore transfer in an exposed anchorage were ever present, even on calm days.

The death of James Melville Balfour, New Zealand's Colonial Marine Engineer, revealed the deeper urgency behind Timaru's harbour development. Balfour was responsible for advising on coastal works and improving the efficiency and safety of ports throughout the colony.

He had been in Timaru examining the coastline and harbour conditions, including the behaviour of drifting shingle, as part of this work.



Grave of James M Balfour, Dunedin Cemetery.

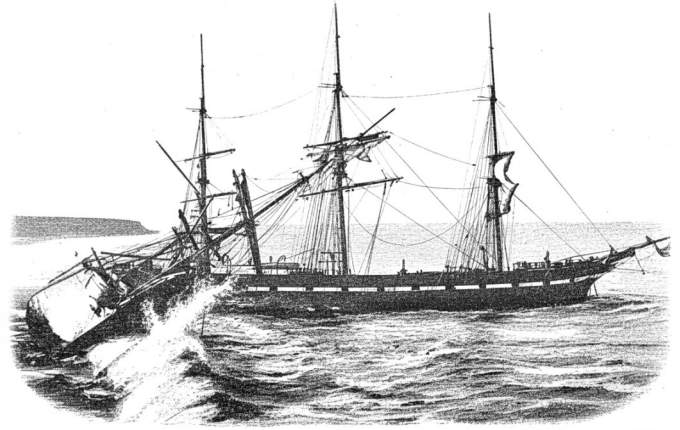
In 1869, while attempting to board a steamer anchored offshore, Balfour was drowned when the surfboat carrying him capsized. He was 38 years old, travelling in the ordinary course of his duties and bound for Oamaru to attend matters connected with another maritime death. There was no storm that day. The man charged with improving harbour safety lost his life in the very waters he was assessing. His death reinforced a stark truth: rescue alone was not enough. Timaru needed lasting protection.

The Alexandra was housed in a shed at the foot of Strathallan Street, beside the landing service first run by Captain Henry Cain and later by the Government. From here, passengers and cargo were transferred through heavy surf, day after day.

The lifeboat formed part of a wider rescue system that included harbour lookouts, flag signalling, the Rocket Brigade, and shore-based crews. As the service developed, crews became trained and, for a time, paid professionals.

The risks were constant. In 1869, lifeboatman Cameron Duncan drowned while attempting to reach the vessel Twilight during a rescue involving the Alexandra. Government and community subscriptions were raised to support his family and burial. Duncan was laid to rest in an unmarked grave in Row 0 at Timaru Cemetery, a reminder that not all who gave their lives were publicly commemorated at the time.

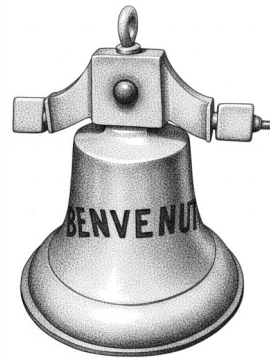
When crew allowances were reduced and equipment wore out, local women stepped forward, organising concerts, subscription lists, and sewing work to support rescue services, replace gear, and assist families affected by loss. In 1873, supporters formed the Alexandra Lifeboat Lodge, reinforcing the belief that lifesaving was a shared civic responsibility.



Black Sunday, 14 May 1882: The Benvenue and City of Perth wrecks. By J. Dickie. Brodie Collection, La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria. 9917507453607636

The Alexandra's darkest and finest hours came on Black Sunday, when the ships Benvenue and City of Perth were wrecked in a sudden and violent sea. Volunteers launched the lifeboat again and again, refusing to stop while men remained in peril.

Some did not come home. The scale of courage shown that day was formally recognised. Medals were awarded to those involved in the rescue efforts, and a public memorial was later erected in Timaru to honour both the dead and the living.



The Benvenue ship's bell and the Bravery Award medals that are displayed at the South Canterbury Museum.

Among those most closely associated with Timaru's rescue services was Captain Alexander Mills, who served as Harbour Master and led the Timaru Volunteer Rocket Brigade. He witnessed many of the town's shipwrecks and carried the responsibility of balancing safety with the practical demands of a working port. On Black Sunday, 14 May 1882, Captain Mills took part in the rescue attempts during the wreck of the Benvenue and the City of Perth. He made it back to shore, but later that day died from shock and exposure, as ruled by the inquest. He was 48 years old.



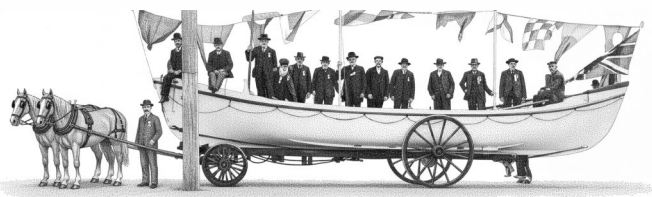
The Harbourmaster, Captain Alexander Mills and his grave at Timaru Cemetery. His wife Margaret and several of their children rest here as well.

1862 Alexandra Lifeboat of Timaru - More Than a Vessel - She is a Monument.



1932 memorial service at the Benvenue Monument.
The Alexandra lifeboat is visible in background.
Illustration based on South Canterbury Museum photo 1456

After her active service ended, the Alexandra continued to be cared for by the Timaru Harbour Board, before being gifted to the Timaru Borough Council in 1932. That year, on the 50th anniversary of Black Sunday, a memorial service was held at Caroline Bay. The Alexandra stood nearby, already recognised as a vessel of remembrance as well as rescue.



50th Anniversary of Black Sunday parade.
Illustration based on South Canterbury Museum photo 1554

In 1997, the Timaru Maritime and Transportation Trust was established to oversee the lifeboat's conservation and long-term protection. Following the restoration of the historic 1870s Landing Service Building at 2 George Street by the Timaru Civic Trust, the Alexandra was moved there. Her major restoration was completed by 1999, ensuring her survival for future generations.

After a period in storage, the work of care continued behind the scenes, reflecting more than a century of community commitment to preserving the lifeboat and the stories she carries.

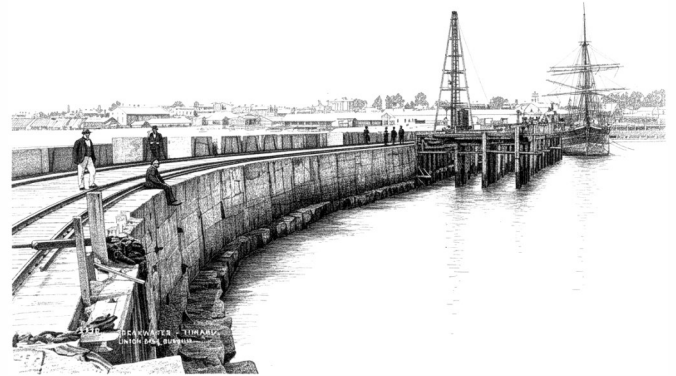
In December 2025, the Alexandra returned to Caroline Bay, housed in a new shelter near the water she once faced. Her return marked more than 160 years of community care, service, and remembrance.



A lifeboat that is still in existence is cared for in Norway.

The Blackett Lighthouse and the enclosed harbour transformed safety at Timaru. Before they existed, ships anchored offshore in the open Roadstead, exposed to sudden swell, dragging anchors, and poor visibility. The lighthouse provided a constant visual warning, guiding vessels away from dangerous cliffs and reefs, day and night.

The harbour allowed ships to enter protected water, removing the need for hazardous ship-to-shore transfers and open anchorage. Together, they reduced groundings, collisions, and wrecks, and greatly lessened the need for emergency rescues. Where the Alexandra and Rocket Brigade responded to danger, the lighthouse and harbour helped prevent it.



The breakwater helped to reduce shipwrecks and loss of life.



The Blackett Lighthouse at Timaru was built in 1877–1878. It was part of John Blackett's nationwide programme of lighthouses, introduced to improve maritime safety after repeated shipwrecks along New Zealand's coast.
Illustration based on South Canterbury Museum photo 202105704

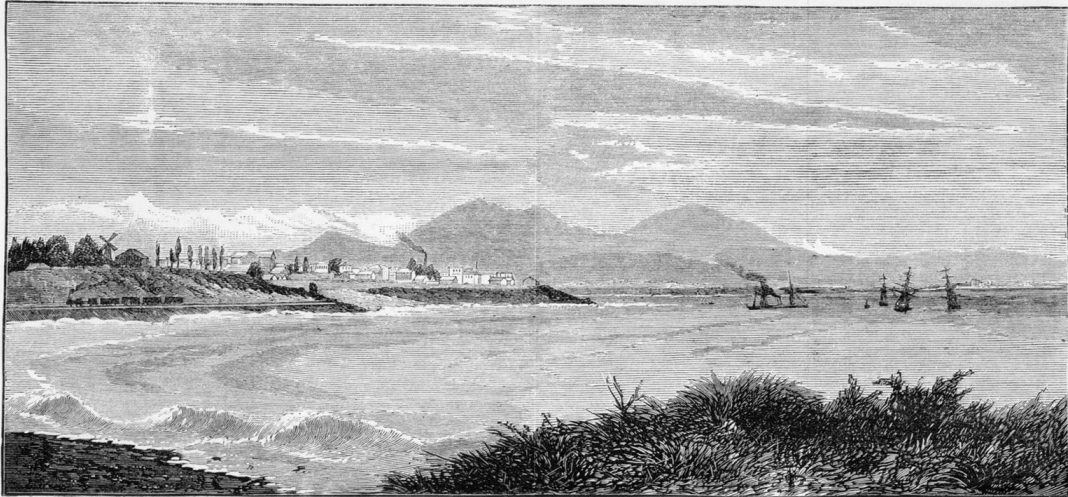
Today, the Alexandra remains one of the oldest surviving lifeboats of her type in the world, giving Timaru international significance within maritime heritage. She stands here not as an object of nostalgia, but as a witness.

*To courage and loss. To women's work and community resolve.
To innovation, leadership, and care across generations. To a town that
chose to act — and to remember.*



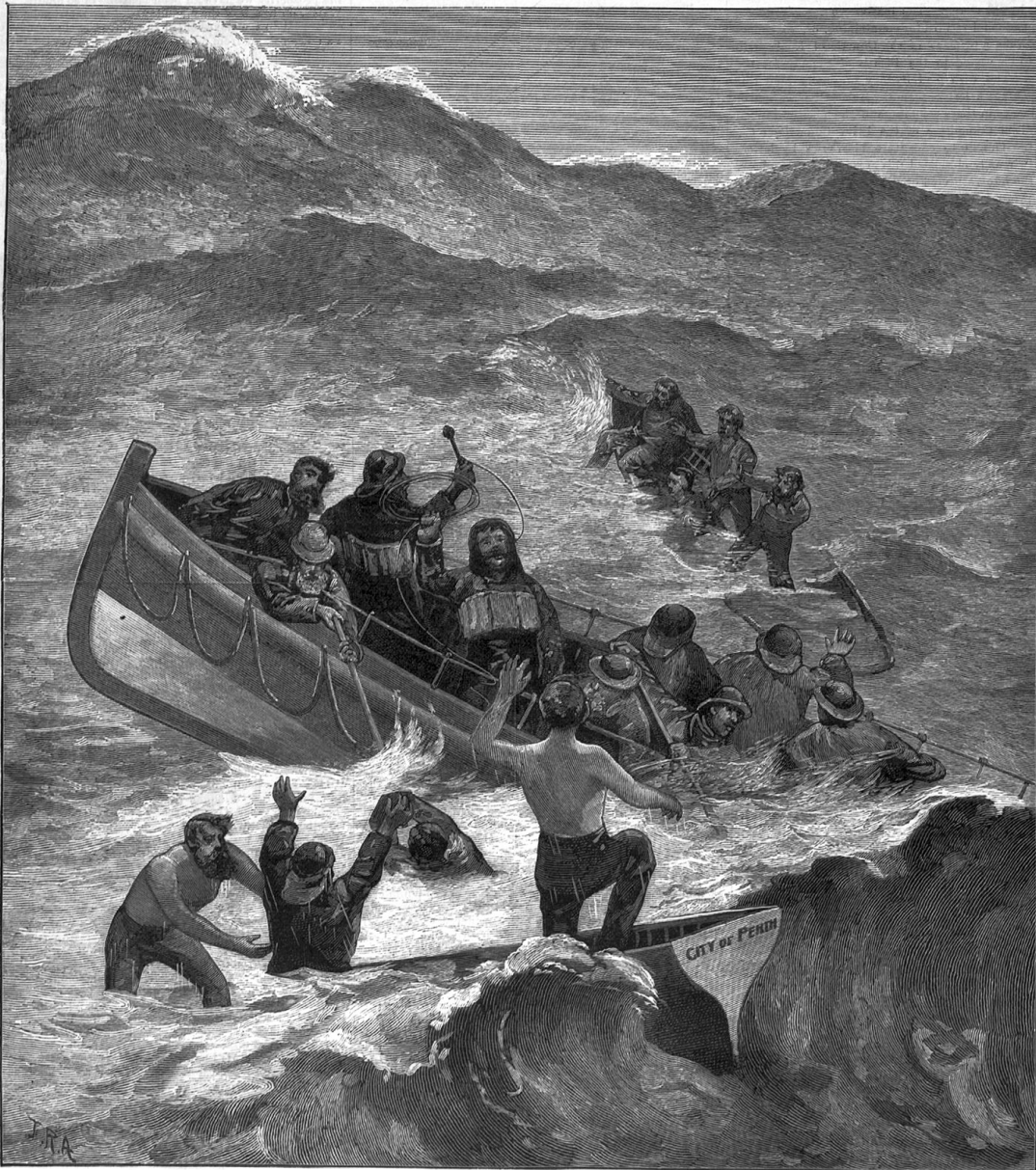
The construction of the southern breakwater began in 1878 to protect the port from rough seas.
Illustration based on Te Papa. PA.000203

Rescue, Reform, and Harbour Construction Timeline



THE ROADSTEAD, TIMARU, N. Z.

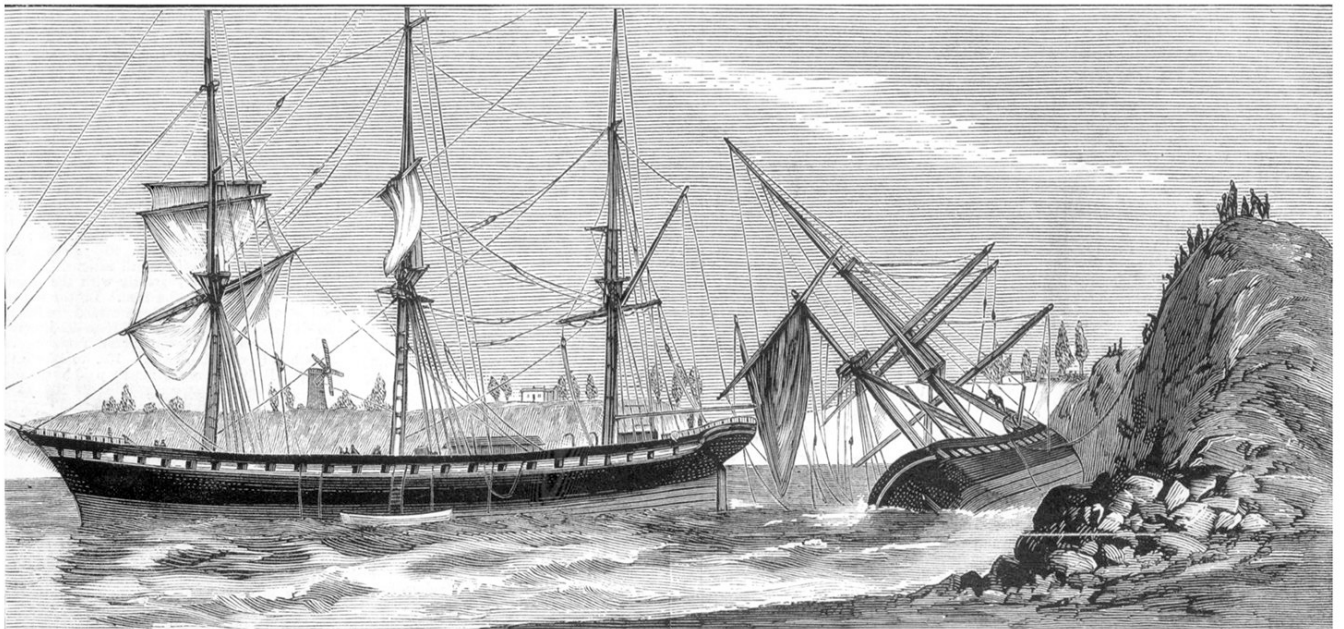
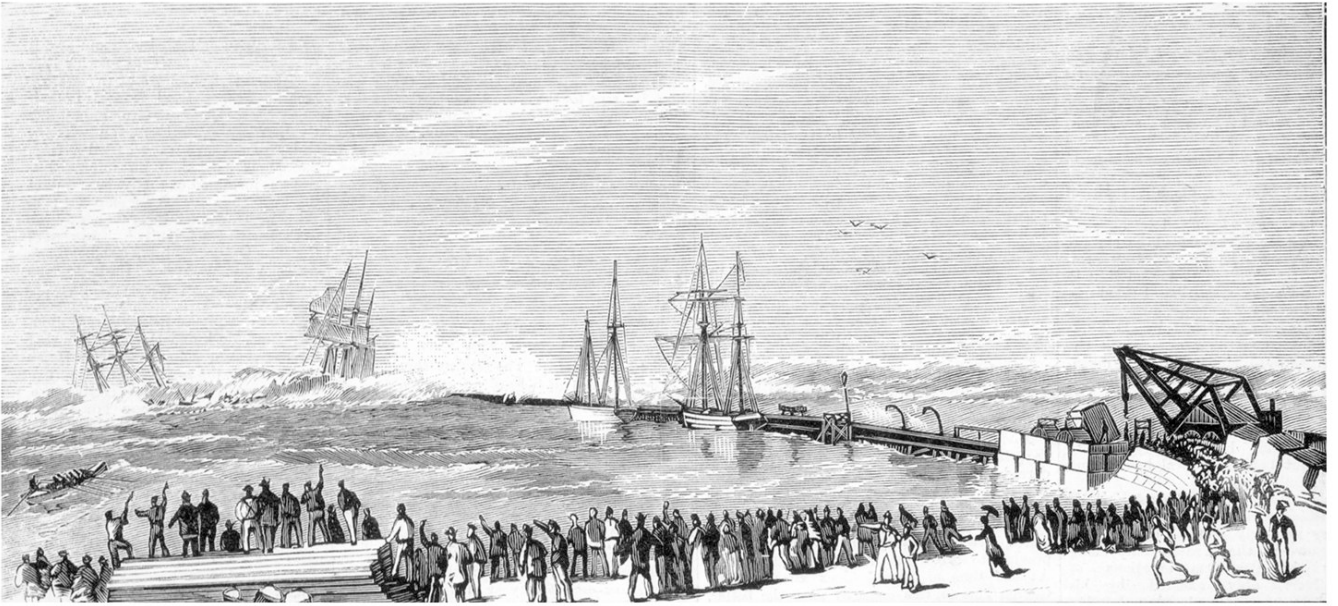
THE ROADSTEAD, TIMARU, N. Z. [picture]. (1877). Ebenezer and David Syme.



THE WRECKS AT TIMARU, NEW ZEALAND: THE LIFEBOAT RESCUING THE CREW.

The Wrecks at Timaru, New Zealand; The Lifeboat rescuing sailors in heavy surf, one life boat named City of Perth.
Wood engraving by Ashton, Julian Rossi, 1851-1942

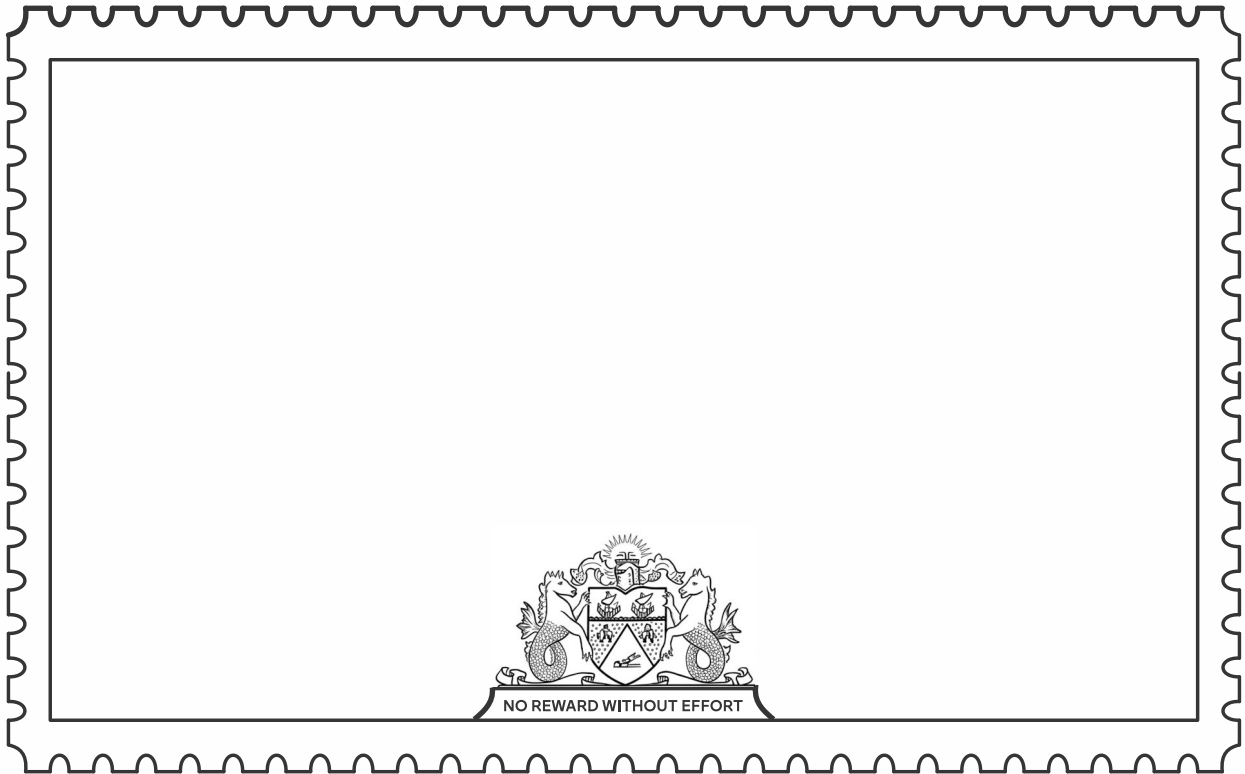
Rescue, Reform, and Harbour Construction Timeline



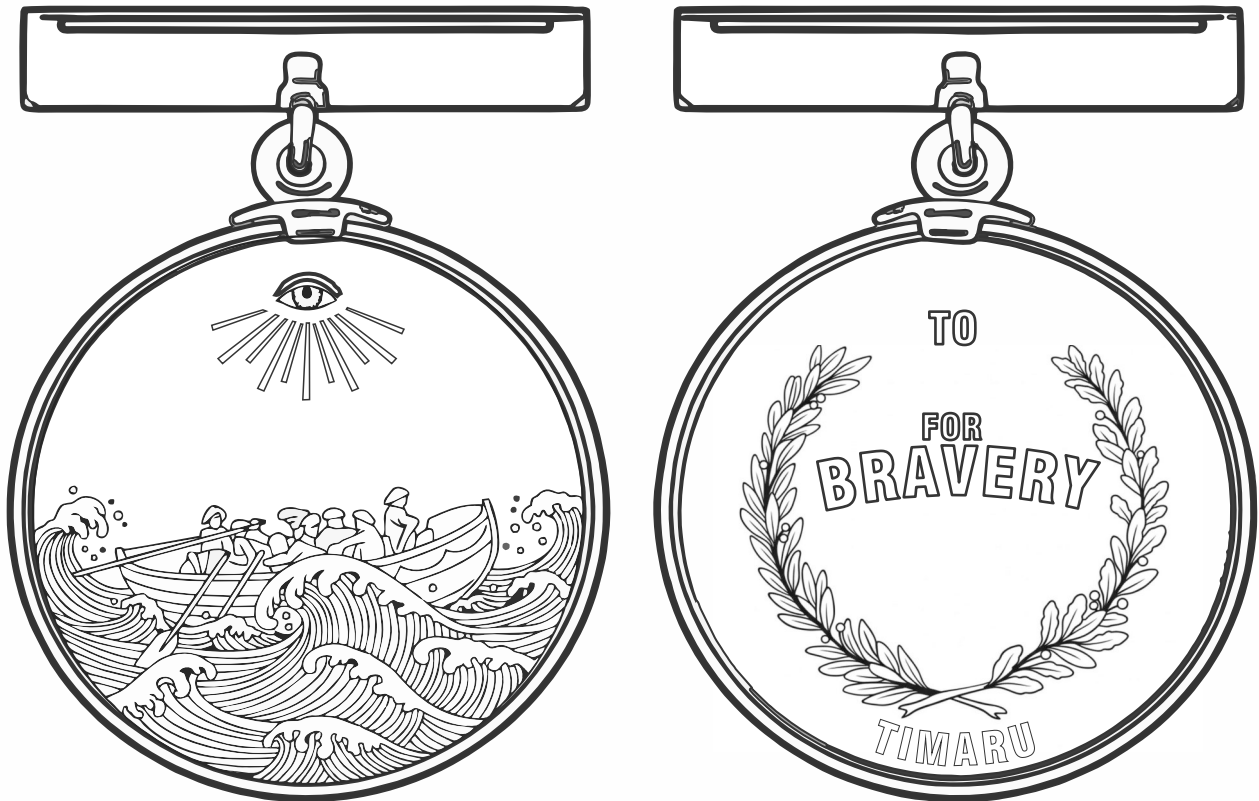
Rescue, Reform, and Harbour Construction Timeline

1820s–1840s	Sealers work along the Timaru coast, followed by the Weller Brothers whalers, who establish a shore station in 1839. Māori from Arowhenua help operate whaleboats along the coast, predating organised European landing services.	1875	The lifeboat crew's £1 monthly allowance is cut, and members must volunteer. Local women organise fundraising events to support the Lifeboat Lodge and rescue services.
c.1856	Samuel "Yankie Sam" Williams, a former Timaru whaler, returns to work for the Rhodes Brothers, assisting with shore whaling and early landing operations.	1877	A public meeting in Richard Turnbull's Hall, attended by about 600 people, demands harbour improvements. The Timaru Harbour Board is established. The Timaru Rocket Brigade formally forms.
1854	Queen Victoria grants a Royal Charter to the National Lifeboat Institution (later RNLI), promoting coordinated sea rescue and self-righting lifeboat design.	1877–1878	The Blckett Lighthouse, designed by John Blckett, is built and first lit, becoming part of New Zealand's national maritime safety network.
1857	Captain Henry Cain establishes Cain's Landing Service at the foot of Strathallan Street for Henry Le Cren, transferring passengers and cargo through surf. Captain Belfield Woollcombe, a Royal Navy officer, arrives as Customs Officer, Harbourmaster, Beachmaster, and Pilot.	1878–1879	The Harbour Board begins constructing John Goodall's breakwater, quarrying local volcanic rock and using large concrete blocks. Around 300 feet of breakwater is completed in the first stage.
1860	A small lifeboat arrives from Sydney, reflecting growing concern for maritime safety.	1880	Ships including the Prince Rupert, S.S. Grafton, Mary King, and Elizabeth Conway are among the first to moor alongside the breakwater. The George Street Landing Service is absorbed during consolidation of port services.
1861	Timaru is gazetted as a Port of Entry, formalising its role in coastal and international trade.	By 1883	The original wharf is extended to approximately 840 feet.
1862–1863	The Canterbury Provincial Government orders a self-righting lifeboat from Britain. Built in 1862, it arrives in 1863 and is christened Alexandra, named for Princess Alexandra of Denmark. Alexandra Square is also named in her honour.	1882	Black Sunday 14 May: The Benvenue and City of Perth are wrecked. The Alexandra lifeboat and Rocket Brigade conduct repeated rescue attempts. Ten men die, including Captain Alexander Mills, who later dies from shock and exposure. Medals are awarded for bravery.
1863–1864	The Alexandra is housed in a shed beside Cain's Landing Place. The Government begins developing the Strathallan Street landing service. Engines and winding gear are ordered for hauling boats and cargo. The Timaru Herald is established, reporting on shipwrecks, rescues, and harbour debates. The Government purchases the Strathallan Street landing service.	1885	The Alexandra lifeboat crew formally disbands as harbour protection reduces the need for open-sea rescue.
1866	Captain Alexander Mills is appointed Harbourmaster. Rocket apparatus is used during the rescue of the Prince Consort, though no formal brigade exists yet.	1887	The Rocket Brigade disbands.
1867	The Timaru Shipping and Landing Company forms a rival service at George Street. Strongwork Morrison, one of the Deal boatmen who arrived in 1859, serves as Beachmaster and Pilot.	1890	The harbour scheme is completed, effectively ending Timaru's most dangerous maritime era.
1868	The Canterbury Provincial Council approves funding for a Harbourmaster at Timaru.	1892	The rocket apparatus is used for the final time.
1865–1890	Timaru gains a reputation as a "ship graveyard". 34 major maritime incidents are recorded, with 30 ships wrecked or refloated.	1898	Shingle undermines parts of the breakwater, prompting an eastward extension to better control drift.
1869	Engineer James Melville Balfour, New Zealand's Colonial Marine Engineer, studies Timaru's drifting shingle using a small concrete groyne. While attempting to board a steamer anchored offshore, Balfour drowns at Timaru. Cameron Duncan, a lifeboatman, also drowns during a rescue attempt to reach the Twilight. He is buried in an unmarked grave in Row 0, Timaru Cemetery.	1903	The Tuhawaiki (Jack's) Point Lighthouse is installed by the Harbour Board using the former Somes Island lighthouse tower.
1870	A paid and trained lifeboat crew is established. Captain Mills serves as Chief Coxswain of the Alexandra.	1912	The Alexandra is paraded with waterside workers, reflecting her symbolic status.
By 1871	The Alexandra has saved at least seven lives.	1932	On the 50th anniversary of Black Sunday, the Alexandra is placed on public display at Caroline Bay. The Harbour Board gifts the lifeboat to the Timaru Borough Council.
1873	The Independent Order of Good Templars Alexandra Lifeboat Lodge forms with around 80 members, providing organised community support.	1997	The Timaru Maritime and Transportation Trust is established. The Timaru Civic Trust restores the 1870s Landing Service Building at 2 George Street.
		1999	Major restoration of the Alexandra is completed.
		2024	The Maritime and Transportation Trust concludes its role.
		Dec 2025	The Alexandra returns to Caroline Bay, housed in a new shelter near the sea she once faced.
			Today The Alexandra is one of the oldest surviving lifeboats of her type in the world, a monument to courage, loss, community care, and Timaru's transition from rescue to prevention.

Design Your Timaru Commemorative Stamp

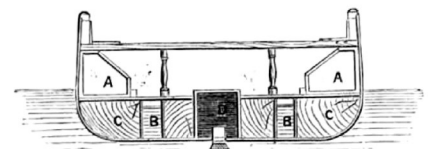
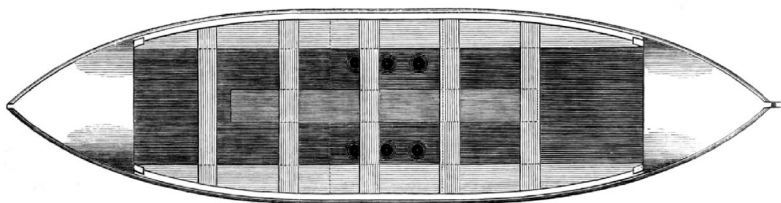
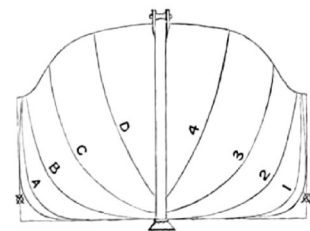
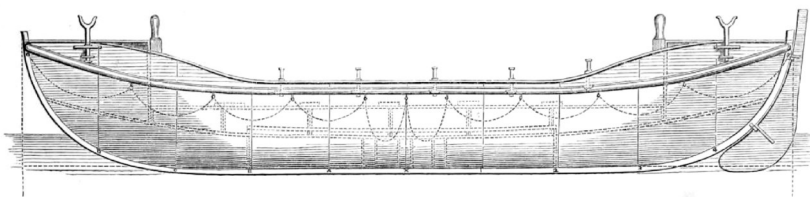
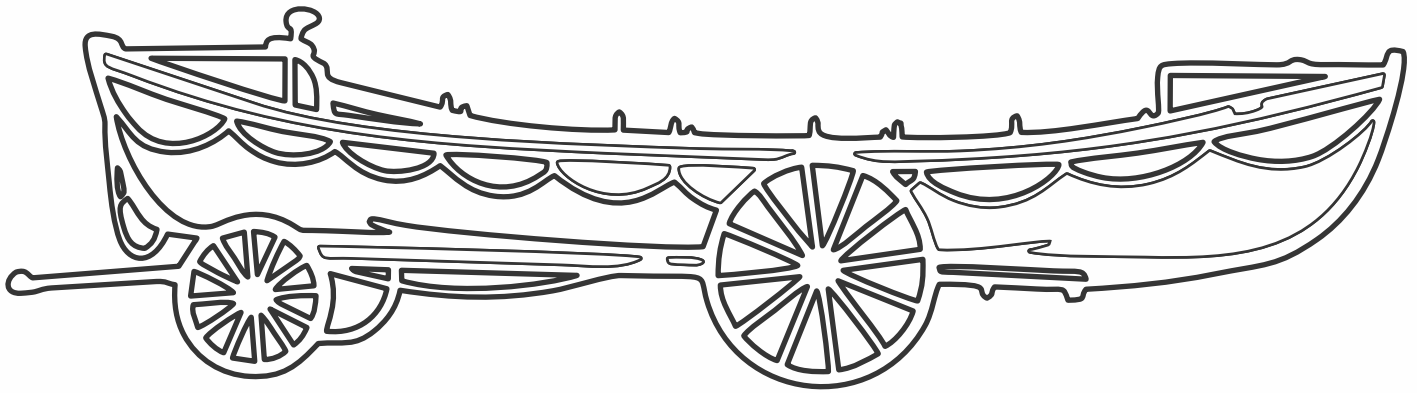


Colour in



The men recognised by the St John's Masonic Lodge for their bravery in the Black Sunday rescue.
Forty received medals in person in August 1882: W. Collis, J. McIntosh, A. H. Turnbull, J. Cracknell, J. Thompson, G. Sunnaway, R. Collins, John Reid, J. Houlihan, M. Lekoy, J. A. Petterson, G. Findlay, C. Gruhm, J. Henneker, W. Halford, G. Shirtcliffe, W. Walls, R. H. Balsom, T. Hart, G. Davis, W. S. Smith, F. McKenzie, T. Morgan, C. Vogeler, P. Bradley, D. Bradley, S. J. Passmore, J. Crocombe, C. Moore, A. Schabb, T. Martin, M. Thompson, W. Oxby, I. J. Bradley, H. Trouselot, W. H. Walls, J. Isherwood, A. L. Haylock, John Ivey, and W. Budd. Three were absent and their medals were sent to Scotland: G. Mentac, C. McDonald, and W. R. McAteer.

Colour in the 1862 Timaru Alexandra Lifeboat



1856 LIFEBOAT, DESIGNED BY JAMES PEAKE, ESQ.

ASSISTANT MASTER SHIPWRIGHT AT H.M. DOCKYARD, WOOLWICH. ADOPTED BY THE ROYAL NATIONAL LIFEBOAT INSTITUTION.

CONSTRUCTED BY MESSRS. FORRESTT, OF LIMEHOUSE.

Illustration By J Peakes. Published in The Engineer, Vol 201, P20.

THE ALEXANDRA ENABLED THE CREW TO:

Rely on a proven RNLI design,

with enhancements.

It was built and tested in Britain before shipped to New Zealand ready for service.

Launch rapidly from the beach,

using a wheeled launching carriage, pulled by horses or men, straight out into the surf.

Generate powerful propulsion,

using oars to row in heavy seas. They could steer from either end. The *Alexandra* came with a sail and mast.

Hold steady and drive through surf,

using the ballast keel for grip and the double-ended shape to take waves from either direction. Its shallow rudder could lift on the gudgeon pin to avoid damage.

Survive a capsizel, roll back over, and stay afloat,

with a self-righting hull using airtight bow and stern cases. Self-draining valves emptied the swamped boat in about 30 seconds. Built-in air cases and cork added buoyancy to reduce water intake.