

The Founders of the Royal Life Saving Society

*While our founder **William Henry** is universally celebrated as the impetus for the early growth and development of the Society, the unique qualities and commitment of his closest colleagues also merit recognition.*

Archibald Sinclair was a journalist by profession and a keen swimmer who co-authored *Swimming* magazine with Henry in 1893. **Sir Andrew Clark**, co-author of the first Society Handbook delivered the first sponsored public lecture on 25th May 1891. He was also the personal physician to Prime Minister William Gladstone.

William Wilson evolved the “drill method” of training, which was practised in Glasgow on a competitive basis and he offered this method to the Society. He also co-authored the first Handbook.

Dr. W. Collingridge was the Medical Officer of Health for the Port of London and co-authored the first Handbook.

Sydney J. Monks, a celebrated swimmer and considered William Henry’s “right hand man” in many demonstrations in lifesaving, took over as Chief Secretary upon Henry’s death.

There were others, possibly less well known but who brought important medical expertise; including **Sir E. Sharpey-Shafer**, Professor of Physiology at the University of Edinburgh, who contributed to the Handbook and was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal in recognition of his work associated with Artificial Resuscitation.

Another was **Sydney Holland**, the Rt. Honorable Viscount Knutsford, Chairman of London Hospitals who in 1908 gave the first public lecture on the “Shafer” method of artificial resuscitation which led to the Society adopting that method in 1907. He served as Acting President of the Society from 1896 to 1900.

Others, namely **Sir William J. Bull**, **Harry J. Barclay** and **John V. Hudson** served in key positions for many years. These men, while certainly less well known than William Henry, played important roles in the early success of the Society.

The *actions* of our Founders also figure prominently in the Society’s early growth and development.

When addressing a public problem such as drowning, it would be tempting to think that everyone shares your passion and that little other than sheer enthusiasm will carry the day. The Founders thought otherwise. After thoughtful consideration they settled on principles and qualities which they embedded into the tenets of the Society.

These included crafting the **Aims and Objects** which described the purpose and direction of the Society, the **Proficiency Awards**, (beginning with the landmark **Bronze Medallion** (1892), and the **Diploma** (1896) followed by many others), which predicated lifesaving training on the achievement of high standards, the careful giving of medals for success and instructional Handbooks which standardized the

collective body of Society lifesaving knowledge in a form that was easy for ordinary citizens to understand.

These methods of organization and the Society's perseverance in retaining them formed the bedrock of a foundation that stands until this day.

(To learn more about the Aims and Objects, Proficiency Awards and other accomplishments, read ['Ten Milestone Achievements of the RLSS'](#).)

While matters of organization occupied the Founder's time, so did public outreach. In 1891 the Society was teaching swimmers the skills of lifesaving. An annual series of public lectures and demonstration of the principles of lifesaving was established.

As historian David Browne notes: "These classes must have been effective for in 1892 more than half the cases of rescue and resuscitation recorded were attributed to members of the Society and others who had witnessed the demonstrations".

The Society grew to such an extent that within *just three years of its formation*, it reported a membership of over 50,000 persons.

Promotional work was done on a mass scale; the Society held displays of lifesaving techniques at swimming galas. In 1892 the Society hosted the National Life Saving Competition, sponsored by Lever Brothers, the large soap manufacturer. These galas attracted large crowds; attendance at Highgate Ponds in 1911 was estimated at 50,000 onlookers. By that year, some 13,000 people had passed awards given by the Society.

Early on, the Society's outreach extended to many parts of the British Empire and beyond.

In 1897 William Henry toured England, Scotland and Ireland, promoting and giving public exhibitions of lifesaving techniques. A branch of the Society was established in Scotland shortly after. In 1898, after a trip there, the Swedish life saving society was formed. The Society's manual was translated into German, Italian and Finnish.

Even further afield, Henry travelled to Canada in 1909 performing demonstrations and examinations. The first branch was established there in 1908. In 1910 he visited Australia and New Zealand and in 1913 he visited South Africa where eventually, a branch was formed.

In 1924 the Society was granted its Royal Charter. In the year previous it recorded a remarkable total of over a quarter of a million awards made.

With many foundational achievements including establishing a foothold in nations well beyond the United Kingdom, William Henry and his many associates had positioned the Society for the remarkable growth and development that has sustained it for over a century and a quarter.

All those in the RLSS and indeed all citizens who have benefitted from their devotion to our humanitarian cause owe a deep debt of gratitude to these extraordinary individuals.