

**'Grace Darling and the Fine Art of Saving Lives at Sea' Review by Marlene Chase  
Talk by Dr James Taylor FRSA, at General Meeting on 21 November 2023**

The subject of this talk was Grace Darling (1815-1842), the daughter of a lighthouse keeper, who became famous for her part in the daring rescue of steamship passengers wrecked off the Northumberland coast in 1838. Dr James Taylor not only gave us the facts of the rescue, but also fascinating details of the aftermath, when Grace Darling became a national heroine. She was even the first woman to be awarded a medal for gallantry.

As a Fellow of the Royal Society of Artists, James not surprisingly illustrated his talk with many of the paintings and lithographs created by artists of the time to depict Grace's amazing rescue (the clue may be in his title for the talk). He also mentioned that some paintings exhibited more artistic licence than others with regard to her appearance, even depicting Grace as tall and fair-haired for example.

The facts of the rescue are well-documented. The steamship *Forfarshire* was sailing from Hull to Dundee with around 60 crew and passengers, and came to grief in the Farne Islands during a storm on the night of 7th September 1838. Nine survivors managed to find refuge on nearby rocks, and they were spotted in the early morning by Grace from her bedroom in the Longstone Lighthouse. She and her father, William, launched their coble (a wooden rowing boat with a high brow and a flat bottom) and made for the shipwreck and survivors, experiencing treacherous sea conditions on the way. Since the boat only had room to pick up five survivors at one time, William clambered onto the rocks to explain, while Grace rowed frantically to and fro to keep the boat safe. The five taken off first included a badly-injured man and a woman whose two children had both died that night, and they were rowed back to the lighthouse. William and two of the stronger passengers returned to rescue the remainder, while Grace stayed put with the others at the lighthouse.



This event inspired poems as well as paintings and brought her fame, and even the attention of Queen Victoria. Being the focus of all the interest was difficult for Grace. James gave his audience many details of the type of demands made on her, including requests for locks of her hair and for personal appearances (even at a circus!), for endless portrait sittings, and for backing for inventions (such as the breeches buoy, a rope rescue device).

Sadly, Grace died of tuberculosis in 1842, aged only 26, and an ornate memorial was erected in her honour in Bamburgh, the place of both her birth and death.

Later pictures emphasised the survivors and James went on to talk about the work and history of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. He mentioned the different types of lifeboats, gave statistics regarding the number of lives the service has saved and the various ways in which the RNLI is supported.

The RNLI museum in Bamburgh has many reminders of the life of Grace Darling, should you want to visit, but we are grateful to James for bringing his audience such a vivid account of her life both before and after the rescue.