

## "The Stormy Petrel" by Sunderland Maritime Heritage.



Joseph Ray Hodgson "The Stormy Petrel"

This journey of mine started back in 2005 when a certain lady, Christine Sexton of Oxfordshire, paid a visit to Sunderland R.N.L.I and spoke to chief mechanic Hefin Roberts regarding her great, great, grandfather Joseph Ray Hodgson (The Stormy Petrel).

She was trying to raise the profile of Sunderland's (if not Great Britain's) greatest peacetime hero. So it seemed quite natural to her to approach the RNLI to see if she could obtain more information, but unfortunately this was to no avail. As I was a member of the RNLI, this is when I first heard of Joseph Ray Hodgson. For various reasons I put it on a back burner making a promise to myself that I would research the "Stormy Petrel" at a later date, and now that time has arrived.

Regarding Joseph Ray Hodgson's nickname "Stormy Petrel", it seems that in the past it was a phrase that used to mean "trouble brewing". The seabird from which his nickname was derived is the storm petrel. It was rumoured that when bad weather was brewing out at sea, the storm petrel was the last species of bird to return to land. It was often seen dancing between the peaks and troughs still trying to feed amongst the storm waves.

One quote of interest that I found regarding the name came from the pages of Sherlock Holmes. "You are the stormy petrel of crime, Watson" meaning he had a troubled, black look.



On and on he went, saving Mr Jacob Cresswell of Wrekenton from drowning at Short Sands, Tynemouth.

The crews of the "James Bales" and the French schooner "Les Trois Soeurs" had Joseph to thank for saving their lives. Because of the assistance he gave to the French ship he was awarded a gold medal from Emperor Napoleon 3rd of France. On the back of this memorable award he also received a silver medal for gallantry from the Board of Trade and a gift from the English ship's captain, a gold watch. The following year the crews of "Boucher" and the "Poulton" also received assistance from our local hero.

It is sobering to remember that between 1855 and 1860 alone, around the coast of Britain, 7402 ships were wrecked with a total of 7701 lives lost. Also remember that there was none of the modern equipment and boats used today. Joseph was casting himself, often alone, into our freezing North Sea with very rudimentary gear in hand rowed boats. Many more deaths would have been recorded if our lad from Sunderland had not worked so heroically to rescue all these people. Of course a lot of these rescued people were local people, possibly ancestors of people living in Sunderland now.

### "THE STORMY PETREL."

**T**HE name of "The Stormy Petrel" was given to Mr. Joseph Hodgson, a resident of Sunderland, who for many years signally distinguished himself on the north-east coast by his heroic exertions in saving life from shipwreck. Whenever a fierce gale arose—and tempests on this wild and dangerous coast are of frequent occurrence—the "Petrel" might have been seen on the shore, gazing intently seaward, ready to risk his life in the gallant rescue of some craft in distress, with its precious freight of human souls.

From now on details of Joseph become a little sketchy. It is recorded in the Newcastle Journal dated 15th August 1861 that he was reported to have joined the "Royal Navy Reserves" in Sunderland.

Just before leaving Sunderland in 1869 for Wapping, London, he saved a man from Coxgreen where his life saving career started. When reaching London, he worked for the "West African Shipping Company" as a model builder till 1888. He also applied for a life raft patent but didn't have the funds to register it.

In 1872, John Dean son of a pilot boat captain, was saved by our Joseph Ray Hodgson resulting in the award of a bronze "Royal Humane Society" medal. Eleven years later Joseph accepted an invitation from Sunderland's Mayor where he was presented a gold medal.

In the 1880's he volunteered and became a Fireman stationed at Walworth, London. Sometime in the same decade he left for Australia where his wife tragically died. In 1890 he returned possibly alone to Limehouse, London. Nine years later he remarried at the age of seventy to Elizabeth Nimmo, fourteen years his junior. Then on 15th October 1908, after pawning his eight bravery medals he died a poor man of pneumonia in a slum in Suffolk Street, Poplar, London, SW1 4HG.

So finally my saga ends, or does it? There are lots of grey areas in Joseph's life that need colouring in. If you have any information or pictures regarding "The Stormy Petrel", please [contact us](#) at Sunderland Maritime Heritage and we will get it here on our website. Let's try and complete this extraordinary man's story.

Thank you for your time and spread the word about Sunderland's "Stormy Petrel", Joseph Ray Hodgson, one of our truly bravest local heroes



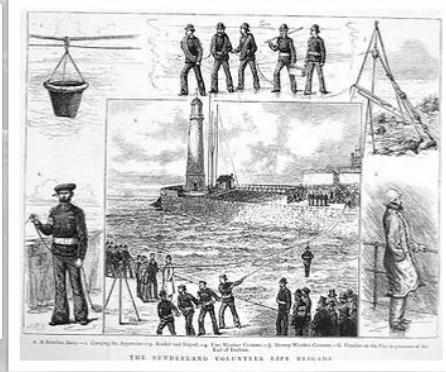
"Last Man Ashore" was painted by Sunderland's James Stokeld 13th April 1827 - 21st November 1877 and can be seen to the right. The picture portrays Sunderland Coastguards rescuing sailors from a wreck using a rocket and a form of breeches buoy equipment. On the right are the metal railings at the foot of lighthouse on Sunderland South Pier. The man carrying a rescued sailor boy is probably James Ray Hodgson. A man in a brown coat giving a rescued sailor a drink is probably from the Sunderland Humane Society, set up in the 1790's to revive wreck survivors. The artist considered this to be his finest picture out of the many that he produced.



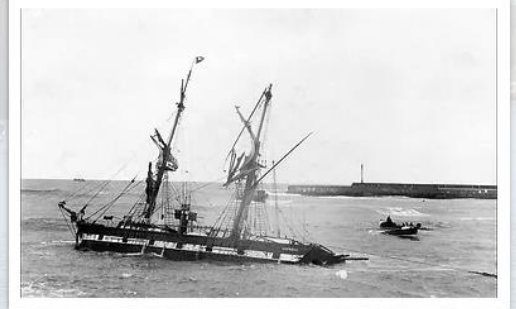
**Last Man Ashore by James Stokeld**



**Storm Petrels**



**Sunderland Volunteer Life Brigade**



**The Arendel shipwrecked of Roker beach**