

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 64

THE 'SALVUS' LIFE JACKET

This cotton life jacket became standard issue in the Royal and Merchant Navies in the 1920s. The story of its invention is a fascinating one.

The 'Salvus' (Latin for 'safe') life jacket was brought into production just as the First World War was ending in 1918. It was designed, not by an experienced lifeboatman, but by the wife of a New Zealand harbour master. Orpheus Beaumont of Dunedin on New Zealand's South Island had the sea, and the tragedies that so often go along with it, in her blood. Born into a fishing family in Jersey in the Channel Islands, she was named after the Royal Navy warship, HMS *Orpheus*, on which her elder brother Henry was believed to have drowned. This boat, deployed in the New Zealand Wars, was making an approach to Auckland's Manukau harbour in 1863. Using out-of-date charts, she ran aground on a sand bank in heavy surf, and started to break up. As she sank slowly, the crew, some as young as twelve, frantically climbed into the rigging until this, too, gave way. Few were able to swim and none had lifejackets. 189 drowned, making this the worst maritime disaster in New Zealand's waters to this day. Although Henry was later found, in fact, to have survived, this tragedy profoundly traumatised the family.

Seven years later, Orpheus' family emigrated to the coastal town of Dunedin, New Zealand. She later married a seaman. In 1912, another of her brothers drowned while fishing. That same year, inquiries following the loss of the *Titanic* focussed attention on the lack of sufficient lifeboats and life jackets on board this 'unsinkable' liner. There was a worldwide search for better protection at sea, to replace the commonly used cork-filled jacket. This had been developed by a lifeboat inspector in 1854, and proved its worth in 1861 when the Whitby lifeboat on the Yorkshire coast made five rescues in one day before capsizing; the coxswain, the only member of the crew to agree to wear the new lifejacket, was the sole survivor. The cork vest, however, was bulky and rigid, making them unpopular with working seamen. Few of the Tiree fishermen, as they sailed out the Skerryvore banks in open twenty-six foot skiffs at the end of the nineteenth-century, wore one. They also fitted poorly to the contours of the body, and several people died from a broken neck after leaping into water from height.

Orpheus Beaumont's design was quite different, using a cotton vest filled with kapok. This tall tropical tree was widely cultivated for the fibres packed around its seedpods. Kapok fibres are extremely buoyant, water-repellent and pack tightly. The

'Salvus' jacket was easy to put on over the neck and comfortable. After eight years of refining her design, the British Board of Trade granted its approval in 1918. 30,000 were commissioned, and the life jacket became standard issue in the British Fleet until the Second World War.

In 1928, the self-inflating life jacket was invented in America. Nicknamed the 'Mae West' because of its resemblance to the figure of the era's premier Hollywood star, this featured canisters of liquid carbon dioxide that discharged on contact with water. These were quickly taken up by the US Navy and the RAF, and after 1945 their use spread to civilian fleets. Orpheus Beaumont died in 1951, aged eighty-eight, having contributed significantly to safety at sea in the twentieth century by inventing the world's first mass-produced life jacket.

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