

Corsair capsizes - dramatic rescue of the rowers - and the Gig lives to row another day

Port Isaac Gig, Corsair, capsized in heavy seas on Sunday February 20th. The crew of six girls and their male cox had just finished their training session when they found that they couldn't get back into the harbour because of the heavy swell. As luck would have it, Port Isaac Lifeboat, Copeland Bell, was also returning from a training exercise and the gig members waved frantically to get the attention of crew members Nigel Sherratt and Ian Johnson.

The lifeboat went alongside and discussed with the gig rowers all the options. The rowers decided they would stay at sea until it was safe to come in. The lifeboat came in and collected warm clothing (the girls were just in tee shirts) and life jackets – to prove a godsend as the drama unfolded. It was then decided to transfer two of the anxious ladies to the lifeboat and bring them back to shore. Trevor Beare and Steve Hudspith, two experienced Gig club members, were taken back out by the lifeboat to replace them.

After some time, the Gig attempted to come into the harbour but, with the big spring tide swell still running, the vessel capsized, throwing all seven gig rowers into the water. Within minutes Nigel and Ian, who had been standing alongside, had them all safely on board the lifeboat and back out into the relatively safer deep water. Nigel deemed it unsafe to attempt entry back into the harbour with nine people on board so Padstow all-weather lifeboat was launched and the cold and shocked girls were transferred to this at sea. Some were suffering minor injuries and so all five were then airlifted by a rescue helicopter from RNAS Culdrose to Treliiske Hospital. Thankfully they were all soon safely back home.

In the meantime, the Port Isaac Lifeboat with Nigel and Ian – RNLI crew – and Trevor and Steve – gig rowers – on board made their way back to shore at Port Isaac. They two RNLI crew had done a fantastic job. Said Phil Tidey, Port Isaac's RNLI Operations Manager, "Nigel and Ian did a wonderful job in extremely difficult conditions, rescuing seven casualties in under four minutes. Our boat performed brilliantly, perfectly demonstrating exactly what an Inshore Lifeboat is designed to do, working close in in shallow waters, among the rocks and surf. Additionally, Port Isaac coastguard rescue team provided invaluable assistance to our lifeboat from the cliff."

You'd think that the story ended there but no. Corsair had been left at sea as, at that time, it was too dangerous to go back out to bring her back in; her fate was to smash on the rocks. Several hours later when the tide was higher, making it possible for the gig to be towed in, long standing ex member of the Rowing Club, Roy Speakman couldn't bear the thought of Corsair being destroyed and so he and Tom Cleave went out to sea on a rescue mission.

Said an onlooker, "Corsair is about 30feet long and was almost totally submerged by the time the two rescuers got out to her. They had a really difficult job getting enough speed up to empty enough of the water out in order to tow the Gig successfully back to Port Isaac. It was great to see their determination and skill rewarded as they released Corsair into the care of those waiting on the Platt and it was a delight to see all the beaming faces. Well done boys."

How good it is to have such a happy ending for everyone involved.

