

TALES OF THE RIVERMAN 49



From Wikipedia; “a lifebelt is a large ring, usually made of a light substance such as cork, which someone who has fallen into deep water can use to float”.

Bennie Parsonage spent a lot of time dealing with lifebelts. He would retrieve them from the water and have them returned to empty stances. Bennie would advise the Council and give assistance to the Council worker who walked from Dalmarnock to the City Centre at least twice a week to replace the ‘belts. I have a lovely memory of my Dad sitting with “Bobby,” the lifebelt man, having a bottle of Coca Cola in the boatshed. On an aside, in those days there was no stopping for a cuppa tea or coffee as there was no running water at the boathouse; water (including toilets) did not come during Bennie’s lifetime, Bennie never had the luxury of running water, but that’s another story.

Some lifebelts were, and are, thrown in by silly people who thought that it was fun; others are thrown into the water to people in distress, to hang onto until further help arrived/arrives.



After an incident on the river even during the night Bennie would row to retrieve a lifebelt that had been thrown in to have it returned; he would not if he could help it leave an area without a lifebelt. We should not, he would say, leave the retrieval of the lifebelt until the next day, as there could be another incident at the same spot in the interim. This was drummed into everyone who assisted Bennie; we soon learned that this is the way to prevent accidents and save lives.



Glasgow has at present around 600 lifebelts available along its extensive waterfront.

There are also lifebelts and throw ropes available at private establishments along the waterfront; an agreement reached between these establishments and the Glasgow Humane Society



City firms can offer a lifeline to help prevent river deaths



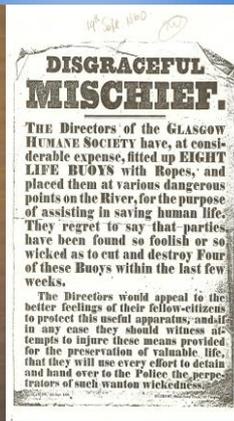
Lifebelts have saved hundreds perhaps thousands of lives yet if you google river or waterway rescue, you will find little reference to the use of lifebelts.



LIFEBELT VANDALS WHO COST LIVES

Fury as lifebelts thrown in river by drunken louts

Lifebelts with ropes on square wooden frames had been made available to the public in the early 1800's by the Glasgow Humane Society.



Unfortunately lifebelts have always been seen as "fair game" to vandals as this 1860 poster shows. The first Lifebelts were made of cork covered with canvas, or linen, the writing on the lifebelts was "Glasgow Corporation Police Department". These lifebelts were on Bridges so the Council had about 20 lifebelts to look after. Cork lifebelts were often very heavy, cumbersome to throw and you had to make sure you did not actually hit the person in the water.



In the Harbour area (from the west side of the Albert Bridge downstream) the lifebelts were looked after by the Port Authority. At this time the writing on their lifebelts was Clyde Navigation Trust (since 1858) and a number

Lifebelts at this time did have ropes attached but they were always being “stolen” for various purposes and “lifebelt” ropes were to be seen on washing poles, pulleys and Lorries. Indeed they seemed to be acquired for any item that needed tying up. For a time a “tarry” rope was used on the lifebelts and this was extremely successful as no one wanted to “steal” them for other purposes; but they were soon laid aside unused in case someone got some of the “tarry” substance on their clothes. Attempts to have a rope made of coloured strands only available to Emergency services have fallen on deaf ears (so far) but we have people working on the idea.

Cork gave way to polystyrene. Although the polystyrene made the lifebelt light, it meant that it was very easily broken as can be seen in the photograph of Bennie Parsonage with a collection of damaged lifebelts.



Various types of plastic lifebelts are now used; they are much stronger and almost vandal proof though even the ropes around the lifebelts keep disappearing, the occasional lifebelt gets burned and of course any throw ropes we do try to attach quickly disappear.

Many members of the public and Police Officers threw lifebelts to people in the water which kept them afloat until a boat arrived, usually Bennie’s boat.

I remember an incident where 5 persons were kept floating holding on to one lifeboat until Bennie and I arrived.



Nowadays our 600+ lifebelts are GPS marked and are on an APP-

I am sure Bennie approves.