

# IFCA NORTH WEST

*Simon Everett reports on the important work of the Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority and the reasons behind the selection of a Humber 7.5m as their RIB of choice.*

**COASTAL FISHERY PROTECTION** and policing has a long tradition, going back as far as 1379, and the Fishery Protection Squadron is the oldest section of the Royal Navy. Even earlier than this date, the herring fishermen of Great Yarmouth fought with foreign fishermen and apparently hanged them as pirates if they caught them. Our fishing industry was an important and valuable asset that required protection, and still does.

Who can forget the Morecambe Bay cockling tragedy? This highlighted the need for better management and policing of our

foreshore and inshore waters, with the result that the value and diversity of our coastal resources have come under the protection of an act of parliament issued in 2009 as the Marine and Coastal Access Act. This first step forms part of a wider programme to protect and manage our coastal natural resources, with various bodies working together to provide a sustainable, well-managed marine environment.

To implement the new strategy the country was divided into 10 regional Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities, one of which is the North West, which covers the cockle harvesting areas of The Wirral, Dee Estuary and Morecambe Bay, plus the waters enclosed out to the 6-mile boundary from the mean low-water mark. To effectively manage the area, which has some of the most extensive sands in the world, a powerful RIB was seen as one of the essential tools, together with quad bikes for covering the low-water sands. The RIB chosen was a Humber 7.5m, for several reasons. Of course, there was a budget to work within, but they needed a Category

3-coded RIB of 7.5m, which would take six crew, cruise comfortably at 30 knots and have a flexible seating configuration.

Andrew Brownrigg and Phil Capper have been doing this job for some years and recognised the limitations imposed by the previous boat, so they drew up the requirements for the replacement craft themselves, based on their practical experience. The area they cover stretches from the mouth of the River Alt in the north to the Dee in the south, and with the 6-mile limit in some areas actually being 17 nautical miles out, they needed a boat that could handle offshore conditions. They settled on 7.5m as being big enough to take on the rough seas but still small and manageable enough to take alongside small, private angling boats, or even fishing kayaks. The high-performance aspect was deemed a necessity so as to have the ability to pursue modern craft used for fishing activities and to give them a wider operational range in a reasonable time.

They looked at various manufacturers but immediately discounted MST and Delta

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Cutout illustration showing the direction of airflow entering the engine.



Marine is fitted for the two permanent crew, behind a very protective console and screen. This allows the boat to run at high speed in rough water with far less stress on the crew and much reduced risk of injury. Without these seats the boat would be less usable due to weather considerations. The shallow waters and river mouth confluences chop up more easily than other areas, and a surf situation can develop over the sandbanks very quickly.

The new RIB was ordered in January 2014 and was ready to go to sea in the April of the same year, in time for the start of the fishing season. One of the local problems was refuelling: Liverpool Marina doesn't have petrol for the outboards and so the team had to obtain their own fuel bowser that they pull behind the Land Rover to refuel the twin 200-litre tanks, which give around 10 hours' operational time with the twin Yamaha F150 outboards. With the bowser it does mean

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because they cost twice the available budget. That left Ribcraft, Piranha and Humber. The final decision came down to being the right boat for the right price, but what really swung the decision was the fact that Humber were fairly local for backup and that they had supplied boats in the past, so were a known quantity.

The new Humber replaces the previous 5.2m RIB powered by a 50hp Yamaha, which proved too limiting in its operational capability to cover the entire area. The IFCA team usually operate with a crew of two, but on joint operations with officers from the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) or Welsh Fisheries they can have a requirement for a crew of six. At the same time, the boat needs to be capable of bringing in gathered evidence, such as illegal fishing gear or seized catches, which is why the aft seats are easily removed to create a large load space in the stern. The RIB also needs a strong towing capability, and the twin 150s provide power with economy and the ability to act as a backup safety boat. The tides in the area can run at up to 4 knots, so they needed plenty of pulling power. For the navigation electronics, Garmin equipment was chosen, with the GPSMap 750s at the heart of the system. An Icom M423 VHF provides the communications with its easy-to-use, soft touch buttons and 10W performance.

For crew comfort and safety it was deemed that, with today's modern employment requirements, shock mitigation seats were a must. Scot seating from KPM



The IFCA officers monitoring bait diggers to get an idea of the impact on the numbers removed.



One of the IFCA officers raking for cockles to be taken for scientific testing.



Being on the water regularly, keeping an eye on fishing vessels in particular, the officers notice when something is amiss.





The IFCA officers maintain communication with other agencies, such as the Police



Cockles collected for testing, together with a shellfish size gauge.

they can refuel away from base too if they have an extended period of operation for some reason.

The fishing activity in the area, other than the conventional sea angling, consists of a thriving artisan commercial fishery. Cockle collectors rake the sands in known areas to get the high-quality shellfish that this area is known for. Gathering razor clams is a once-a-month activity on the bottom of the very low spring tides. The collectors have to walk out with the ebbing tide to get a maximum of an hour to collect the razors and then retreat at a fast pace before they get cut off by the tide filling a gully behind them.

Netsmen work their nets by hand at low water in the gulleys between sandbars, mostly for flatfish such as slip sole, plaice and flounder. This kind of naturally curbed

activity, provided it is carried out within the regulations, is completely sustainable, so the IFCA team are there to ensure that minimum landing sizes for all types of fish are adhered to and that no migratory sea trout or salmon are taken.

It isn't just the commercial fishing activity that they are keeping an eye on. Anglers are also checked to make sure they are adhering to the minimum landing sizes and the bass nursery area rules, where it is illegal to target bass from a boat or use sand eels as bait. There are over 200 small fishing boats regularly in the area, a number that is boosted in the summer months by visitors, which keeps the team busy.

The IFCA team are helpful to the charter angling fleet skippers too. Often there is potential trouble on the charter boats when

foreign anglers want to keep every fish they catch with no thought for conservation. The IFCA officers can diffuse a situation by their presence. When the skipper points out the powerful boat with its blue-light rig and tells the anglers that there is a hefty fine for contravention of the regulations, the anglers suddenly change their attitude. There have been a couple of stressful situations where skippers have been threatened and harassed in the past.

Leisure anglers and bait collectors are also monitored, to gauge the numbers of worms and crabs being harvested for bait and to ensure that anglers also abide by the regulations regarding the landing of fish, notably the minimum size they must be before they can be taken legally, which is 42cm. The IFCA officers provide posters at

The versatile seating arrangements can be altered to suit operational requirements



The Humber 7.5m has proved ideal over the season she has been in operation.



Below: Checking people keeping undersize bass is a major part of the IFCA work. Bass have not sawned until they reach 42cm, which is the European minimum size limit





An open wheelhouse door of this licensed fishing vessel caused an act of neighbourly concern by the helpful Officer.

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launching sites and popular fishing spots as well as placing them in tackle shops and marina offices, to ensure anglers are made aware of the legalities of fishing, even in the sea. With over 200 private fishing boats operating in the area, a number swelled by visitors in the summer, keeping an eye on the bass posters has had a major impact in reducing the number of anglers, even yachtsmen who occasionally troll a line, who have been found with undersize fish. There is a leaflet with the regulations printed in it, together with a waterproof ruler to measure your fish that the team make available as part of the education programme. Persistent offenders are dealt with accordingly – with these guys you can only plead ignorance once.

The Humber 7.5m has proved ideal over the season she has been in operation, allowing the officers to reach the offshore cockle bed off Lytham St Annes about 25 miles to the north to keep an eye on the shellfish-gathering activities and monitor the health and state of the shellfish stocks. One of the IFCA duties is to collect samples of shellfish from various places that are sent to the biological laboratory for testing. This sampling is to ensure that the shellfish are within the health requirement levels. From time to time, certain areas are closed for fishing due to the results of the test laboratory findings, either for conservation reasons to give the stocks a chance to recover or for health reasons.

There is also a safety cover aspect to the presence of the boat on the water, or indeed if the team are out on the sands using the quads. Keen eyes watching the activities that are going on can alert the rescue services early, or they can intervene to avert a situation by educating the people involved, pointing out the dangers of the sands. The public will take heed of people in uniform who know the water and tides and what can happen, even though that doesn't form part of their designated remit, and the officers have a sense of community spirit that pervades the nautical world.



Old infrastructure on the Mersey. This is an area where unlicensed nets have been found, so they maintain vigilance.



Lugworms in a bait digger's bucket. There is no restriction but the amount taken is monitored.

While carrying out their duties, the IFCA officers often unearth other criminality, which they report to the relevant authority section, usually the police. It often turns out that illegal fishing is carried out by people with other criminal intent or activities. By sharing information with the police, successful prosecutions have been brought for more than the illegal fishing uncovered. For instance, one case of cockling at night, which is prohibited, revealed that a man was running a cockling gang of illegal immigrants, was not filing any tax returns and so not paying tax on his gains, and was claiming a significant amount from social security. The resulting prosecutions for the combined offences took him off the streets for a long time.

The North West IFCA are entitled to fly a defaced red ensign, as a result of a royal warrant issued in September 1901, the month the reigning monarch died. Consequently, the warrant is black edged in respect and mourning for the late Queen Victoria. That the service is still a major part of the front-line defence of our fisheries and helps to provide the scientific element of fisheries conservation gives us an insight into the importance of the work these officers do. [PBR](#)