Sea Mines by David Gray

The red “sea mines” you see around British harbours and seaside towns are one of the more unusual bits of maritime charity history in the UK. They belong to the Shipwrecked Mariners' Society, a charity founded in 1839 to support seafarers and their families in hardship.

The mines themselves are genuine decommissioned Second World War naval mines — mostly large British contact mines with the classic protruding “horns.” After WWII, around 200 were donated by the Admiralty to the charity in recognition of the Society’s work helping shipwreck survivors and rescued personnel during the war.

During the war, the Society helped sailors, soldiers, airmen, nurses, and civilians who were landed in British ports after rescue at sea, especially from sinkings during the Battle of the Atlantic. Assistance included emergency clothing, food, accommodation, and rail fares home.

The mines were converted into charity collection boxes and painted bright red so they’d stand out on promenades and quaysides. Many have a slot cut into the side for donations. Over the decades they became iconic coastal landmarks in their own right. The Society says only around 50–60 remain in operation today because weather and corrosion have gradually destroyed many of them. The picture above shows one of these ‘charity’ mines at Hunstanton in Norfolk. This mine, alas, became so corroded it was removed in recent years.

A few interesting details:

- Most are thought to be Mk XVII naval mines installed around the UK coast in the early 1950s as fundraising collectors.
- They’re usually placed in prominent maritime locations: harbour walls, ferry terminals, promenades, and yacht marinas.
- Enthusiasts sometimes do “mine spotting” trips around the coast; the Society even created a “Mine to Mine Challenge” encouraging people to visit all surviving examples.
- They’re completely inert now — otherwise seaside councils would have *slightly* bigger concerns than parking enforcement.

If you want to explore the Society itself, their official site is **Shipwrecked Mariners’ Society**.

The Society was founded in February 1839 as a result of the tragic loss of a fleet of fishing boats on the north Devon coast in October 1838.

Since then, it has grown to become one of the largest national maritime charities. Its main purpose today is to provide financial support to individuals in need who have worked at sea in the Merchant Navy and Fishing Fleets and their dependants. While the title is now more of a metaphor for what the organisation does, shipwrecks still occur and it is there to provide assistance.

1838 – Wrecked Ships, Wrecked Lives

On Sunday 28 October, 11 fishing vessels with 26 men onboard left Clovelly harbour for nearby fishing grounds. The fleet encountered a ferocious storm, after which only two vessels returned and 21 men were lost.

Hearing of the tragedy, Mr Charles Gee Jones, a former Bristol pilot and landlord of the Pulteney Arms in Bath, suggested to Mr John Rye, a retired 'medical man', that something should be done to assist the widows, orphans and parents of the fishermen and mariners who lost their lives at sea.

1839 – The Society's Formation

The Shipwrecked Fishermen and Mariners' Royal Benevolent Society, better known as the Shipwrecked Mariners' Society, was established by John Rye with the assistance of Charles Gee Jones. The Society's objectives were to give "relief and assistance to the widows and orphans of fishermen; and of mariners, members of the Society, who lose their lives by storms and shipwreck on any part of the coasts of the United Kingdom, while engaged in their lawful occupations; and also, to render necessary assistance to such mariners, soldiers, or other poor persons as suffer shipwreck upon the said coasts".

The Society's first public meeting was held on 21 February 1839. Her Majesty Queen Victoria was its first Patron and ever since the Society has been honoured by Royal Patronage.

British sea mines have played a major role in the UK's naval strategy since the early 20th century, serving as devastating offensive and defensive weapons. Today, the Royal Navy no longer actively maintains a stockpiled inventory of offensive sea mines, having shifted its primary focus to cutting-edge Autonomous Mine-Hunting Systems for defensive and clearance operations.

A look at the history, mechanics, and evolution of British sea mines reveals how they shaped naval warfare:

How They Work

Naval mines are broadly categorized by how they are deployed and triggered:

- **Moored Mines:** Tethered to an anchor so they float at a predetermined depth to strike passing hulls or submarines.
- **Bottom Mines:** Rest on the seabed and are triggered by the acoustic, magnetic, or pressure changes of a ship passing overhead.

Making safe a sea mine

- **Contact Mines:** Typically covered in "Hertz horns" (glass vials of acid that break on impact) to trigger an explosive charge upon physical contact, (right).

Historical Impact

- **World War I:** Britain laid over 128,000 mines in various locations (including the Dover Straits and the North Sea). British-laid mines sank 150 enemy war vessels, severely crippling the German U-boat fleet.
- **World War II:** The UK deployed more than 185,000 defensive and offensive mines throughout the war. These accounted for the loss or damage of over 1,500 Axis ships and submarines.
- **Post-War:** The UK developed the advanced *Stonefish* series of bottom mines in the 1990s, but currently lacks domestic sea mine manufacturing capabilities, often relying on off-the-shelf procurement or allied cooperation if needed.

Surviving Relics

Many decommissioned British sea mines (like the famous Mark 17 from WWII) were deactivated and repurposed by the Shipwrecked Mariners' Society. About 60 of these deactivated, iconic historic shells can still be seen serving as brightly painted collection boxes around the British coast today.

Autonomous mine hunting systems (right), are Uncrewed Surface Vessels with sophisticated payloads that can detect and defeat the threat of underwater sea mines. These new systems are quicker and provide greater precision than crewed mine hunting vessels.

The adoption of autonomous systems provides the Royal Navy with world-leading mine-hunting capability, ensuring the freedom of movement for our ships and submarines when defending the UK at sea.

MHC Systems include the joint FR/UK Maritime Mine Counter Measures (MMCM) system, the WILTON mine detection system, the Combined Influence Minesweeping (SWEEP) system, and the SEACAT Medium Underwater Autonomous Vehicle, (left). The programme is also providing host platform to expand operating ranges.