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Lighthouses

5 - History - History

The first lighthouse in Scotland is believed to have been built on the Isle of May in the Firth of Forth, in the mid-17th century, lit by a coal fire.

Since then hundreds of lights have been set up round the coast of Scotland to guide mariners safely through treacherous waters. The Northern Lighthouse Board was set up in 1798 and now operates 206 lighthouses as well as many other buoys, beacons and other stations.

The Northern Lighthouse Board (NLB) has a fascinating history. One family of engineers – the Stevensons – was involved in designing their lighthouses over four generations. This work started with Thomas Smith, who was responsible for the NLB's first lighthouse at Kinnaird Head in 1787. By 1797 his stepson, **Robert Stevenson, was building lighthouses with him. Robert Stevenson was a famous engineer, responsible for the erection of at least 15 major lighthouses, as well as inventing intermittent and flashing lights, and working on railways and bridges.** Some of his sons and grandsons followed him into the profession, designing lighthouses for the NRB until 1938.

This means that most of the beautiful lighthouses seen round Scotland today were erected by Stevensons.

Another member of this famous family was the writer, **Robert Louis Stevenson, a grandson of Robert Stevenson the engineer.** He would have travelled with his family to many remote lighthouses, and it is thought that these visits inspired some of his novels, such as 'Kidnapped' and 'Treasure Island'. He was very proud of his engineering family, and wrote:

"There is scarce a deep sea light from the Isle of Man to North Berwick, but one of my blood designed it. The Bell Rock stands monument for my grandfather; the Skerry Vhor for my uncle Alan; and when the lights come out along the shores of Scotland, I am proud to think that they burn more brightly for the genius of my father."

The Flannan Isles

One of the most famous, or infamous, lighthouses in Scotland was designed by David Alan Stevenson in 1899. This was the Flannan Isles light, situated on Eilean Mòr, one of seven remote, rocky, uninhabited islands out in the Atlantic approximately twenty miles to the west of the Isle of Lewis. **It became famous in 1900 when its three lighthouse keepers disappeared in mysterious circumstances, giving rise to numerous conspiracy theories from then to the present day.**

In those days keepers stayed for weeks at a time on the lighthouses. James Ducat was the Principal Keeper on the Flannan Isles, Thomas Marshall was the 2nd Assistant, and Donald McArthur was an Occasional Keeper, who was working there because someone was on sick leave. The disappearance of the three men was

discovered on Boxing Day, 26 December 1900, when the lighthouse tender, a ship called the Hesperus, called at the Flannans on a routine visit. They realised at once that something was wrong, and when they went ashore they found the island deserted. The last entries in the lighthouse logs were on 15 December, and an investigation at the time concluded that the men must have been caught by an unexpectedly large wave and swept out to sea.

This incident led to the poet, **Wilfrid Wilson Gibson**, composing the poem Flannan Isle in 1912. The poem became very popular, and is widely known to this day. The fact that the poet took a bit of 'poetic licence' with the details has helped fuel the conspiracy theories and the fascination with the story, and inspired other artists to use it in their own stories, songs, video games, and even in an opera.

Flannan Isles lighthouse was manned until 1971, when it became automated like many other lighthouses round our shores. All the NLB's major lighthouses were automated by 1998.

Timeline

Frise

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Games

Design a modern day warning system to keep ships off the rocks round our shores.

Activities

1. Show on a map the location of all the major lighthouses round the Scottish coast.
2. Research the disappearance of the three men on the Flannan Isles and write your own newspaper report on the tragedy.
3. Write your own story, based on a lighthouse.

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