

Flannan Isles Mystery - Background Report

Disappearance of three Lightkeepers on 15 December 1900

1. The keepers were:-

James Ducat, Principal

Thomas Marshall, 2nd Assistant

Donald McArthur, Occasional Keeper - doing duty for William Ross, 1st Assistant, on sick leave.

2. Their disappearance was discovered only as a result of the routine visit of the Lighthouse Tender HESPERUS on 26 December 1900.

3. It is the case that a vessel passed the Flannan Islands about midnight on 15 December and on arrival in port reported that the light was not seen, but this fact was not communicated to the Commissioners until the disappearance of the keepers had been discovered on the visit of the Lighthouse Tender.

4. Captain Harvey was in command of the HESPERUS. We reported that on arrival at the Flannans during the afternoon of 26 December there was no sign of life to be seen on the Island and no response was made to a rocket fired from the ship. The relieving keeper, Joseph Moore, who was landed on the Island, went up to the lighthouse, but found no one there. Moore reported the facts to the Master and then returned to the Island, along with Mr MacDonald, Buoymaster (who was on board the vessel at the time) and Seaman Lamont and Campbell, all three having volunteered to remain on the Island with Moore for the time being to keep the light in operation.

5. The Master of the HESPERUS was not an eye witness of the condition of the lighthouse when found deserted. Moore was the first person to be landed, and when he went back to the Island for the second time he was accompanied by the three men referred to in 4.

6. The disappearance was immediately investigated, and from the traces which were evident of the very bad weather which had been experienced on the Island it was concluded that the men must have left the lighthouse for some purpose or other, probably to secure some gear or to ascertain what damage had been done at one of the landing places, and been caught by an unexpected large roller and swept into the sea.

7. The last written entries in the log were for 13 December, but particulars for 14 December and of the time of extinguishing the light on 15 December, along with barometer and thermometer readings and state of the wind taken at 9am on 15 December, were noted on the slate for transference later to the log.

Everything was in order, the lamp ready to be lit, and it was evident that the work of the forenoon of the 15th had been completed, indicating that the men disappeared on the afternoon of Saturday 15 December.

8. The contractor for the work of building the lighthouse on the Flannan Islands was Mr George Lawson. The lighthouse stands on Eileen Mor, one of the Flannan Islands about 18 miles from Gallan Head, West Coast of Lewis, and the light was first exhibited on 7 December 1899.

A vessel passed the Flannan Islands about midnight on 15 December 1900 and on arrival in port reported that the light had not been seen. This fact, however, was not communicated to the Commissioners of Northern Lighthouses until after the disappearance of the lightkeepers had been discovered as a result of the routine visit of the Lighthouse Tender, HESPERUS, on 26 December 1900.

The Master of the HESPERUS in his report stated that on arrival at the Flannan Islands on the afternoon of 26 December there was no sign of life to be seen on Eilean Mor, the island on which the lighthouse was built, and no response was made to a rocket fired from the Tender. The relieving lightkeeper was landing and proceeded to the Lighthouse Station but, finding no-one there, he immediately returned to the ship and reported the position to the Master. He then returned to the island accompanied by three men who had volunteered to remain ashore to assist the lightkeeper in keeping the navigation light in operation.

Investigations into the disappearance of the three lightkeepers showed evidence of very bad weather having been experienced and it could only be concluded that the lightkeepers must have left the Station buildings for some purpose or another, probably to secure some gear or to ascertain what damage had been done at one of the landing places, and had been caught up by some exceptionally large and unexpected wave and swept into the sea.

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Everything was in order, the lamp was ready to be lit, and it was evident that the work of the forenoon of the 15th had completed, indicating that the men disappeared on the afternoon of Saturday, 15 December.