

# **Muckle Flugga**

## **Light Established**

1854

## **Engineer**

Thomas & David Stevenson

## **Position**

Latitude 60° 51.3'N

Longitude 00° 53.0'W

## **Character**

Flashing (2) White every 20 secs

## **Elevation**

66 metres

## **Nominal Range**

22 miles

## **Structure**

White tower 20 metres high. There are 71 steps to top of tower.

## **History**

The establishment of a lighthouse at Muckle Flugga, which is the most northerly rock in the British Isles, was considered by the Commissioners as far back as 1851, but due to difficulties in determining the exact site for the Lighthouse, no work had been undertaken by 1854. During the Crimean War the Commissioners were urged by the Government to erect a light at Muckle Flugga with a view to the protection of Her Majesty's ships. A temporary light was therefore established and first lighted on 11 October 1854. The light sits on a jagged outcrop of Skerries a mile north of Unst and right in the path of the Atlantic storms. It was first named "North Unst" but changed in 1964 to Muckle Flugga.

The temporary lighthouse building is said to have been completed in 26 days. As the structure itself (50ft in height) was on rock 200ft above sea level it was thought that it would have to withstand only the wind and the rain. However, when the winter gales began to break over the rock it was found that the sea not only broke heavily on the tower, but ran up the sides and burst open the door of the dwelling room. The Principal Keeper reported that 40ft of stone dyke had been knocked down, six water casks carried away, and that "we had not a dry part of sit down in or even a dry bed to rest upon at night". This experience proved the necessity of raising the lightroom of the permanent tower so that the possibility of the seas endangering the light would be prevented. When the Board of Trade finally asked

the Commissioners to prepare plans for a permanent lighthouse on Muckle Flugga, they unanimously reverted to their original preference for Lamba Ness. It was only after several discussions that they agreed finally on Muckle Flugga. Orders to proceed with the work were given in June 1855. A 64 foot high brick tower was built, with foundations sunk ten feet into the rock, and a permanent light appeared on 1 January 1858.

The Commissioners declined to reduce the thickness of the tower walls below 3½ft, or risk weakening the foundations by using local stone for rubble or reducing the depth of the foundations; but they agreed to have an iron pedestal in place of stone, and to reduce the size of the cornice. In spite of all possible economies, Muckle Flugga cost £32,000.

That they built well, was proved over the succeeding years, when the seas broke over the rocks for 21 hours continuously, sweeping away one gate pillar and dislodging another, and blocks of stone 2ft square were rushed over the court as if they had been wood.

Minor alterations were made mainly for the convenience of the lightkeepers. Experience had shown that the high walls built for shelter caused strong whirls of wind in the courtyard and interfered with the lightkeepers look out.

Fixed lights were no longer regarded as suitable and in 1927/28 the character of the light was changed to group flashing.

At some of the more isolated stations the Second World War added immensely to the lightkeepers work. As naval operations moved north the old radio beacon at Muckle Flugga was re-opened and the lightkeeper ashore was constantly employed passing service messages between headquarters and the rock.

In 1968/69 a new dwelling block was built within the retaining wall in space saved by electrification, replacing the primitive conditions where lightkeepers slept in a crows nest and ate in a cell, as the Principal put it. The original tower still stands firm, with four glass-fibre sectional water tanks installed in it; but serious rock erosion threatened the security of the access path, and weaker sections had to be bolted to the more solid parts in order to stabilise the rock.

There were three Lightkeepers on the rock at any one time; each of the six Lightkeepers manning the station spending one month on and one month ashore. The Lightkeepers were relieved by helicopter which made trips to the lighthouse once every 2 weeks. Fresh water and any heavy stores are landed at the rock by the introduction of the service of the helicopter, reliefs were sometimes long overdue because of heavy seas which made a landing from the Attending Boat impossible. It could be said that the advent of the helicopter was the lightkeepers' dream.

It may be interesting to note that Robert Louis Stevenson, who was born in 1850, visited Muckle Flugga on 18 June 1869 with his father, Thomas Stevenson, Engineer to the Board and there is a school of thought that the Island of Unst influenced him in his writing of "Treasure Island".

Muckle Flugga Lighthouse was automated in March 1995.