

Pentland Skerries Lighthouse

Light Established

1794

Engineer

T Smith & Robert Stevenson

Position

Latitude 58° 41.4'N

Longitude 02° 55.4'W

Character

Flashing White every 30 secs

Elevation

52 metres

Candlepower

710,000

Nominal Range

25 miles

Structure

White tower 36 metres in height. There are 196 steps to the top of the tower

Fog Signals

1 blast of 4.5 seconds every 45 secs

History

The lighthouse tower is listed as a building of Architectural/Historical interest. In 1794, the Commissioners, to open the Pentland Firth to shipping, in place of the longer route round Orkney, provided a double light on the Pentland Skerries at the eastern entrance with 2 towers 80ft and 60ft high and 60ft apart. Built by Orkney masons, it was superintended by Robert Stevenson as his first work for the Board. It was rebuilt between 1821 and 1830 in a more permanent system. Experiments were carried out in 1870 with paraffin.

A Royal Humane Society bronze medal for saving life at sea went to Assistant Donald Montgomery off Pentland Skerries in 1871 for rescuing a boy in the "boiling tideway" of the east side of the island after the crew of the "Good Design" of Wick had taken to their boat. When the "Vicksburg" of Leith went aground on the Pentland Skerries in 1884 and 9 men died, the 4 keepers saved 12 lives at much personal risk and danger.

Fixed lights were no longer regarded as suitable for the great landfall and coastal lights and the old double lights were discounted in 1895 on the installation of powerful group flashing lights.

When the Principal Lightkeeper was taken ill during stormy weather in 1929 two young assistants never let the light or foghorn fail for 12 days before a landing was possible, although with blizzards and high seas neither of them got to bed at night. They took in turns to doze on the engineroom mats when the fog horn was sounding. The winds and tides of the Pentland Firth often delayed a landing.

On 22 February 1941, an enemy machine-gunned the lighthouse buildings but fortunately, no-one was injured and there was very little damage to the structure.

The lightkeepers' life had become less monotonous than it used to be, not only because of amenities such as radio and television, but also with the variety of sophisticated navigational aids which it was his job to maintain and operate. The life was not yet devoid of excitement, and opportunities to show courage and initiative, as was shown for example in 1965, by the prompt action of two lightkeepers on Pentland Skerries when the motor vessel KATHE NEIDERKIRCHNER of 10,300 tons went aground in thick fog on the west side of the Muckle Skerry. The lightkeepers ensured the safety of the 50 crew and passengers by climbing down the cliff, boarding the ship's lifeboat when it was in difficulty and guiding it to safety at the east landing.

In 1939, the light was converted to electric operation, the power for which is produced by 3 diesel generators, any one of which is able to carry the full station load.

The lighthouse used to be relieved by ship, which sometimes involved a long sea trip but in 1972, the helicopter came into the service. The "FINGAL" was used to deliver stores, diesel oil and fresh water etc.

"In the cemetery at Kirk Hope on South Walls in Orkney is the memorial to the eight-man crew of the Longhope lifeboat, the entire company, who lost their lives in 1969 in the Pentland Firth leaving seven widows and 10 orphans. Of these eight, the coxswain and the motor mechanic both and two sons aboard.

South Walls, where they came from, has never recovered from this blow and no one wants to speak about it. In fact there is very little to be said; because no one knows anything more than the bare outline about what happened. One very experienced ship-master I spoke with compared the operation to the Charge of the Light Brigade. The Longhope lifeboat was a 48ft Solent type, built of steel and just under 28 tons. She had a maximum speed of 9.2 knots and an endurance at cruising speed of 46 hours. She was named TGB, after an anonymous donor.

The lifeboat was launched at 8pm on 17 March after a Mayday (SOS) call by the Captain of the 2,300 ton Liberian steamer, "Irene" which was drifting out of control before a South-east gale, force 9. This gale had already been blowing for three days and it continued to blow for many more. There was bad visibility and flurries of snow. Although the Captain of the "Irene" gave her position as 18 miles off South Ronaldsay she was actually only three miles off the east Coast. The Coastguard Rescue Headquarters, which covers the Orkney archipelago, had already been alerted to carry out a breeches buoy rescue from the cliffs of the shore, if the opportunity presented itself.

At the same time as the TGB was launched, the Kirkwall lifeboat, the "Grace Paterson Ritchie", put to sea a 70ft Clyde class boat weighing nearly 87 tons and with a maximum speed of 11 knots.

At 8.40pm the TGB gave her position by VHF as 3 miles SE of Cantick Head Lighthouse on South Walls, which placed her five miles from her launching place, off North Head on Stromo and entering the tidal race which runs nine knots on a spring flood tide and was now opposed by a force 9 plus, south-easterly gale. With high water at Pentland Skerries just after mid-night the flood was now near its full strength, and it was a spring tide. It was the way into death's dark vale, if ever there was one. "It was a terrible, terrible night. You could see nothing but a white haze, no sea," George Manson said. He is postman at Duncansby and an auxiliary coastguard at the Head.

Forty minutes later, at 9.30 pm, the TGB was sighted by the Principal Lightkeepers. Pentland Skerries in line with Lothar Rock, about four miles south-east of her previously reported position.

The TGB was now in almost deadly situation, with the flood running like a millrace to the south-east out of the Firth and meeting the floor pouring down the east side of South Ronaldsay, both of them opposed by a south-east gale.

The last reporting signal for the TGB was now picked up by Coastguard headquarters, Wick, and a few minutes later she was seen for the last time, again from Pentland Skerries, in Brough Sound, between the Lighthouse and Brough Ness, identified by her stern light and apparently on a north-easterly course.

It proved impossible even for the 70ft "Grace Paterson Ritchie" to approach the "Irene" at 11.05pm. Kirkwall Coastguard Headquarters asked her coxswain to search the coast of South Ronaldsay south-wards for the TGB. At 11.15pm the Kirkwall boat fired a parachute flare; but there was no answering signal.

Nothing more was seen of the Longhope boat until the following afternoon when the Thurso lifeboat found her floating upside down, four miles south-west of

Torness some fifteen sea miles away at the Western entrance to the Firth - after a daylight search by Shackleton aircraft, a helicopter and three lifeboats.

When the TGB was righted in Scrabster Harbour she was found to have suffered serious hull damage. Seven bodies were found on board, six in the cabin, one of them a Supernumerary, the seventh, that of the coxswain, at the wheel with a broken neck. The eighth member of the crew, the motor mechanic, was never found. The coxswain is thought to have included the Supernumerary in the crew by breeches buoy through the surf, an operation which he and his crew had performed with conspicuous success a number of times in the past: at Pentland Skerries (The Ben Barvas), under the cliffs of Hoy (The Ross Puma), and then from the foot of a geo (a narrow inlet) on the north shore of the Firth (The Strathcoe) to name but a few of their rescues, most of which were from trawlers.

The findings of the inquiry held by the RNLI were that the TGB had been overwhelmed by very high seas and maelstrom conditions while proceeding eastwards between South Ronaldsay and Pentland Skerries.

The 17 crew of the "Irene" were rescued from the shore, where she had driven in near Grim Ness at the north-eastern end of South Ronaldsay, by the two coastguard emergency companies in the biggest breeches buoy operation ever effected in Orkney.

At the moment the Longhope boat went, some time just after 9.35. it seems probably that not even a 70ft boat, such as the "Grace Paterson Ritchie", would have survived in the conditions prevailing north of the Pentland Skerries, with an immense wind against an even more immense tide which would produce seas up to 60ft high with correspondingly deep pits between them.

"Suddenly, you find your vessel in a position where there's no more buoyancy because there's no water to support her, "Captain Robert Sutherland, Head of the Department of Nautical Studies at Stromness and an ex-deep water ship-master said, "The POLE STAR", the Northern Lighthouse Board's Tender, once fell 30 feet into a hole at the Sumburgh Roost, off Shetland. She survived; but even the "POLE STAR" would have found it extraordinarily difficult down there in the Sound that night, and she's a vessel of 1,325 tons.

I believe that the TGB was turned end for end and then fell from a great height, either stunning the crew or creating such disarray that it would be beyond human capacity to handle the boat.

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Pentland Skerries Lighthouse was automated in 1994.