

Kinnaird Head Castle and Lighthouse

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In 1782 ferocious storms raged around the coast of Scotland leading to a major loss of shipping and impacting the economic trading capabilities of the whole country; these events focused the minds of the parliamentarians to find a solution to the problem. Lord Saltoun, the owner of the crumbling Kinnaird Head Castle, which sat on a promontory in Fraserburgh, had long thought that his existing crumbling castle would be an ideal building on which to install a private lighthouse. This would provide safety on one of the worst coastlines of Scotland and crucially it would provide income for his estate. However, despite his best efforts his plan was not taken up.

Instead the castle and one and a half acres of ground surrounding it was eventually leased, by him, to the newly formed Northern Lighthouse Board (hereafter NLB). The NLB had been set up in 1786 in response to the storms. Kinnaird Head castle was chosen as

the site of the first lighthouse in the country and its conversion was undertaken in 1786. The use of the castle was both a strategic and an economic decision as the new board had been tasked with the creation of Scotland's first four lighthouses on a relatively small budget. After much discussion Thomas Smith, an Edinburgh tinsmith and lamp maker was employed by the board to undertake the project. Smith had presented the new board with a plan for a system of parabolic reflectors and lamps which he proposed to use to create the first lights. The reflector technology was first developed in 1763 by William Hutchinson and later used by Ezekiel Walker in 1778 to design a system of reflectors and lamps on the Hunstanton Lighthouse in England.

Initially the board offered the post of chief engineer to the board to Ezekiel Walker who rejected the idea. Walker did, however, offer to train Smith in the necessary skills. Smith worked alongside Walker in Norfolk before embarking on this gargantuan job of the very first engineer to the NLB. The castle light was first lit in 1787 and a retired ship's captain Mr James Park was chosen to become Scotland's first lighthouse keeper to the NLB. The light at Kinnaird Head became mainland Scotland's first and continued in service until automation left it redundant in 1991. The NLB replaced the castle lighthouse with a smaller modern one placed a few metres away which today does the job of keeping



Figure 1 : Crashing waves around Kinnaird Head Castle and Lighthouse



Photograph 1 : Historic Kinnaird Head Castle and Lighthouse alongside the modern NLB lighthouse

mariners safe.

When the NLB undertook the automation of Scotlands Lighthouses it brought about major changes to a way of life of that had been in existence since 1787. The lighthouse service had always relied on the service of men who dedicated their lives to keeping mariners safe in the wild seas around Scotlands Coasts. The process of automation began in in the 1960s and the last of Scotlands lighthouse keepers hung up their uniforms in 1998. Their service wasn't just a job it was commitment to keeping the lives of mariners safe. It was a difficult job that demanded many skills not least the ability to live in isolated and harsh conditions for many weeks at a time and sometimes months if the weather was bad. The waters around Scotland can be unforgiving and the role that lighthouses play is crucial to the safety of all who sail on the sea. The change in NLB policy brought about the creation of the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses in order to provide a home for the many historic lenses, archives and objects that would inevitably be removed from Scotland's lighthouses; there would be a plethora of such items. Initially the idea was to create a museum within the lighthouse tower and the existing lightkeepers cottages. However

this idea was expanded and the NLB working in conjunction with Grampian Regional Council constructed a purpose built museum alongside the Castle and Lighthouse which would house and display the many Fresnel lenses and other objects being removed from Scotland's lighthouses. Building the collection was no mean feat and the first manager of the museum Richard Townsley travelled around Scotland acquiring lenses and objects from NLB storage facilities and from many other lighthouses to build the national collection. Many objects and lenses from our collection are on loan in other museums and heritage centres around the country helping to promote and preserve the history of lighthouses in Scotland.

By 2007 the collection was so vast that the museum was awarded recognition status, an important accolade. Today we are still building our collection in a more focused way and we now collect specific items to make our collection a more complete reflection of the history of NLB, lighthouses and lightkeeping in Scotland. We aim to curate specialist exhibition every season that tell the many stories of lightkeeping, lighthouse engineers and the NLB.

Running the museum and castle and lighthouse as a major visitor attraction has always presented a challenge to our team but in the last five years we have faced one the toughest management challenges in its thirty year history.

In 2020 we were experiencing a period of wonderful growth and development and consolidation of our collections when, out of the blue, on the 21st of March we had to close our doors, due to the Covid pandemic. The majority of our staff went home except for two of the management team, our manager and our collections manager, who

continued to work to replace our income with grant funding and to look after the collection. Over the following almost two seasons we remained closed, this brought with it many issues for a growing tourism business. We reopened in 2021 and started to rebuild our team and our business. This was only to last for five weeks when on the 26th of November of that year storm Arwen hit our town and our museum hard. The storm ripped the roof off an entire building exposing our collections store and all of offices and an entire large exhibition space to wind, rain, sea, salt and sand. This was a catastrophic event which threw our national collection into a major crisis. Tears were shed for the first few hours whilst we waited in the carpark for the building to be made safe for us to enter. By around 12 noon following the storm we gained entry to the museum and began the massive task ahead. We removed around thirty-five thousand objects and our entire archive which was threatened with incoming rain. We then had to dismantle several of our precious Fresnel lenses and parabolic mirrors, pack them safely in boxes and find storage in double quick time. We moved swiftly on entry to the building, we decided that if collection items were not already lost then we would ensure they were not lost. That decision galvanised all of us to work hard and keep going to bring our collection to safety as swiftly as we could. We purchased around ten thousand pounds worth of plywood which was built into specially designed boxes to house the many pieces of dismantled Fresnel lenses and parabolic mirrors. We had around eight thousand pounds of scaffolding erected in order to accommodate the lifting gear necessary to take the lenses apart. We will forever be grateful for the many people



Photograph 2 : Articulated lorry being loaded with our lenses after removal from the museum following Storm Arwen

and companies who volunteered to help us. We had help from Historic Environment Scotland who provided us with a joiner who build the 90 boxes necessary for lenses as well as other conservation workers, lorries and vans. A local company Gray and Adams provided extra hands, forklift trucks and an articulated lorry to move things as well as providing us with new racking for the storage units. Local fish companies also assisted us with additional help as well as other items we needed. It was indeed the most challenging time for us all and we needed three industrial units to house everything.

Once everything was safely removed, we started working toward opening in time for the new season but with only half the museum intact.

Four years on the council handed the building back to us complete with a new roof. As soon as the collection was safe we began to plan for our bigger and better new gallery we saw the opportunity to further develop the museum in a positive way a phoenix from the fire if you like. We raised the funding, employed heritage architects to design the new space for us and we were determined to go bigger and better aiming to put on display Europe's largest collection of



Photograph 3 : Lenses from Fair Isle South, Neist Point on Skye, and Dunnet Head in Caithness (left to right)



Photograph 4 : Proposed designs for the new gallery

Fresnel lenses. The majority of those lenses have been held in storage for some thirty years. We have now obtained the funding, the building warrants and the work is now out to tender for the proposed designs for the new gallery, and we should be in a position to appoint a contractor later this month.

The museum and the lighthouse also function as an important tourist attraction in the centre of the town of Fraserburgh, providing many jobs and many volunteer opportunities and work experience placements. We work closely with the job centre and employment specialists and we are a disability friendly museum. We also work with many third sector organisation providing opportunities and meeting space where possible. We run an education



Photograph 5 : Likely Henry Brunton, from the Museum Collection

programme for nurseries, schools, colleges and universities and this is well supported. The economic impact of the museum on the town is over one and a half million pounds a year and as such is really important.

The Stevenson family of engineers began with Robert Stevenson who became the stepson of Thomas Smith when he married Robert's mother. This dynasty spread their experience and engineering skills around the globe. One of the places where the long arm of Scotland's lighthouse experience extended was Japan through the work of Richard Henry Brunton who was known as the Father of Japanese Lighthouses. He travelled to Japan in 1868 as a foreign advisor to help modernise Japan's maritime infrastructure.

It would be nice to research this links more and carry out a joint exhibition with our lighthouse counterparts in Japan. We are currently making links around Europe's lighthouse communities. We are working currently with Azerbaijan, Norway and also with North America and Canada.