

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Helping seafarers on the most treacherous of our coastlines

Navigation charts help mariners understand their surroundings; but, especially in the era before radar, GPS and other precise navigation aids, if a navigator was unsure of his position – especially when making a landfall – it could lead to disaster. This week's Buildings at Risk article looks at some local structures built to reduce the risks to ships and seafarers. By Susan Temple, Castletown Heritage Trust and Dave Martin, Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society

Derbyhaven, with its landing place sheltered from the prevailing wind, provided the first port for the Island's ancient capital.

Named after the Earls of Derby who landed there when bound for Castle Rushen, its strategic importance can be judged by the construction and arming of the forts on St. Michael's Isle (a.k.a. 'Fort Island') to defend the haven – which was not just a trading port, and the principal port of entry for Customs, but was also home to much of the Manx fishing fleet.

Two of the main centres for the growing herring trade were Derbyhaven and Douglas; both had warehouses for the fish and smokehouses which produced 'red herrings' – smoked unsplit.

Almost all traces of these red-herring era buildings have gone, the only survivor is a single warehouse at Derbyhaven built in 1772, half of which has been converted into a house (but the smokehouse has vanished).

Derbyhaven is sheltered by the Langness peninsula, whose Manx name was Oaie Ny Baatyn Marroo, 'Graveyard of the Lost Ships' – an accurate name for one of the most treacherous stretches of coastline on the island, indeed Admiralty charts describe the current off Langness as 'Stream at max. 5 knots with heavy overfalls' – our equivalent of Portland Bill and Race.

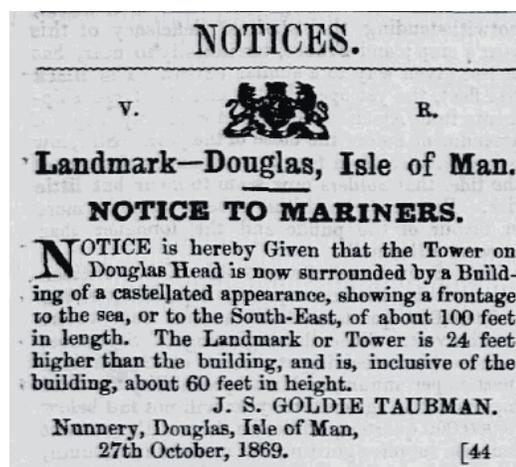
HERRING TOWERS

One of the hazards when passing along the South-East coast of the island, or making for Derbyhaven, is the low-lying nature of the Langness peninsula – in poor visibility the first intimation that a ship is too close might be when breakers are sighted or heard. Further North, where the coast is steep-to, is another hazard – some seafarers had difficulty in distinguishing how far 'up' the coast they were, they knew that the entrance to Douglas harbour was 'just North of Douglas Head' but came to grief because they allegedly mistook another headland for Douglas Head.

Seamarks (landmarks designed to be distinctive when viewed from out at sea) and



Red-herring warehouse, Derbyhaven - 1981 (Manx Museum)



Notice to mariners from IoM Times (Manx Museum)

lights are erected to help mariners ascertain their position in relation to navigational dangers – be they the island itself or offshore rocks and reefs – and are intended to help make a safe approach to a harbour or landing, or help keep safe sea-room when passing the island.

To try and combat the continued loss of ships and life in the area of Langness and, to a lesser degree at Douglas, in 1811 the British Government built two unlit seamarks – one on the outer side of Langness, and the other on Douglas Head. They were both

designed by Thomas Brine, who had arrived in Castletown in 1810 to serve as Clerk of Works to the Barracks Office, and who subsequently was responsible for many of the important buildings in the area including St. Mary's Church and the old House of Keys in Castletown, also the modifications to Castle Rushen for its use as a gaol.

The new seamarks were modelled after the tower in Peel Castle – a proven design which has stood now for over a thousand years. They are some sixty feet high, conspicuous above the surrounding



Langness Lighthouse (Manx Museum)

land when viewed from seaward. Built of local limestone, they have castellated tops and alarming interior staircases built into the walls; and because of their popularity as seamarks with the herring fleet, became known as 'herring towers'.

The Douglas tower was built on the top of Douglas Head, on land belonging to the Goldie Taubman family of the Nunnery. It stood alone for fifty years, and despite the new lighthouse on Douglas Head (which had been transferred to the Northern Lighthouse Board in 1859), the herring



Langness herring tower

tower was still in use as a seamark when the tower was incorporated into the Douglas Head Hotel in 1869 (see illustration).

In 1948, the surrounding building was gutted by fire, with the exception of the famous concert hall (where 'Tipperary' was first popularised) and the Tower, which remained unscathed; the building was then repaired.

When the site was cleared prior to the construction of the Douglas Head Apartments, the Tower was spared and in March 1999 briefly re-emerged to be seen in its

original prominence. Now conserved, the tower can be seen in full from the central private courtyard; but unfortunately all except the 'crown' of the tower is once again eclipsed when viewed from most other angles.

LIGHTHOUSES

From the 1700s, Merchants from Liverpool and Glasgow agitated for means to protect their ships from running aground on the Island as they passed through the Irish Sea. While the need for lighthouses at the extremities of the island was agreed in principle, the



Herring tower Douglas conserved in modern courtyard

matter was complicated by a degree of territorial friction between the Northern Lighthouse Board, which covered Scotland, and Trinity House which covered England (to which, since Revestment, the Island now 'belonged').

In 1815 an act of the British Parliament finally empowered the Commissioners for Northern Lights to build two lighthouses on the island; however, no money for their construction was forthcoming from the British Government and it was left to Sir William Rae, Sheriff of Edinburgh, and Mr. John Gladstone, a representative of the Merchants of Liverpool, to raise the money required. Designed by Robert Stevenson, the lighthouses at the Point of Ayre and on the Calf of Man were completed in 1818.

Meanwhile, Langness still had its unlit herring tower which was visible from either side of the peninsula, but in an area notorious for fog and heavy seas, it did little to re-

duce the number of casualties. Its purpose as a seamark would only have been useful in daylight hours; although short-range lights were periodically exhibited at the mouth of the haven on poles and then from a tower at the Fort (principally to aid entrance into Derbyhaven during the herring season).

The unlit herring tower no doubt averted some catastrophes, but ships continued to be wrecked around Langness – over forty between 1850 and 1875 alone.

John McMeiken, a merchant of Arbory Street, Castle-town was deeply involved with charitable enterprises, including the Royal Benevolent Society and the Shipwrecked Fishermen and Mariners Society, and saw at first hand the poverty and unhappiness caused by the shipwrecks in the area. For 12 years he lobbied anyone and everyone for the provision of a lighthouse, and upon his death, was the

subject of a memorial poem by T.E. Brown, which begins 'excellent Manxman, Scotia gave you birth, but you were ours....'

Almost all agreed the only answer to this situation was the construction of a proper lighthouse at Langness by the Northern Lighthouse Board; but the English authorities (the Board of Trade and Trinity House) remained intransigent despite pleas from the Manx Government, the Harbour Commissioners, and Shipowners. From 1875 to 1877 nine further wrecks occurred, and eventually in December 1877 Trinity House conceded and agreed to the Northern Lighthouse Board constructing a lighthouse at Langness.

Finished ahead of schedule, the light was shown for the first time in December 1880, and in 1883 the intermittent auxiliary light on the Fort at Derbyhaven was discontinued, and the light-tower with-in the Fort was removed.



Alyn ashore Langness in 1940 (Manx Museum)

Langness wrecks

The coast in the Langness area has probably seen more than its fair share of marine casualties, though many are not properly recorded.

As elsewhere, some are commemorated with a simple memorial, or poignantly by gravestones for those lucky enough to be recovered for burial; some are documented courtesy of a press report, others only in oral history.

Some marine losses though are better documented. Reports of the foundering of HM Brig 'Racehorse' at Langness in December 1822 not only record the tragedy, and the bravery and sacrifice of local rescuers, but analysis of the reports shows the need for distinctive aids to navigation.

Racehorse, a brig of 18 guns with a complement of 121 men under the command of Captain William Suckling (a relative of Admiral Lord Nelson through his mother), was bound for Douglas, and in due course the pilot saw a light ashore which he thought was that of Douglas Pier Head and so turned shoreward.

However shortly afterwards, the ship struck a rock which they would later find was part of the Skerranes at Langness Point.

The weather was cloudy, it was dark and the sea was running high.

It quickly became apparent that the ship was badly holed and the ship's boats were sent ashore to seek help.

The weather worsened and although five local boats went to assist, only one managed to reach the Racehorse and this boat made several journeys to and from the brig



Sailing ship Anna ashore Langness (Manx Museum)

and succeeded in saving all the remaining crew. Sadly on the final journey, a large wave swamped the boat and eight men were drowned, including three Manx rescuers.

At his Court Martial, William Edwards, the Pilot, deposed: 'I beg to observe that the light which deceived me was right over Langness Point and is called Scarlett House, the Gentleman who occupied it died on that day so the house was well lighted up which occasioned me to take it for Douglas Pier Light and on account of the haziness of the weather I took that light to be a greater distance'.

This highlights the confu-

sion trying to differentiate between fixed lights ashore, especially on a populous coast, and is why Langness and other modern lighthouses and harbour lights have different patterns of flashes (and some use coloured lights) to allow them to be uniquely identified.

Good did come from the Racehorse tragedy though – it was one of the events which spurred Sir William Hilary to found the RNLI.

The importance of a light on Langness was demonstrated as recently as March 1940 when the steam coaster 'Alyn' ran aground in the dark on Fort Island during the wartime blackout.