

Press Release : Lighting the World's Seas

An exhibition created by the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses, Fraserburgh, will be on show at the Scottish Fisheries Museum from 18 November.

The exhibition, created to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the construction of the Bell Rock Lighthouse, charts the development of these extraordinary feats of engineering around the coast of Scotland. It also provides an insight into the living and working conditions of those who manned the lights and to the Northern Lighthouse Board which still provides an essential service to Scottish seafarers today.

The Exhibition - story

In the beginning, there were no lights at all. The first lighthouse was probably one of the *Seven Wonders of the Ancient World*, which famously included the Pharos of Alexandria. According to Pliny the Elder, 'Its purpose is to provide a beacon for ships sailing by night, to warn them of shallows and to mark the entrance to the harbour'. From this North African birthplace, the lighthouse was imitated around the Mediterranean. By the Middle Ages there were at least 30 lights, allowing coastal trade to be undertaken in some safety. Most famously, the lighthouse at Corduan on the west coast of France was already ancient by 1550.

Around England, there had been early warning lights at Dover, the Isle of Wight and on the Northumberland coast at the mouth of the Tyne, among others. Scotland's coasts were equally dark and dangerous. From early medieval times most external trade was eastwards across the North Sea but charting these perilous coasts remained an inexact science until the late 17th century. The first Scottish lighthouse was set up on the Isle of May after some local Fife landowners banded together to petition the Scots government for the provision of a light. A simple grate on a tower was set up in 1636, in which burned a fire between then and 1816.

In 1782 a series of unprecedented storms was experienced around Britain. One reaction was a series of coastal surveys, which emphasized the need for lighthouses at critical points around Scotland's coast. A Bill was presented to the House of Commons on 31 May 1786, which proposed the setting up a board of trustees, or Commissioners, with the authority to build lights in the recommended positions and to levy dues on every British and foreign ship that passed any of the lights. This is how the modern lighthouse service is still funded.

The first lightkeeper, James Park, was appointed in 1787. Light-keeping evolved from the early days, and in due course most lights had a complement of three – a Principal Keeper and two Assistants. Further roles were developed when the need arose. Wives and families were accommodated in nearby houses. During the nineteenth century the Northern Lighthouse Board and their staff of keepers, engineers and boat crews had evolved into a well-oiled machine supplying about 150 lighthouses. A way of service had emerged, where generations of the same family would enter the lighthouse service. This was a very disciplined life, with a strict hierarchy.

Today technology has improved and the lighthouses are unmanned. But these are still some of the most dangerous waters in the world. Working with a global network of other lighthouse services and

the International Association of Lighthouse Authorities (IALA), the Northern Lighthouse Board still endeavours to make the Scottish seas a safer place. Today, the Northern Lighthouse Board looks after 209 lighthouses, 162 buoys and 37 beacons around Scotland's 6200-mile coastline, which has at least 790 islands.

The Exhibition – content and comment

The exhibition narrative was written by Alison Morrison-Low, principal curator of Historic Scientific Instruments and Photography at National Museums Scotland who said,

“Lighthouses remain some of our best-loved landmarks and we believe visitors will be fascinated to see and hear about their history, from the Scottish engineering ingenuity involved to the personal stories of the men and women who kept the lights shining for passing mariners.”

It is complimented by a selection of objects from the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses including the lens from the Kyle Rhea Lighthouse, documents relating to the Stevenson family of engineers and personal items belonging to lighthouse keepers.

Virginia Mayes-Wright, Director of the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses said,

“It is wonderful to get the opportunity to loan artefacts to Scottish Fisheries Museum. The Lighthouse story is tied deeply to the stories of Scottish fishermen. Most seafarers know their local light and feel comforted by seeing its beam. In hostile waters lighthouses provide a reminder of land and a comfort to a weary mariner. I hope visitors will appreciate the complexity of these emotional structures and the dedication of the men that kept them, In Saludem Omnium, for the safety of all.”

Linda Fitzpatrick, Curator at the Scottish Fisheries Museum said,

“It is particularly fitting that this exhibition should be shown here. Apart from the huge reliance that fishermen place on the lighthouses that can be found around the coast of Scotland, it was on the Isle of May, just off Anstruther, that the first Scottish lighthouse was built. Visitors to the exhibition will be able to see the island and also to walk around Anstruther Harbour, built by the famous Stevenson family who were responsible for the design and construction of almost every one of Scotland's 209 lighthouses.”

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Notes to Editors

Scottish Fisheries Museum

The Scottish Fisheries Museum is operated by an independent charitable trust and tells the story of the Scottish fishing industry and its people from the earliest times to the present.

Exhibition dates: 18 November 2011 – 4 March 2012

Open : Mon – Sat : 10 – 4.30, Sun : 12 – 4.30, last admissions 1 hour before closing

Entry : FREE with museum admission, accompanied children FREE

For further information please contact Linda Fitzpatrick, Curator

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The Museum of Scottish Lighthouses

The Museum of Scottish Lighthouses tells the unique story of the lighthouses set up around the coastline of Scotland, their engineering feats and the stories of the people who manned them.

The Museum is open seven days a week.

April-October, Monday-Saturday 10am-5pm; Sunday 12am-5pm.

For further information please contact the Director on 01346 511022 or email

director@lighthousemuseum.org.uk.

Images

Please contact Linda Fitzpatrick if you would like to send a photographer to visit the exhibition or to use any of the images listed below:

- Kinnaird Head Lighthouse at night.
- The last keepers at Kinnaird Head Lighthouse
- The Bell Rock Lighthouse
- Muckle Flugga Lighthouse from D. Alan Stevenson's "Lighthouses before 1820"

All above images are © the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses.