



Trinity House

Lighthouses have been around for a very long time, they were mentioned as far back as c.280BC. The two original lighthouses at Dover were built by the Romans. From these very early times, and up until the 16th century, anyone was free to build a lighthouse and, if they could, they charged passing mariners a fee for using it. This system was not very reliable since, if a light made a profit, then it remained in use but, should it have made a loss, it went out of use. The latter was, of course, of no help to mariners and gave rise to much criticism.

In 1514, a Royal Charter was granted by King Henry VIII whereby Trinity House would, from then on take responsibility for, and own, all lighthouses in the UK. Later, the Northern Lighthouse Board [NLB] became responsible for all lights in Scotland and, similarly, the Commissioners of Irish Lights [CIL] for the lights in Ireland. Today, Trinity House is better known as a General Lighthouse Authority [GLA] and covers all Aids to Navigation in England, Wales, the Channel Islands and Gibraltar and works closely with the NLB and CIL. Funding for this service does not come from the Government purse but is provided from commercial ship operators, via a levy placed on them as part of harbour dues.

Prior to the introduction of satellite navigation, all position fixing, particularly at night, was undertaken by taking bearings of visible lights which the ship's navigator then plotted onto charts. Lights at that time had to be visible as far as possible, even to ranges of at least 25 miles. Most lighthouses emitted a white light but, to warn of particularly dangerous areas, part of the visual sector would emit a red light. To identify each lighthouse, the number and duration of the flashes of each light was different and was known as the characteristic of that particular light. Very early lights were nothing more than a fire in a brazier but, later, better light output was achieved by using oil lamps with reflectors, later still the lights were changed to an incandescent oil burner [IOB] - something like a Tilley Lamp - using a Fresnel lens to concentrate the light into a fine beam. As time progressed, acetylene gas was also used and, finally, electricity was introduced. Early electric lamps were very large and rather inefficient but, in modern times, very small lamps can achieve the same effect. Now, LEDs have taken over from filament lamps.

With the introduction of electronics to lighthouses they can now be remotely monitored which led to all Lighthouse Keepers being made redundant as of 1998. Also, with the introduction of satellite navigation, long range navigation by lights is no longer required so today many of the lights have either been reduced in range or even switched off all together. Some lights are now no more than a local light warning of a local hazard.

The functioning of each light is now monitored from a control room in Harwich between dusk and dawn. However, day to day maintenance of mainland lights is carried out by an attendant who lives in the locality visiting once a month, unless a particular fault needs to be attended to. Each light has a secondary lamp which switches in automatically should the main one fail. Offshore lights are maintained by visiting engineers who usually now arrive by helicopter. The use of helicopters is, however, expensive so a number of lights are still accessed by boat - the Needles Lighthouse is one of these.

In times gone by, if a light could not be seen because of fog, then a fog signal was sounded - another job for the busy keepers and, at some stations, additional keepers were employed specifically for this task. Again, with the introduction of satellite navigation and radar, fog signals are no longer required and they have all been discontinued. Occasionally, however, you will still hear one but it is only there to warn of a local hazard - again the Needles Lighthouse is an example of this.

At various places, including Hurst Castle, there are displays of preserved equipment so that we can all see how life used to be. Many of the items seen here originated from a closed depot in Penzance which had been turned into a museum which unfortunately subsequently closed some time ago. Some of the exhibits were then transferred to the ALK's care at Hurst Castle.

To see where other visitor centres and lighthouses are located, visit the Trinity House Web site www.trinityhouse.co.uk and also the Association of Lighthouse Keepers [ALK] website www.alk.org.uk

And don't forget to visit the ALK Museum Rooms at the far end of the West Wing

For more info, contact hurst@alk.org.uk or ☎ 01329-843883