

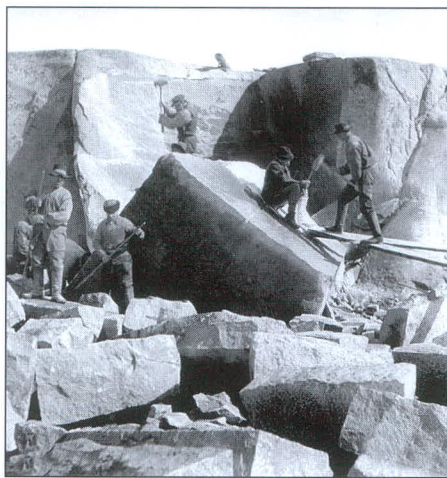


Bengtskär Lighthouse

by Helena Lumme

Scandinavia's tallest lighthouse, Bengtskär, is the Finnish archipelago's most imposing and magnificent monument. Surviving the bombardments of two World Wars, Finland's 'Statue of Liberty' has recently been renovated for future generations to visit and admire.

The treacherous waters of the Gulf of Finland was the site of many shipwrecks until the Imperial Senate granted the materials to build the Bengtskär Lighthouse in 1906. A barren rock, fifteen miles out from the mainland of Finland, became the home of Scandinavia's tallest lighthouse. The granite for the massive lighthouse was quar-



Mining granite on the island to build the lighthouse, 1905.

Above — The Bengtskär station celebrating its 90th anniversary in 1996.

ried on the island. A special petrol lantern was built in Paris and was seen for twenty nautical miles. The following year, 1907, a seven meter long foghorn was installed in the attic of the living quarters.

Bengtskär became a permanent home for a Master lighthouse keeper, a machinist, three assistant lighthouse keepers, and their families. By the 1930s the families had grown and over forty people lived permanently on the small island. A teacher was brought from the mainland to take care of the children's education.

THE SURPRISE ATTACK OF JULY 1941

During the second World War, when Russia was warring with Finland, the strategic importance of Bengtskär quickly became apparent as Finnish troops on the island could easily monitor Soviet activities. The most dramatic event in the history of Bengtskär took place during a foggy July night in 1941. At one



The morning after the Russian attack, Lt. Eriksson searches the horizon. Note the damage from the 40mm cannon shells to the right.

hour after midnight, under cover of heavy fog, two Russian patrol boats secretly landed an armed force at the southern point of the island. The invasion party of one hundred men, led by Lieutenant Kurilov, had orders for the complete destruction of the lighthouse so that it could no longer play a role in hampering Russian war activities.

The small Finnish garrison of forty-one men, including four lighthouse keepers, took refuge in the upper floors of the lighthouse. Overwhelmed by a vastly superior enemy force, the defenders fought bravely under the command of Fred Luther, who was twice wounded during the fight.

After a day long and hard battle, the small Finnish garrison emerged victorious. But victory was to come at a price: the bloody battle had claimed twenty-eight dead. As for Soviet Russia, sixty troops had lost their lives at the hands of the Finnish defense force. The next day, a Russian warplane overflew the island and dropped a bomb. It struck the living quarters, killing seven of the Finnish defense force.

After the war, the lighthouse was closed for repairs for several years. In 1950 the lighthouse keepers returned to the rock, this time without their families. They worked in shifts of two for fourteen day periods. Heavy seas and inclement weather conditions would often extend these shifts to a month of long and lonely duty.



In 1968 the gas lantern was converted to automatic operation and Bengtskär became unmanned. Benign neglect and damage turned the once proud Bengtskär into a damp, cold, and hulking ruin. After years of resisting storms, high seas, winds, and invasion, Bengtskär was falling victim to so called friendly forces. What damage nature failed to cause was provided by human hands. Vandals defaced both the interior and exterior of the historic building.

In the mid-80s Paula Wilson, who had moved to the outer archipelago, saw the deterioration of the lighthouse and started her brave battle to save the unique lighthouse. She made several lobbying trips to the Finnish Parliament in Helsinki, turned to many authorities and private companies for help, as well as her employer, Center for Extension Studies at Turku University.

Most people she turned to were skeptical; even if the lighthouse could be repaired, who would ever be interested in an old lighthouse situated way out in the stormy seas?

Finally, Paula's employer, the University of Turku, reached a decision that they would be willing to take care of the lighthouse, and by doing so also advance the maritime tourism in the area. Finnish Shipping Authorities agreed to lease the lighthouse on the condition that the University would be responsible for the repairs and planning of the future use of the lighthouse.

Renovations started in 1991, and with the help of many local authorities and private companies the work was completed in 1995, when the historic monument was reopened to serve its new role as a Tourist, Conference, and Research and Education Center.

In 1996, Bengtskär Lighthouse was given the Ford Environmental Award of Finland, and was invited to compete for the pan-European Award.

As word of this historic monument spread, it has quickly become one of the most unique destinations in Finland for tourists and scholars alike. At times, when it is very windy and the boats have a hard time transporting visitors to Bengtskär, some tourists have hired private helicopters just to see the unique lighthouse.

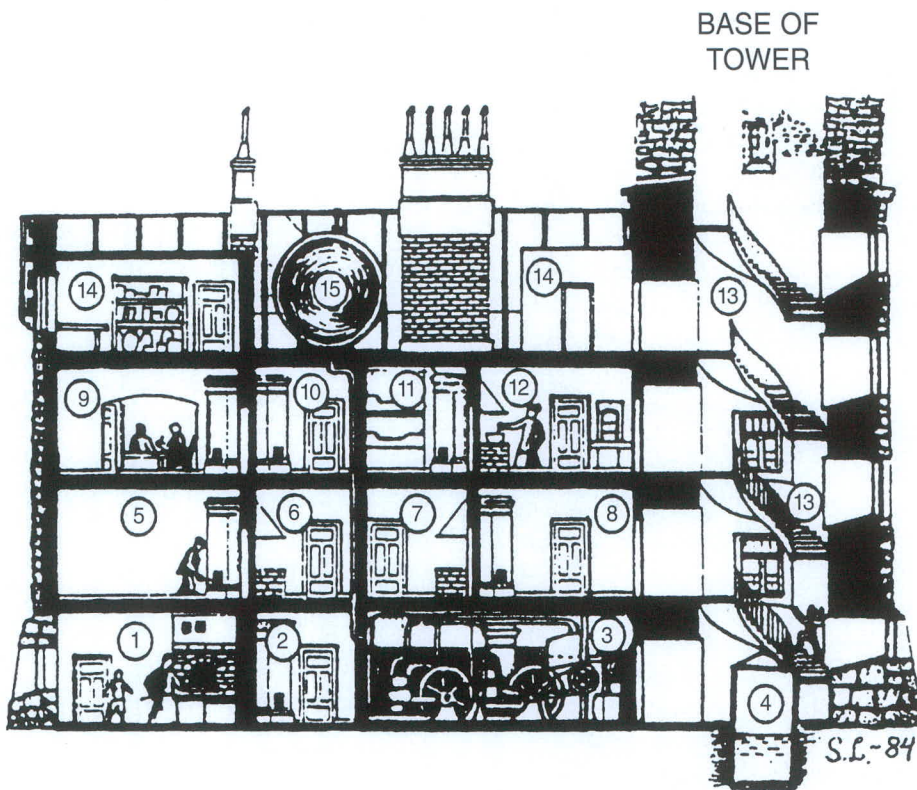
The Lecture hall on the lower floor offers a variety of maritime exhibits depicting the history, flora and fauna, and the natural fea-

tures of the archipelago. The lower floor also houses Finland's first Lighthouse Museum. A permanent exhibit 'Bengtskär 1941', which gives a vivid account of the dramatic hours of the battle for the island, will be opened later.

Other floors of former living quarters will be used for Conference rooms and accommodations. The cozy rooms, named after each lighthouse keeper, accommodate fifteen overnight visitors.

The last five years of Bengtskär have been carefully documented by Paula Wilson's sister Helena Lumme, and Helena's husband, photographer Mika Manninen. To attract sponsors and collect money for the renovations and maintenance, they have published a brochure that contains historical pictures and information about the 90 years of the Bengtskär Lighthouse.

Helena and Mika are now living in Southern California and have creative information packets they would like to distribute to interested members of the U. S. Lighthouse Society. The packets are sold to support the renovation and maintenance of the lighthouse and can be ordered from Helena at a cost of \$25 each. Please make your check payable to Helena Lumme, address: 741 Starlight Heights Drive, La Canada, CA 91011. Please include your address and phone number.



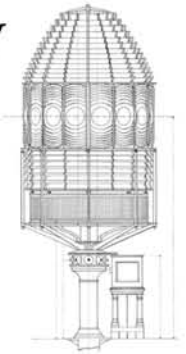
- | | | | |
|------|---|-------|---|
| 1 | Bakery | 7, 8 | Machinist quarters,
1 room + kitchen |
| 2 | Workshop | 9, 10 | Master of the lighthouse
quarters, 3 rooms + kitchen |
| 3 | Machine room | 13 | Staircase |
| 4 | Water tank/reservoir | 14 | Store room |
| 5, 6 | Lighthouse keepers
quarters, 1 room +
kitchen | 15 | Foghorn |



The lighthouse keepers' kitchen with original 1930's furniture. All photos in this article courtesy of Helena Lumme.



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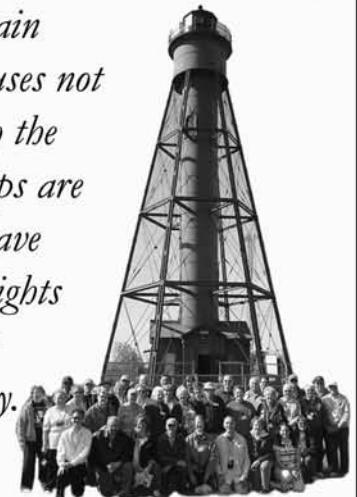
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