



Brazier-Lighthouses

by D.B. Hague

In Ireland there is a small number of unusual structures quite unlike lighthouses elsewhere (Fig. 1). They consist of a stone-vaulted keeper's cottage containing stone stairs leading up to a small platform on the roof on which was displayed an open fire; this could be of coal, wood or at times turf or peat. In most cases they stand on high headlands, but one example at low elevation was provided with a tower. The principal difference between these and their nearest parallels—at the North Forelands, Isle of May or Flamborough Head, where the residential quarters are contained in the structure of the tower—is the Irish insistence on a vaulted single-storied cottage. Their vaulted roof is clearly a protection against fire, but the form springs from the ancient tradition of stone-vaulted oratories such as the famous Gallarus in Kerry (Leask, 1955). The longevity of this can be seen in such buildings as the English-built powder-magazine at Charlesfort or the famous nineteenth-century Black Church in Dublin.

The northern entrance to Dublin Bay is marked by the promontory of Howth Hill, the present Baily lighthouse being set on the low southernmost tip. Howth was one of the several sites for private lighthouses granted to Sir Robert Reading by patent in 1665, and it can be assumed that he commenced building with little delay. Here the elevation of about 120 m does not demand a tall tower, and an engraving by Francis

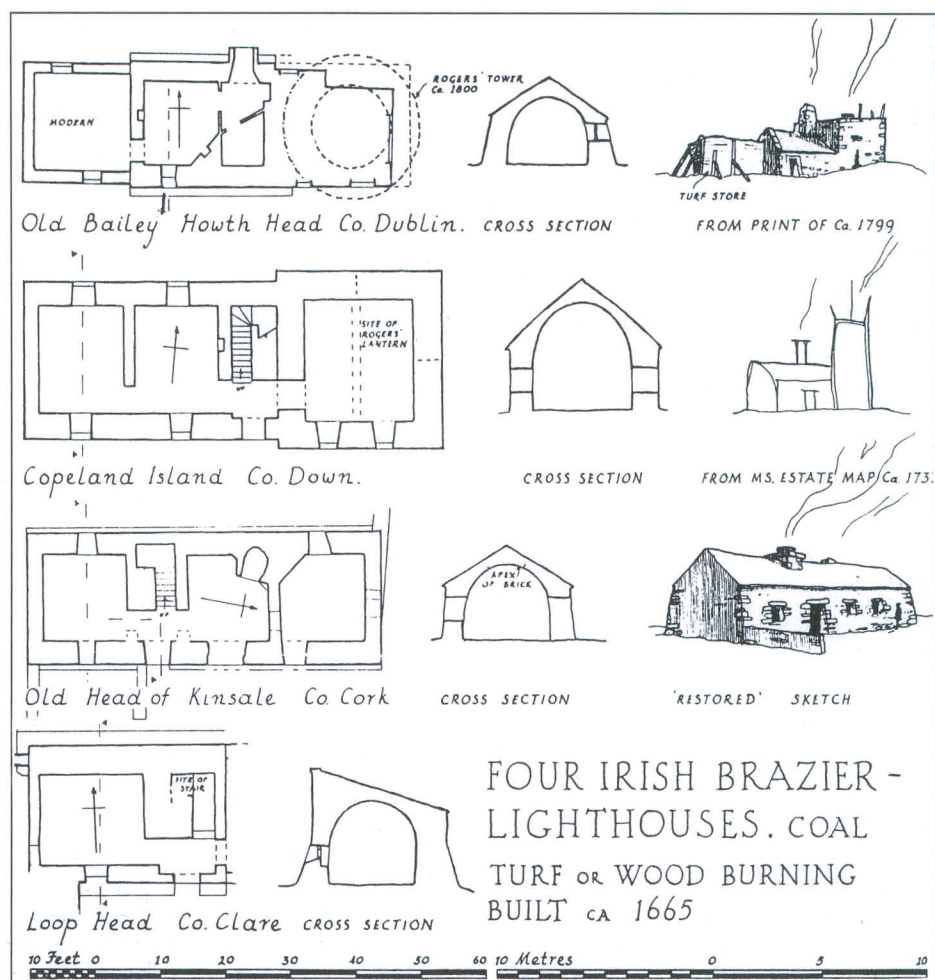


Figure 1

Jukes, published in 1799 (Fig. 1), shows the station in operation. In the centre is the vaulted cottage with battered walls and chimney; on the right, very little higher than the roof, is a squat tower or platform holding the brazier; on the left is a propped-up pile of what appears to be turf or peat. Turf was used here, and the stone basin in which the fire was kindled survived in part, into the nineteenth century (Sloane, 1873), but it is clear that coal was the main fuel and its use is recorded in 1690 (Belfast P.R.O., 1690-91). Late in the eighteenth century it was decided to provide an oil lamp, and Thomas Rogers demolished the square structure and replaced it by a small round tower of similar height. In

the Ballast Office in Dublin is an early nineteenth-century water-colour showing this and some enigmatic buildings. All that survives of the original building is the single-roomed vaulted cottage measuring about 25 feet by 12 feet; this is subdivided and provided with modern extensions to the west and on the site of the tower, the latter being echoed by a curved section of garden walling; the only hint of antiquity is the battered side-walls. (Fig. 2)

Loop Head lies at the extreme end of the Shannon mouth, on the north side of the river. An application was made for a light here in 1717 (Callwell, 1863), and the result of this must be the small vaulted building now used as a store in

the present compound. It has the same battered walls as the building at Howth, and is about the same size, but now has a single-pitch roof. Its stair has been removed, but it is clear that the very thick mass of masonry on its inner side must have carried the fire-platform. As the ground slopes down to the north the wall on this side is considerably thicker than the opposite one containing the entrance and a single small window. There are indications that it was a single unit; the door in its east end, now leading to a nineteenth-century building, might have led to an earlier one in that position. In 1802 Rogers built a 60 foot high tower to the east, and this was removed in 1854 when the present 23 m high tower was erected by George Halpin.

The third and best-preserved example is that situated on the Old Head of Kinsale, 1 km north of the present lighthouse which is at the extreme end of the headland. The fine deep-water harbour of Kinsale was considered to be one of the very best in Ireland. After the siege of Kinsale in 1601, when the Spanish garrison was given honourable terms of surrender, the port became increasingly important. A naval dockyard was established and in the late 1660s the splendid Charlesfort was built commanding the entrance to the harbour and the main anchorage. Like Howth, Kinsale was covered by the patent granted to Reading in 1665, in which he was given the right to erect two lighthouses, one on the Old Head and a second on Barry Ogee's Castle; the latter was engulfed by the new Charlesfort masonry buildings and the light was shown from a window in the fort. The Old Head is about 6.5 miles south of the town and is a long sinuous headland with the extremity isolated by a narrow isthmus defended by a prehistoric or medieval earthwork on which stands a medieval tower. The original lighthouse is situated about $\frac{2}{3}$ mile to the south-east on high ground where the headland widens out.

The building measures 50 feet by 16 feet and contains three rooms, one of which must have been a store, since in addition to being exposed it is 5 miles from the nearest hamlet. Externally the

walls are battered, internally the crown of the vaults is in brick. The stair is badly ruined, but access to the top is possible, and here coal ash from the fire can still be found. In 1703 complaints were made that the light had not been shown for the last twenty years (Callwell, 1863). In 1714 notice was given that the light was to be "made with coals and not candles as it hitherto hath been there" (*Dublin Gazette*, 21 Sept. 1714). This was presumably another example where mariners found that a change to candles or oil was not an improvement, and demanded the reinstatement of the coal

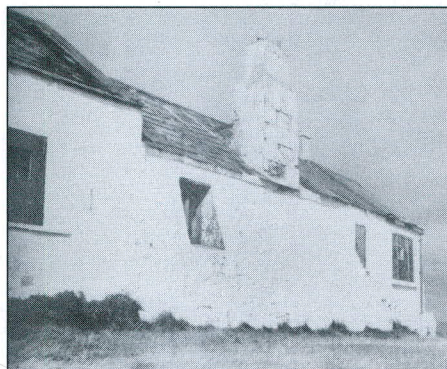


Figure 2

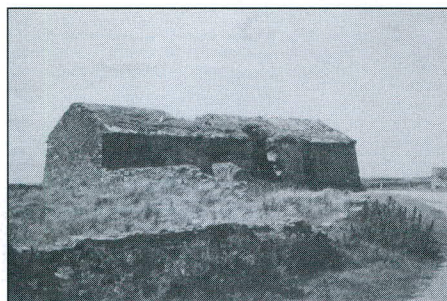


Figure 3

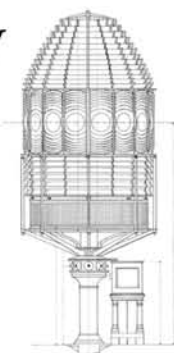
brazier (as at North Forelands and Isle of May). In 1810 an inspection was made of a temporary lighthouse which had a small lantern containing "twelve lamps with cylinders, but without reflectors" (Halpin, 1810), but it is not clear from the description whether this was carried on the roof of the cottage or was an independent structure; the latter is the more likely as the roof shows no signs of alterations. Whatever its form it survived until 1814, when George Halpin built a new round tower about 55 feet to the south-east nearer the cliff edge. This had keepers' dwellings around it on a concentric plan, and the tower, now ruined, is unlikely to have been very

high. This was replaced by Halpin's 95 foot tower at the end of the headland in 1853. This old "cottage lighthouse" is the best example of its kind and it is to be hoped that it will be restored and preserved as an Irish Ancient Monument of considerable interest. (Fig. 3)

A structure rather different from the previous three examples is the light on one of the Copeland Isles at the entrance to Belfast Lough, about 2 miles north of Donaghadee. The small island now known as Old Lighthouse Isle, but originally as Cross Isle, rises to an elevation of only 85 feet and consequently it has always been necessary to have a tower. Furthermore, the light being on an island, it was necessary to provide more accommodation for living quarters and stores; consequently two stories were provided, and this part, 34 feet by 22 feet, still survives intact. At the east end are the ruins of a square tower a little wider than the living quarters, with walls $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet thick. In 1774 a description by Walter Harris states that the tower was 70 feet high with walls 7 feet thick (Harris & Smith, 1744), whilst in 1810 it was reported as 44 feet high (Halpin, 1810); as the extant walls are not of this thickness it is possible that Harris's "sevens" are a mis-transcription of "fours". In 1796 Rogers built a turret on the north-east corner of the tower, of which remains can still be seen. Soon after 1813 it was decided to build a new lighthouse, and Halpin's 46 foot high tower was erected to the south; the old one was used to carry a bell. In 1844 yet another lighthouse was built, this time on Mew Isle, and this 115 foot tower is still in use. The plan of the old building presents some problems, particularly the relationship of the stone stair to the tower, which is very awkward. It is possible that there might have been an earlier tower such as that clearly shown on an estate map of 1732, which was completely removed in the late eighteenth century. The date is not known precisely, but Harris is probably correct in recording that in 1744 it was "built thirty years ago". This is supported by the fact that it is not shown on Price's map of Ireland of 1711.



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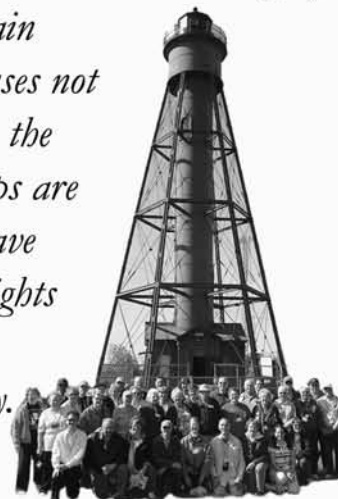
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