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Grace Darling
Extraordinary Rescuer or Media Heroine?

By Elinor DeWire



'Twas on the Longstone light-house,
There dwelt an English maid;
Pure as the air around her,
Of danger ne'er afraid…
Cal Bagby, "The Ballad of Grace Darling"

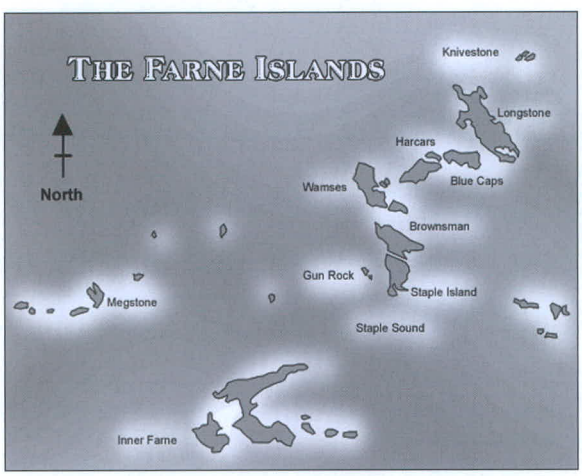
What lighthouse enthusiast has not heard of Grace Darling, the daughter of an English lighthouse keeper whose pluck and call to duty in 1838 resulted in the rescue of the survivors of the wrecked steamship *Forfarshire*? Thanks to flowery Victorian journalism and the British bent for fanfare, Grace's single gallant deed earned her immortality and made her, as biographer Jessica Mitford said, "the first media heroine." Yet, her story is barely a glimmer these days—not the popular and embellished tale it was more than a century ago. Who was Grace Darling really, and was she as heroic as history claims?

I first heard about Grace Darling from my mother, a great reader and amateur historian who, though she never visited England or saw the tempestuous North Sea where Grace gained fame, had learned the heroine's story in books and girls' magazines when she was a child during World War I. One day when I was about 7, as we browsed through a plethora of pretty Easter bonnets in Montgomery Ward's, we came across one with pink ribbon ties called "Grace Darling." Mother proceeded to educate me about girls who were pretty and dainty but also tough as nails and braver, sometimes, than their male peers. She remembered reading that Grace Darling had been given an expensive bonnet after Grace became famous.

Grace's story grew from simple roots into florid blooms. At dawn on September 7, 1838, Grace and her father, William Darling, the keeper of the 1826 Longstone Lighthouse in the Farne Islands, awoke to the howl of wind and crashing of waves against their ocean home. Spume filled the air as they looked across the slate gray North Sea, a body of water notorious for its storms. It was 4:45 a.m. In the distance the dim, ghostly outline of a ship was seen in the quickening twilight, aground on Big Harcar Rock almost a mile from the lighthouse. A telescope revealed survivors clinging to the wreck.

Keeper Darling, in the tradition of all lighthouse keepers, waited for low tide and greater daylight, and then donned his oilskins and downed a hot drink to steel himself for the grueling task ahead—attempting a rescue of the survivors. The surfmen at North Sunderland (now called Seahouses) likely were not able to reach the ship with their lifeboat. The survivors' only hope was the lightkeeper on Longstone.

His 22-year-old daughter, Grace, knowing her father needed help, asked to accompany him. She was young and could handle a boat. The only other person at the lighthouse was her mother, and the elder woman had less strength than Grace. Who knows what conversation passed between Grace and her father? It was a miserable chore to push a small boat into stormy seas. They knew they'd be risking their lives to save others.



The Farne Islands lie a few miles off England's Northumberland Coast in the North Sea. Longstone and the Harcar rocks are seen in the upper right.

But this was the way of God-fearing coastal people, especially on the North Sea where fishing, boat-building, and other maritime trades dominated the economy. "You have to go out…" was their mantra.



The wreck of the side-wheel steamer *Forfarshire* became a media sensation. This artist's rendering captures the drama of the disaster and a looming Big Harcar Rock in the background. Courtesy Washington State University.

Blankets were gathered, and the lighthouse coble, a short, flat-bottomed boat 21½-feet long from stem to stern, was lowered into the wild waters. Grace and her father were able rowers, but the mountainous seas and violent tide pushed the stout little coble off course several times, making the journey to the stranded ship twice as long. They reached the wreck—the steamer *Forfarshire*—in about an hour and Keeper Darling took off five of the nine survivors while Grace steadied the coble. The boat

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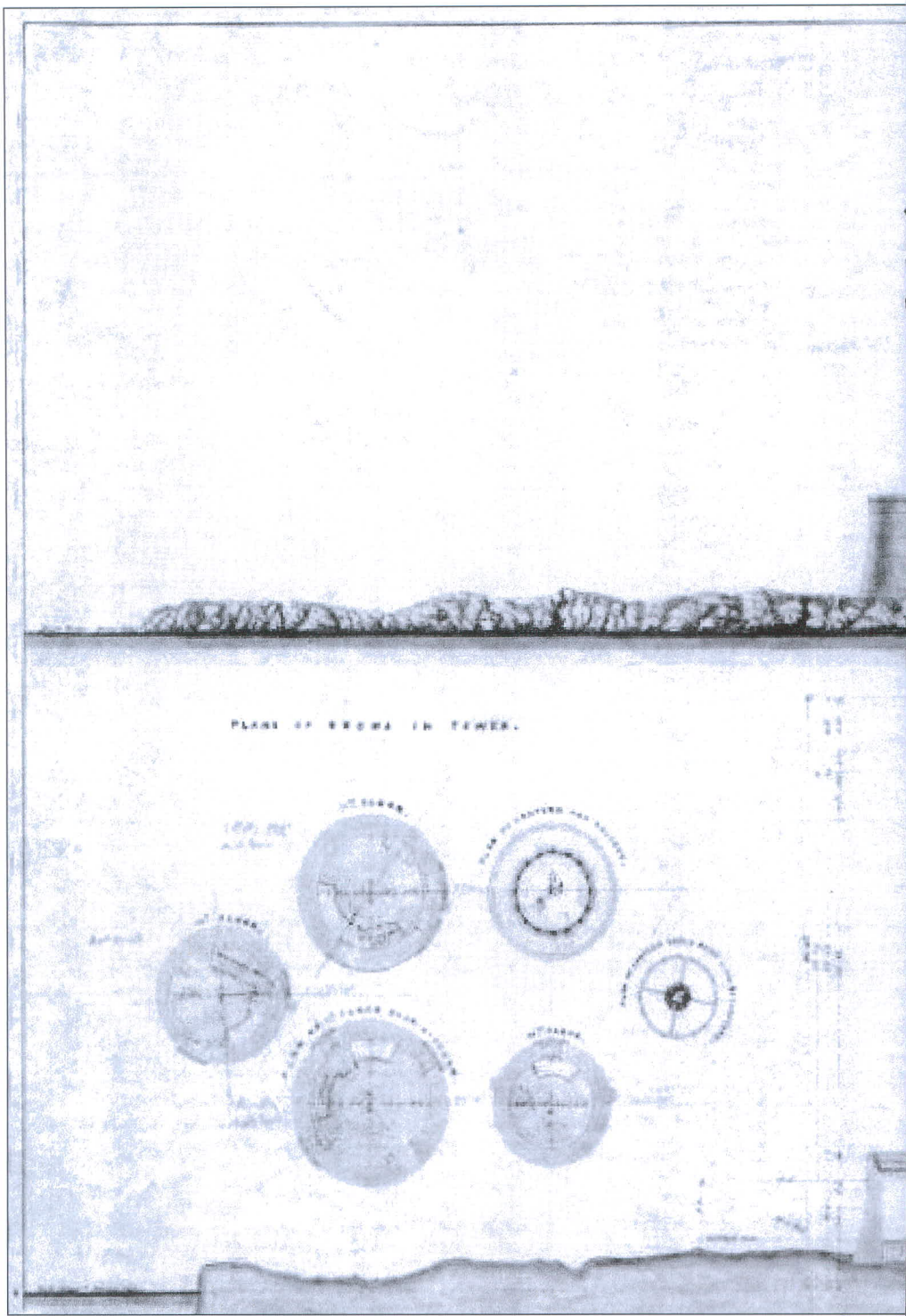
of the catastrophe and the possibility that that the vessel's owners had willfully sent a disabled ship to sea.

The ship was a paddlewheel steamer with brigantine rigging. She was British-built and only four years old—a cross-ship capable of making her own steam power or using sails. This was the age when steam engines were available but not always reliable, so ships carried both types of motive power. *Forfarshire* had departed from Hull for Dundee with a cargo of cloth and hardware, as well as about 60 passengers and crew. As she passed St. Abbs, her boilers began leaking, and hours later the steam engines failed. The sails were raised, but the rising gale quickly pushed the ship in a wayward direction. Her captain, an experienced seaman named Humble, attempted to give his vessel refuge in the quieter waters around the Farne Islands, but with only sails for maneuvering, the ship went aground on one of the outer isles known as Big Harcar Rock.

Some of the passengers and crew managed to launch a lifeboat and were later picked up by a passing schooner. The rest of them spent a horrific night as cold, heavy seas pounded the ship and tore away her stern quarter-deck and cabins. Ultimately, she broke in half. Some perished in the frigid waves or drowned on deck from the heavy wave-wash. Others were killed outright when they were slammed into wooden and metal parts of the ship. At dawn a few passengers still clung to the rails, including a keening Mrs. Dawson who held in her arms the limp, dead bodies of her two children, ages 7 and 9. In the end, more than 40 perished and only nine survived—the nine rescued by the Darlings.

The first inquest into the sinking reported that the ship foundered due to "the imperfections of the boilers and the culpable negligence of Captain Humble." This was based on the decision that Humble should have sailed for the nearest port the moment the boilers failed. Instead, he pressed on under sail, let his ship founder, and was responsible for the loss of lives and cargo, not to mention an almost-new ship. Humble had gone down with his ship and was an easy scapegoat. A second inquest was kinder to him, laying most of the blame on the weather.

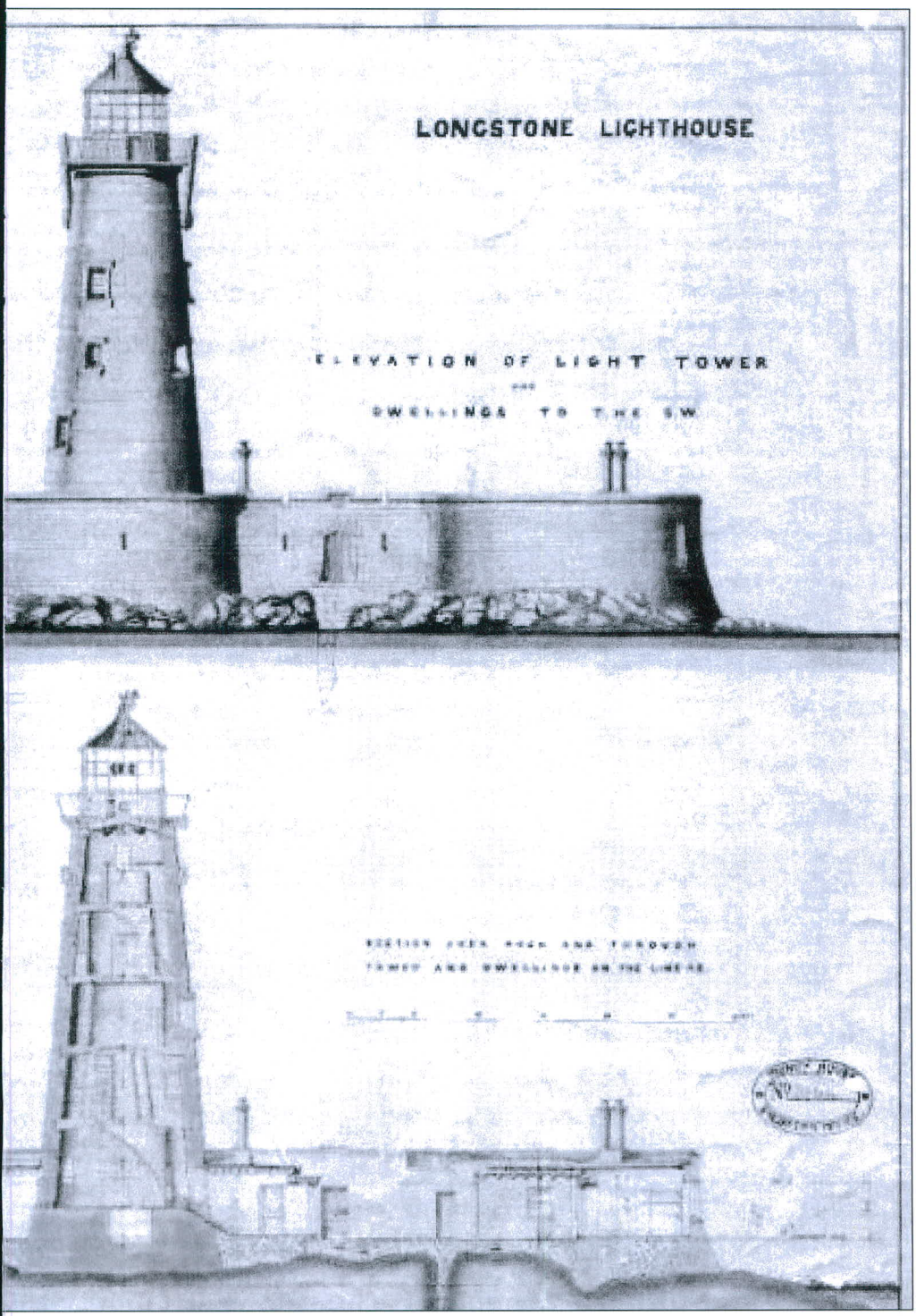
When the scandal died down a few days later, a "penny-a-liner" reporter grabbed the Grace Darling story for his gossip broadside and gave it his melodramatic best. He aimed to milk the tale for all it was worth. Single-page broadsides were cheap entertainment for the masses at this time, and broadside writers seldom cared about journalistic ethics. If it sounded fantastic, it made news, often embroidered with questionable details until it bore little resemblance to the truth. Our current-day, scandalous tabloids no doubt grew out of these broadsides.



A drawing of Longstone Lighthouse, built by Joseph Nelson in 1826, gives a glimpse inside the fortifie tion to endure." Courtesy Trinity House.

The Grace Darling tale was one of the first to explode into an international story, complete with purple prose, hyperbola, and feminine idolatry. The histrionic tale caught fire and leaped from newspaper to newspaper, reaching *The Times* in London on September 19, and eventually landing in magazines and books, each account more thrilling and dangerous than the last. Grace

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, prison-like stone tower and dwelling six miles from shore. Trinity House described it as "a bleak situa-

emerged 10 times the woman in strength, spirit, and "intrepidity" than she was in real life. The drama of shipwreck and rescue, coupled with the kind-hearted nature of lightkeeping families, played out larger-than-life. Grace Darling quickly became a household name in England and elsewhere.

One newspaper reporter identified as M.A. Richardson, said:

"Surely imagination in its loftiest creations never invested the female character with such a degree of fortitude as has been evinced by Miss Grace Horsely Darling on this occasion. Is there in the whole field of history, or of fiction even, one instance of female heroism to compare for one moment with this?"

Painters rushed to Longstone Light to capture Grace's delicate features, then painted her into exaggerated scenes of angry seas and suffering humanity. Those who couldn't meet her in person took license and drew her as they imagined, a slender, pretty young woman at the oars of a boat or about town wearing a fetching bonnet. The versions of her face are so many and varied, we have little idea what she really looked like.

Poets and minstrels wrote tributes to the "Grace of womanhood and Darling of mankind." Peddlers hawked phony locks of her hair and swatches of fabric supposedly from the dress she had worn on the day of the rescue. Anything Grace had worn, touched, or owned fetched a high price. Marriage proposals came by the dozens, none of them of interest to Grace. She wanted only the solitude of the lighthouse, her family, and her books—not untypical for a lighthouse daughter.

A public subscription for the Darling family raised a gift of several hundred pounds, to which the Royal Humane Society and the National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck—the predecessor of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution—added gold and silver lifesaving medals and a silver tea set. Even Queen Victoria chimed in with a gift of money. Grace Darling—small, slim, painfully shy due to her sequestered existence at a lighthouse, and possibly of ill health aggravated by the damp, sunless conditions on Longstone—had captured the public imagination! "...her very name seemed so extraordinarily apt," wrote Jessica Mitford, "almost uncannily predictive of the special place she was destined to occupy…"

She spent her next few years contending with the media, such as it was in the 1830s. There was no Internet, Twitter, or Facebook, or even a You Tube, but Grace went viral in the only way possible for her day. She "graced" the covers of newspapers, magazines, and books, even special sheet music written in her honor. She appeared on sailing cards, church fliers, and advertisements. Girls copied Grace's quiet, gentle demeanor and simple dress. Young men wrote poems alluding to her valor and maternal potential. And she was besieged with mail, visitors to the lighthouse, requests for her signature and personal effects, of which she probably had few. She was the adored model of young womanhood, a perfect suffragette—feminine and obedient, brave and steady of mind and

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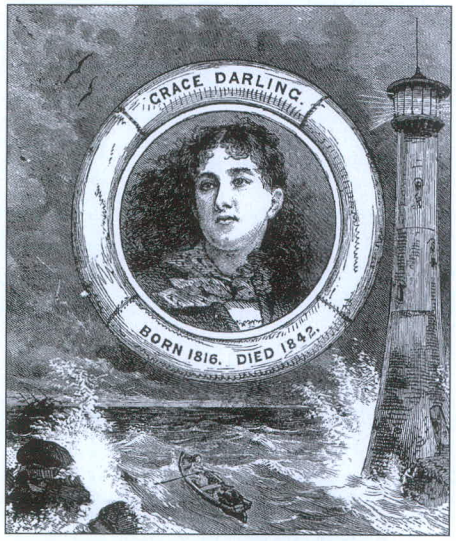


Grace Darling memorabilia abounds. This figurine from about 1900 portrays the alert and ready rescuer popularized by the media of Grace's day. Photo courtesy National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England.

heart, yet capable of rowing a boat like a man to rescue "those in peril on the sea."

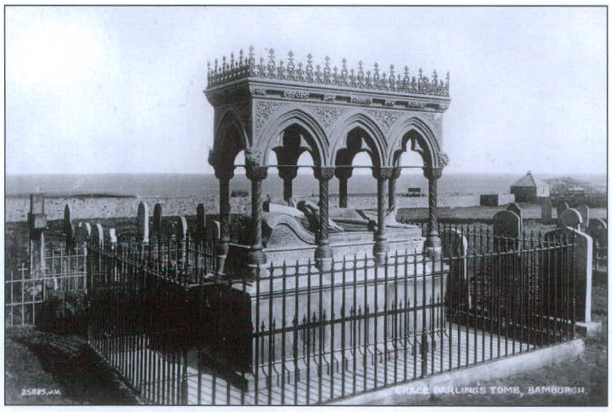
In his 1841 book, *The Tragedy of the Seas*, Charles Ellms wrote of Grace's mettle during the *Forfarshire* rescue:

"This perilous achievement stands unexampled in the feats of feminine fortitude. From her isolated abode, when there was no solicitation or prospect of reward to stimulate, impelled alone by the pure promptings of humanity, she made her way through desolation and impending destruction, appalling to the stoutest heart, to save her fellow-beings."



Grace was embraced worldwide to inspire young women. A story in the *Young American Annual* of 1891 captured her framed by a life buoy. Courtesy University of Connecticut.

The 1839, *Maid of the Isles* by Jerrold Vernon established Grace as "the girl with the windswept hair" and prompted even more paintings that showed her tresses streaming and lustrous behind her as she faced impossible seas. Those flowing locks are ironic, almost comical, since it's almost certain Grace's hair was tied up in rag strips to make it curly—the custom of the day. At so early an hour with a shipwreck sighted, would she have taken time to do her hair? It's doubtful. She likely went rescuing in her curlers.



Though Grace occupies a simple grave in the St. Aidans churchyard in Bamburgh, a cenotaph memorial to her stands nearby. Photo from author's collection.

Unfortunately, much written about Grace in popular literature is fabricated. Her older sister, Thomasin, tried to set the record straight in 1880 with a small booklet in which she wrote that "accuracy has suffered" and "romanticists" had colored "The Deed" with untruths. Thomasin was particularly disturbed by the often-printed assertion that Grace had beseeched, even begged, her father to go to the wreck and that he had been reluctant. This probably was untrue, but it made good dialogue and translated well for the stage productions that followed. Drama aside, William Darling had gone out to shipwrecks before and would have gone to this one without prodding. More often than not, lighthouse keepers put their own lives in peril to save others.

We do know Grace was deft at handling a boat, as were most lighthouse keepers' daughters. From an early age, she was rowed ashore to the family garden plot or to pick up supplies in Bamburgh. Later, after about age 12, she rowed to Bamburgh alone. Thomasin lived in the village, and Grace paid her frequent visits. Like any teenager, Grace enjoyed her sister's company and partook of some of the fun ashore. The oars to the coble were analogous to the keys to the car today. We must not forget, though, that she grew up in a community that relied on the sea for its livelihood and for transportation. Yet—Northumbrians bore as much disdain for "the deeps" as adoration.

"The sea is a lover, but the shore is a deceitful whore," was a popular metaphor repeated by sailors in coastal taverns everywhere, most of whom had a love-hate relationship with the sea. Hardly a family in Northumberland was untouched by "sea change." The local cemetery was rife with epitaphs alluding to saltwater occupations, drowning, and shipwreck. Grace held the same view of the sea as her neighbors, an outlook colored by religious faith, a healthy fear, and duty. Whatever happened on or near the sea was God's will and a test of human strength and endurance. Sacrifice was expected and not to be lavishly rewarded. Grace's letters after the *Forfarshire* wreck reveal that she hated all the attention focused on her.

Ironically, the citizens of Northumberland disliked it too. They saw nothing unusual in Grace Darling. Numerous writers of the day noted the community's contempt for the media circus surrounding the event and the absurd idolatry of Grace. It was much the same disgust we experience today, with outrageous personalities like Lindsay Lohan, Tom Cruise, and the Kardashians. Travel writer William Howitt, who had met Grace Darling in 1840, discovered that people ashore were blasé about the *Forfarshire* rescue. One girl said, "It was low water and the sea was smooth; anybody could have done what she did." Others flat-out denied that the rescue even happened, claiming it was contrived and intended merely to sell papers.

While Grace attempted to elude the media and cope with her sudden fame, her health declined. Visiting her sister, Thomasin, in April 1842 she experienced chilblains and developed a cough. Back at Longstone she grew worse, so her parents sent her back to Bamburgh to live with her sister and be closer to a doctor. There was little that could be done for lung infections in those days.

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Longstone Lighthouse today serves tourists as well as commercial shipping. Trinity House allows boat tours to access the station where visitors may "view Grace's tiny bedroom from where she spotted nine survivors desperately clinging to the rocks." Wikimedia Commons photo.

By September Grace was bedridden and the end was near. "She went like snow," Thomasin told their parents. Grace died on October 20, 1842. The diagnosis was consumption, today known as tuberculosis.

It was a tragic finale to a brief career. Grace was buried in the St. Aidans churchyard at Bamburgh in a simple grave; yet, hundreds came to pay their respects. A distraught public gave money for a monument to honor her, and an admiring sailor requested that Grace's memorial be large enough and placed in such a location as to be seen easily from sea. The cenotaph, a canopied stone memorial minus her body, was built not far from her grave. Its stone effigy of Grace, hands folded as if asleep after her arduous labor of rescuing, or perhaps after the more difficult task of coping with instant fame, put her to rest. The memorial lasted 40 years before it crumbled and a new one of similar but stronger design was built. The plaque on the memorial reads: "Pious and pure, modest, and yet so brave, though young so wise, though meek so resolute," a dedication from poet William Wordsworth.

Even in death, Grace Darling's legend continued to grow. It enlarged by turns until it shone brighter than any lighthouse in England. Not everything written about her was good. One biographer, Richard Armstrong, audaciously suggested in his 1965 *Grace Darling: Maid and Myth*, that she may have had a cleft lip and a suspicious and inappropriate relationship with her father, blemishes on her memory that few care to believe. If she was flawed of face or spirit, it made little difference to her admirers. Newspapers of her day described her as attractive. *The Spectator* noted "...it is pleasant to find coupled with a fine and generous nature a lovely face and a name at once euphonious and cherishable." Travel writer William Howitt noted, after visiting Grace at Longstone Lighthouse, that she was: "...a little, simple, modest woman...neither tall nor handsome...her figure is by no means striking; quite the contrary; but her face is full of sense, modesty, and genuine goodness."

The remains of the *Forfarshire* have a less glorious history. Parts of the ship still lie at a depth of about 12 fathoms off Big Harcar Rock in Piper Gut. Nearby Hull Marina has erected a plaque to the ship, and in a pub in Seahouses is one of the salvaged nameplates.



The Grace Darling Museum in Bamburgh opened in 1938 on the centennial of "The Deed." It houses the cobble Grace and her father rowed to the *Forfarshire* and a diverse collection of her portraits, personal effects, and the many trinkets and souvenirs created to honor her. Photo courtesy Royal National Lifeboat Institution.



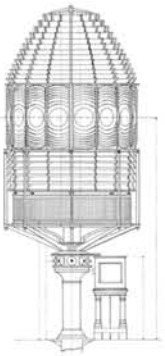
A china thimble bears the image of Grace at the oars of the rescue boat. Author's collection.

The town of Dunkeld in nearby Scotland remembers the wreck to this day. A plaque behind the altar in a cathedral recalls the loss of the town's pastor, Reverend John Robb, "who, on a voyage for the benefit of his health, perished by the wreck of the *Forfarshire* Steamship."

Grace, on the other hand, has her own museum that was opened in Bamburgh in 1938 by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution on the centennial of the rescue that made her famous. Fortuitously, it is located near the house where she died and across from the churchyard where she is buried. Visitors can learn her story and view some of her personal effects and the famous coble she rowed to the wreck, as well as see portraits and mementos from the *Forfarshire* and a variety of souvenirs created in the wake of her popularity—mugs, candies, hand-scribbled poems, postcards, music boxes, clothing, and more. As with most media heroines, Grace has been commercialized.

School children visit the museum, still marveling at her courage and singing "The Grace Darling" song. They view the many artifacts attesting to her mettle, buy a knick-knack or two, and leave chattering about storms and ships and brave young girls. Legend or not, tabloid icon or moneymaking image, Grace Darling surely did something amazing that stormy day in September 1838, an act beyond the expectations of any ordinary woman of her day. This kernel of truth is what truly matters.

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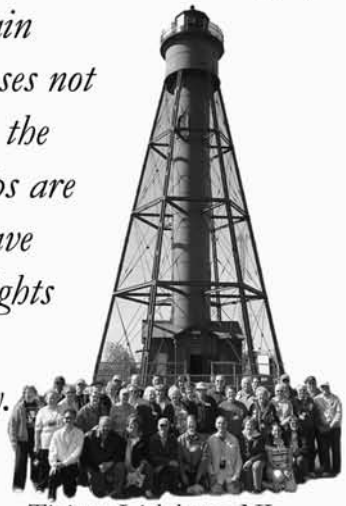
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