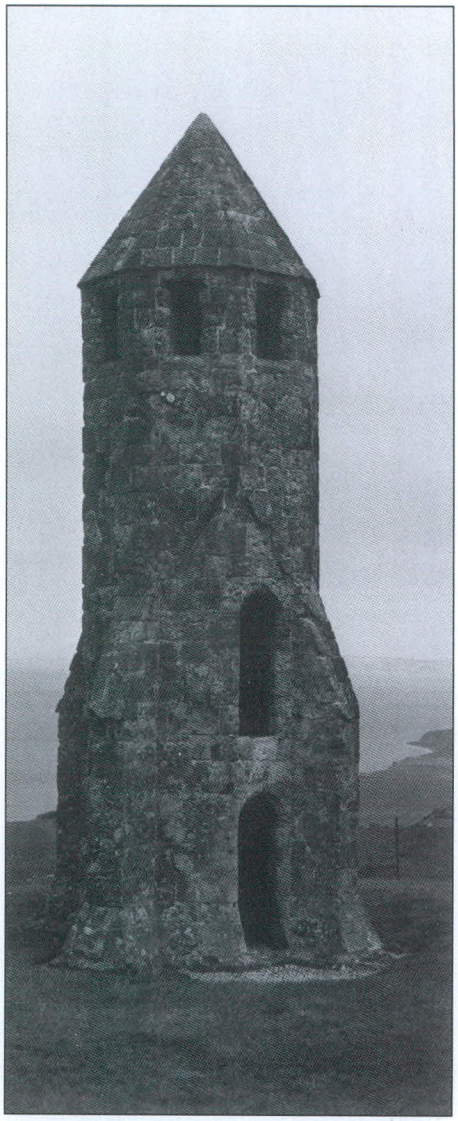
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Above–Pepper Pot.
At right – Mustard Pot
Photos courtesy of John Mobbs.

The Isle of Wight Revisited

By John Mobbs



May I cast your mind back to the Spring 1987 Log, and in particular the article on the "Lighthouses of the Isle of Wight." At the time I thought this was a rather unsatisfactory item, not least because it overlooked the Needles, which is by far the most important and well known of the lighthouses on the Isle of Wight. But as I was not familiar with the subjects of the piece, I offered no comment thereon. Now, however, I have just had a spell of duty at St. Catherine's L.H. and taken the opportunity to visit the nearby downs, and perhaps I might be able to offer my own opinions, and some other bits & pieces of news.

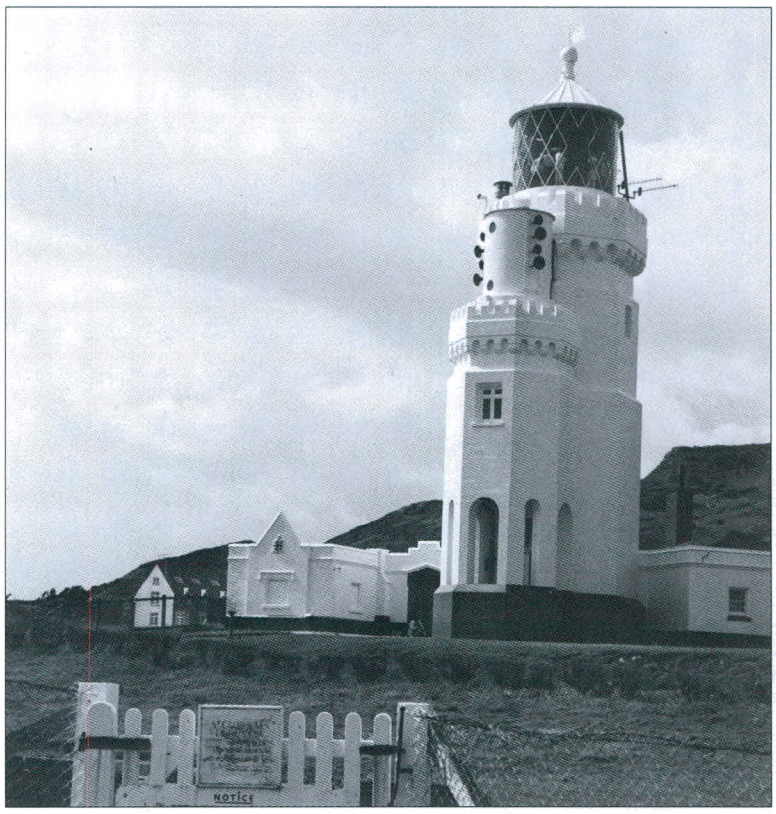
Regarding the Pepper Pot to which is the local nickname for the oratory–this was built as a penance for stealing wine from a wreck in 1314 but I very much doubt it was ever a lighthouse. Set so high on the Downs, and nearly two miles inland from St. Catherine's Point, it would have been useless to sailors and barely visible even on a clear night, whether its light was from a brazier of coals or a chandelier of big candles. In addition the slits on each of the eight faces only amount to one third of the width of each face. So whatever feeble light was available, if any, would be 66% obstructed by the thick stone pillars all round the tower's upper section. Another argument against any consideration of the oratory having been a lighthouse at all, is the 8 slits themselves–why are they all around the tower when only four would be visible from the seaward side?

A nearby information board which, like the article in the Log, quotes Mr. C.C. Dunning's "History of Niton," 1951, merely describes the oratory as a monument and that is all it ever was I feel. Navigation charts for the Isle of Wight refer to the oratory as an "old tower," but they do refer to a nearby base as an "old lighthouse." The article in the Log told us this lighthouse was "abandoned before completion," but I for one would like to have more definitive information on this. If a similar tower high above the Needles was finished and put into operation I see no reason why this one was not too. It may have been partially demolished at a later date, and if Tessa Dunning could furnish some more facts on this tower they would be welcome. I find it much more of interest than the oratory. Certainly the "Mustard Pot," as the base is known, has the genuine look of a lighthouse, whether or not it ever did get to be completed (it now houses a police radio transmitter).

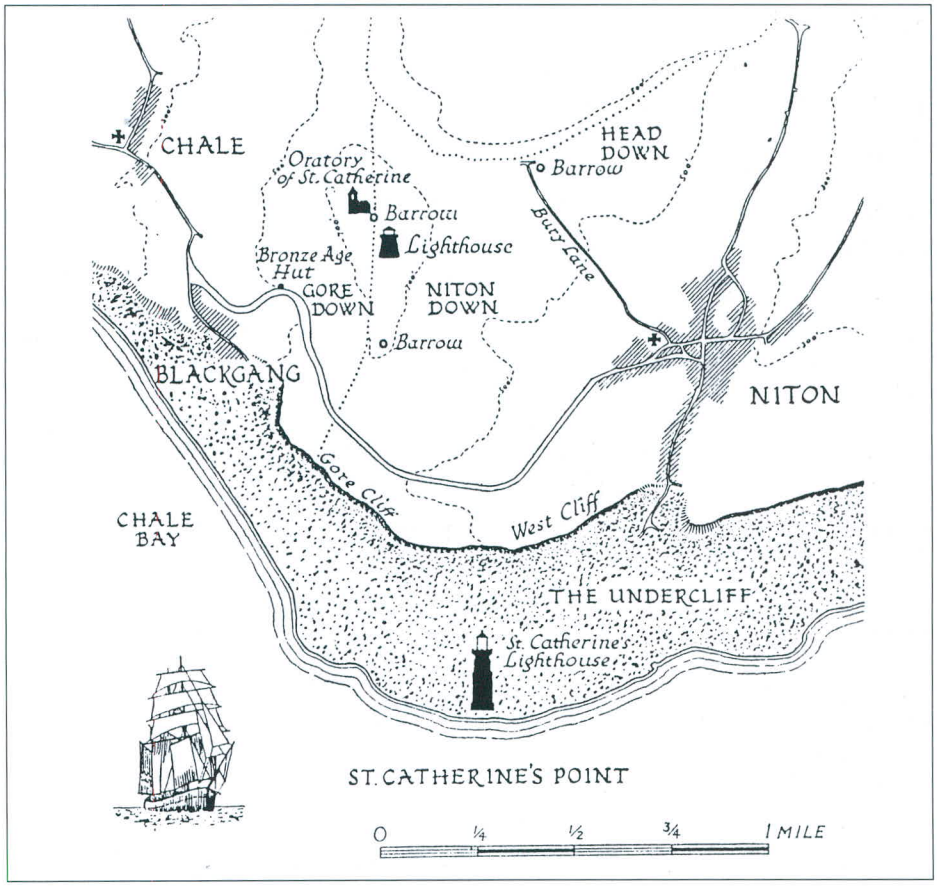
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Now on to the present St. Catherine's lighthouse. As the article told us, this is built on the point of the undercliff, but until my visit I did not realize just how unstable the whole area is. All the slopes are chalk and earth on top of a heavy clay base. The effect is thus of continual pressure from high cliffs down on the uneven terrain below, which is slowly sliding into the sea. This action then erodes away the land and takes chunks out of the coastline every year. One road beneath the cliff has been obliterated. Many of the boundary walls around St. Catherine's lighthouse have big cracks where the ground has settled. The problem is so severe that there are trigonometry height markers dotted all over the face of the undercliff, so that movements of forces can be plotted and likely weak spots noted. A lot of very exclusive homes built in past years are in danger of destruction, and so too is the lighthouse. The tower has a plumb line in it and regular readings are taken. One month recently a 4mm shift was recorded, and such is the problem that lantern glazing panes are sometimes sprung or cracked. The lens has had to be adjusted and realigned on a couple of occasions in recent years due to it ceasing to revolve smoothly as a result of the tilt of the tower.

It may well be quite a few years before the light needs to be abandoned, or a big slip up above the station could cause ripples to render it impotent and unsafe tomorrow. Meanwhile, the keepers faithfully maintain a light (though the fog horn was recently discontinued) and visitors continue to flock down the twisty little lane and climb up the tower to enjoy the view and see the majestic lens at close quarters. Long may it continue!

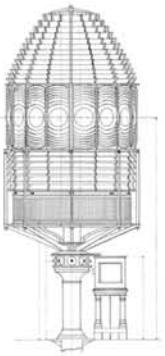


Above–Castle-like St. Catherine's lighthouse with the usual diagonal astragels separating the storm panes of the lantern room. Numerous fog signal horns can be seen bristling the front of the structure. Photo by John Mobbs.



John Mobbs is an English Lighthouse keeper and a very active contributor to the society. In addition to keeping us abreast of what's happening with Trinity House doings, he has contributed hundreds upon hundreds of photos and Post Cards to the society archives.

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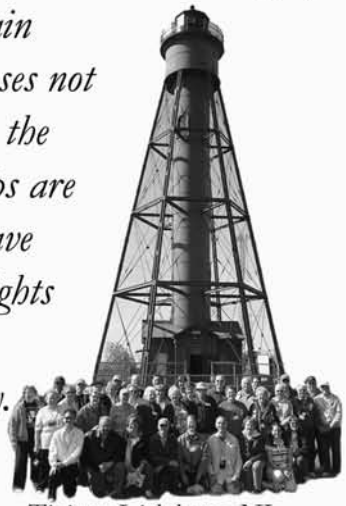
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