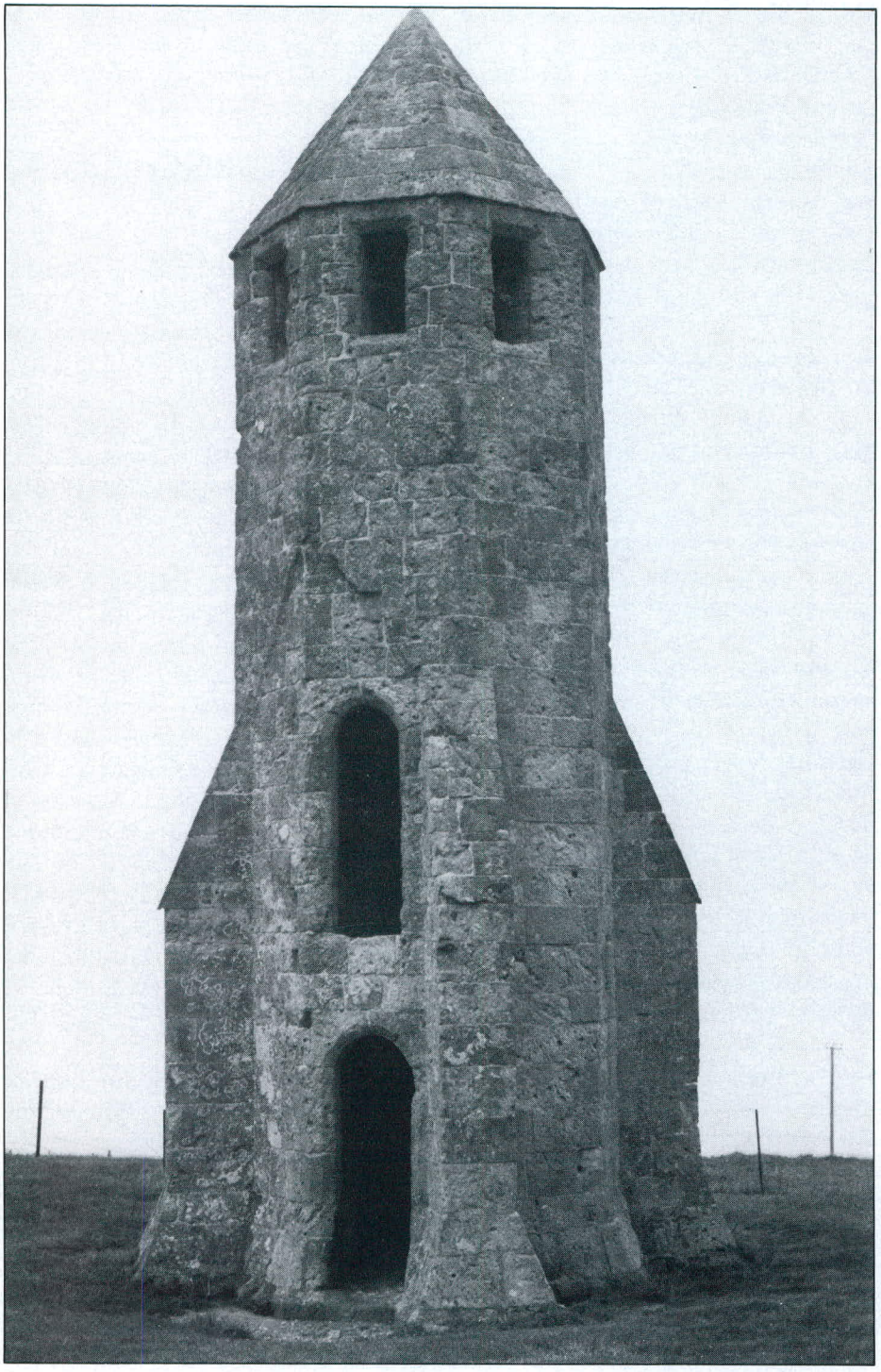
Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Spring 1987 <www.USLHS.org>

Lighthouses of the Isle of Wright

by G. C. Dunning



The tower of St. Catherine's Oratory also known as the "Pepper Pot." Photo by Tessa Dunning.

The following story is an excerpt from "The History of Niton, Isle of Wright" by G. C. Dunning, FSA who was an archaeologist specializing in medieval pottery. It is reprinted with kind permission by his daughter, Keeper Tessa Dunning of Washington, D.C.

The Isle of Wight occupies a unique position along the south coast of England, jutting out southwards into the English Channel. The southernmost point of the island, with the chalk hills of Niton and Chale Downs, reaching 780 ft. above sea level, immediately inland, was therefore particularly well situated to fulfil two roles of primary importance in the Middle Ages. At that time, in the Norman period and during the succeeding two or three centuries, England and France were united politically in one kingdom, the Angevin Empire, and sea trade played a vital part in the commercial relations between the two countries. In particular, and of more immediate concern for the present purpose, the great wine trade of Gascony was intensely active from the thirteenth century until the fifteenth century. The wine trade was based on the ports of Bordeaux and La Rochelle, whence the merchant ships sailed round Brittany and so to ports on the south-western and south coasts of England. The bulk of the shipping passed up the Channel to London, which had become the chief centre of importation during the thirteenth century, and the wine ships also travelled up the east coast as far as Hull.

The wine trade of this medieval sea-state can be demonstrated by archaeological material. At Saintes, in the heart of the Gascon wine-growing country, was made pottery much finer

Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Spring 1987 <www.USLHS.org>

in quality than anything produced in England at that time. In the late thirteenth century this polychrome ware, white in fabric and finely painted in green, yellow, and brown with scroll and leaf patterns, or heraldic shields and birds, was exported in some quantity to Britain, carried along by the Gascon

St. Catherine's Oratory.

The rich cargoes of wine and other merchandise that passed up the Channel bound for London excited the avarice of the dwellers in the villages near the southern coast of the island. Wrecking and smuggling became the usual livelihood of the men of Chale and Niton. Ships were decoyed on to the rocks of this dreaded coast by fixing a lantern to the head of an old horse with one of its legs tied up. The limping gait of the animal gave the lantern a motion exactly like that of a ship's light; the deceived mariners were thus lured inshore and on to the rocks and ledges, and the wreckers waited to plunder the cargo. This drama smacks of the story of the Argonauts lured to destruction by the singing of the Sirens, but the setting is grimmer. This inhuman practice was carried on for several centuries and was only finally stamped out in the nineteenth century. The story of the Chale wreckers and smugglers, and the long list of wrecks on the Back of the Wight have been vividly recorded by Mr. G. F. Mew in two books published locally.

It is to the Gascon wine trade and the habits of the wreckers that we owe the foundation of one of the earliest lighthouses still existing in England, the Oratory of St. Catherine on Chale Down, known locally as "The Pepper Pot." The story has been often told, and may be briefly recounted here.

In 1314 a ship, the *Ste. Marie* of Bayonne, laden with wine, was wrecked on Atherfield Ledge. The cargo of wine washed ashore and it was seized as "wreck of the sea" by Walter de Godeton and other local landowners. This action reached the ears of the authorities, and de Godeton and the others were fined. The wine, however, belonged to the monastery of Livers in Picardy, and the Church's condemnation followed that of the State. As a penance for his sacrilege, de Godeton was ordered to build and endow a lighthouse and chapel on Chale Down above the scene of the disaster. Here the priest tended the light to warn shipping off the dangerous coast, and said masses for the souls of those lost at sea.

These duties were performed for two centuries until the dissolution of the chantries by Henry VIII. The Chapel fell into ruin, but the Tower survived and later it was repaired and buttressed up to serve as a sea-mark, and in this condition it remains to this day. A little sketch of the Oratory in its original state, enclosed by the earthen bank limiting the priest's plot of ground, is shown on a coloured Survey of Chale Down made in 1566, now in Carisbrooke Castle Museum.

The Oratory Tower is 35 ft. 6 in. high, octagonal outside and square inside, built in four storeys finishing in a pyramidal roof. The top storey is pierced by eight windows, each splayed towards the outside for emitting light from a brazier within. The Tower was last required in 1891 by Mr. Percy G. Stone, who also uncovered the foundations of the Chapel and published a full architectural description of the structure. By 1950 the Tower was again in need of repair and the owners, the Warden and Fellows of Winchester College, decided to transfer the monument to the guardianship of the Ministry of Works. The structure will shortly be thoroughly overhauled and repaired, and it will be maintained in sound condition as a national monument.

About 80 ft. south-east of the Oratory Tower is a round barrow, crossed by the two fences forming the boundary between the parishes of Chale and Niton. This barrow was opened in 1925, when a circular stone structure was found buried in the western part of the mound. The pit, about 6½ ft. in diameter, was provided with tunnels or flues on opposite sides, and the clay floor showed signs of intense heat. At the time, this structure was identified as the base for a wooden beacon stack, but the discovery of identical structures elsewhere, and the excavation by the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments of well-preserved examples at castles in South Wales, now proves that this explanation is incorrect. The pits are always associated with medieval buildings and, in fact, they are lime kilns built to supply lime for making the mortar required at the time these buildings were constructed. The pit on Chale Down is therefore identified finally as the lime kiln built in the early fourteenth century for the construction of St. Catherine's Oratory.

The Eighteenth-Century Lighthouse.

It may be doubted if the good intentions behind the founding of St. Catherine's Oratory remained more than a pious hope. The light given out by the brazier in the lantern would only be visible at sea on a clear night, and often obscured by the low cloud and fogs that envelop the downs. Nothing further was done for two centuries after the dissolution to warn sailors off this dangerous coast. In 1785, however Trinity House started to build a lighthouse on the top of Niton Down about 150 yards south-east of the Oratory, but it was abandoned before completion on account of the dense mists capping the hill "The Salt Cellar" is a conical tower of two storeys, 28 ft. across at ground level and 20 ft. high, and it would have been surmounted by lantern with an iron brazier for a coal fire. The appearance of the lighthouse is shown by early engravings of the similar tower built about the same time on the summit of High Down above The Needles.

The ruin of this lighthouse remains to-day as a monument to frustrated endeavour, and fogs and the sea continued to take their toll of human lives until early in the nineteenth century.

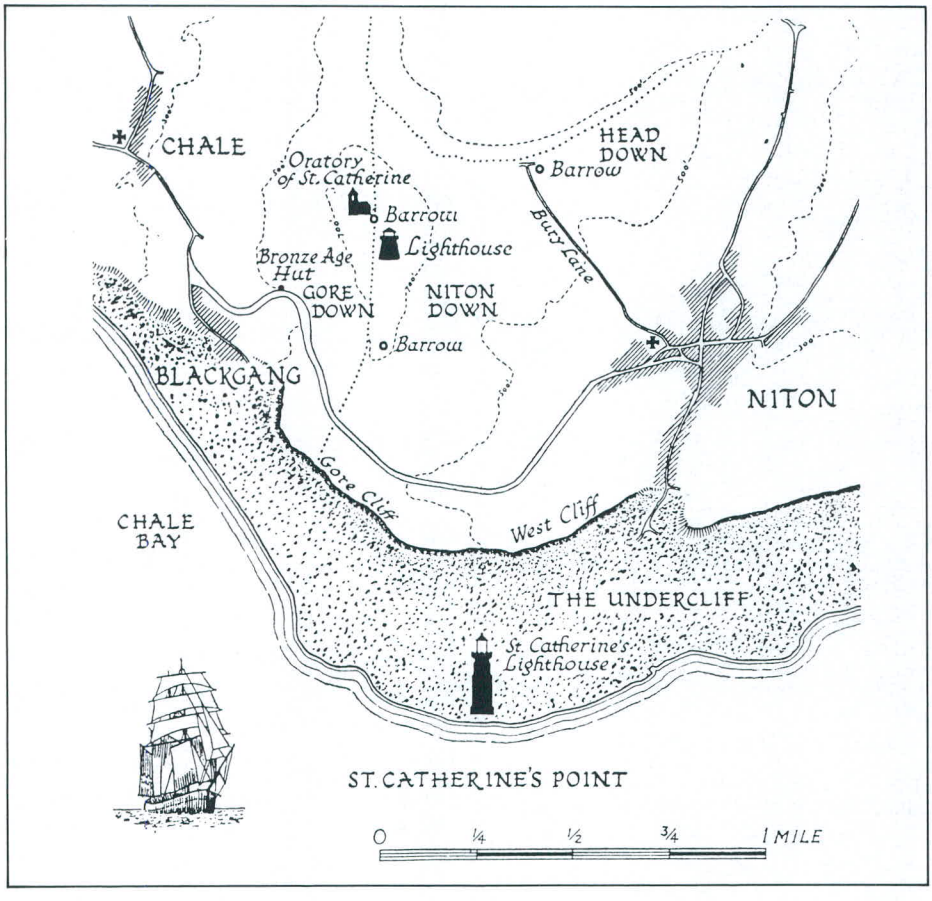
St. Catherine's Lighthouse.

The state of indifference continued until the wreck of the Clarendon in Chale Bay in 1836, with the loss of nearly all her pas-

Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Spring 1987 <www.USLHS.org>

sengers and crew. As a result the building of St. Catherine's Lighthouse was begun in 1838, and the light was first displayed in 1840. This time the lighthouse was built below the downs to avoid the mists, a little back from the edge of the cliff on a terrace about 80 ft. above sea level. Originally the tower was about 120 ft. high, built as a three-tier octagon, diminishing by stages, and finished by a castellated parapet around the lantern, its graceful design may be appreciated from nineteenth century engravings, such as the view in Brannon's *Guide* (1847). Yet even at this low elevation, with the lantern scarcely 200 ft. above sea level, fogs and sea mists still obscured the light, and in 1875 when the structure began to show signs of slipping, it was decided to reduce the height of the tower by 43 ft. by removing most of the middle and upper stages, so that the height to the lantern is now 86 ft. It is a remarkable fact that the prevalence of fogs and mists at St. Catherine's Point defeated the efforts of man to provide a lighthouse here for nearly six centuries, but the problem is now finally solved.

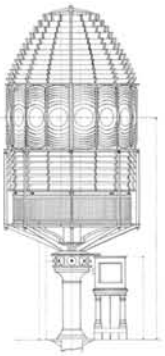
At first the illumination at St. Catherine's was provided by multiple oil burners. The great service of the new lighthouse was shown from the first by the fewer disasters that took place, contrasting with those of former years, when as many as fourteen vessels are known to have been wrecked in one night in Chale Bay. From time to time improvements in the method of illumination were introduced; St. Catherine's was one of the first lighthouses to use electricity, and arc lamps were installed in 1888. Early this century high-power electric filament lamps were fitted, giving a light of six million candle-power, visible to a distance of 18 miles. Formerly the lantern revolved on metal rollers, but in recent years the optical apparatus has been mounted on a float riding in a bath of mercury, which almost eliminates friction and allows higher speeds of rotation to be attained. The fog-signal house was originally near the edge of the cliff, but owing to erosion and cliff settlements the building became unsafe. In 1932 the fog-horn, with a range of 15 miles, was mounted on a low tower in front of the lighthouse. The secondary tower reproduces the design of the shortened lighthouse behind it, and the effect gives a well-proportioned step down between the two towers, thus considerably improving the appearance of the structure. The two white towers are nicknamed locally "The Cow and the Calf."



To complete the story of Niton and its long connection with the sea and shipping, we must mention Lloyd's Station at Lower Niton, later the Royal Naval Shore Signal Station, and now the Post Office Radio Station. In time of national emergency the high downs in the south of the island will have a vital part to play. In the second world war a radar station at Niton was closely associated with the "Overlord" operations in Normandy The continuity in the use of Niton Down for signalling is well illustrated by the latest development; early in 1952 a radar station was installed inside "The Salt Cellar" as part of a network over the country for the reception of signals from ships. Finally, with the arrival of the aeroplane and radar direction-finding, the scene shifts slightly to the Royal Air Force Radar Station on St. Boniface Down above Ventnor. But the geographical setting remains the same, and man still needs guidance as he approaches the land, whether he is a sailor in a windjammer or an ocean liner, or the pilot of a stratocruiser. At night the red lights glowing on the pylons on St. Boniface serve as reminders of the beacons of old and the succession of lighthouses at Niton.

In conclusion, we may take a final look at St. Catherine's Lighthouse and the sea. The tree with its branches beaten over in one direction reminds us of the prevailing south-westerly winds. But the scene is not always so placid and sunny, as our summer visitors like to remember it. St. Catherine's Point has sterner moods, when the wind howls round the old Oratory Tower up on the hill, and the sea boils like the cauldrons of hell. Then this corner of the island speak of its past, and the voice is eloquent of the history of England.

Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today or Give the Gift of Membership!



Restoration & Preservation



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society has donated to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. Most recently we were honored by being presented with the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

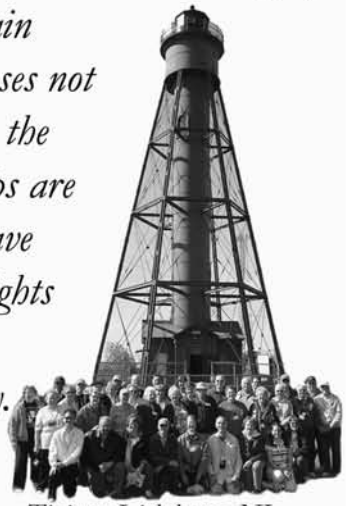
Help Support Our Important Mission!

Education



The Keeper's Log *magazine is the only one of it's kind and has been published quarterly since 1984. Receive this award-winning publication as a benefit of membership.*

The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



Tinicum Lighthouse, NJ

To learn more visit

www.uslhs.org

or

call Headquarters at

415-362-7255