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Lighthouses of Bermuda

by Michael Dolding

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St. Davids, Bermuda's second lighthouse (1879). Photo by the Bermuda News Bureau courtesy of the author

Bermuda is a small cluster of isolated low lying coral islands situated in the Atlantic Ocean some 600 miles E.S.E. of Cape Hatteras.

Colonised by the British in the early 1600s, the Islands have historically been strategically important in times of war, located as they are close to the West Indies and the Americas and directly in the shipping lanes between the West Indies, Florida Strait and Europe.

The development of some 30 miles of ships channels and lighthouses has largely been the result of the strong military presence initially by the British Royal Navy and more recently the American and Canadian Navy Bases located at either end of the main Island.

The Islands' economy is mainly based on the international tourist industry, which is partially serviced by numbers of large passenger cruise vessels which visit regularly during the tourist season.

The history of Bermuda, like her reefs, is littered with the wrecks of ships and yachts of every shape and size imaginable. "Wrecking," in fact, was considered in early days as an important and respectable cottage industry by the locals who pursued this line of work with great enthusiasm. However, as years went by, times changed, and it was decided that lighthouses should be erected to protect the unwary mariner and thus our first and foremost lighthouse, at Gibbs Hill, was erected in 1846.

Gibbs Hill Lighthouse was prefabricated in England by Engineers and Iron Founders "Cottam & Hallam." The tower is constructed of 135 concentric cast iron plates bolted together, standing some 130 ft. in all. The structure was designed by Mr. Alexander Gordon, Civil Engineer, who was the first to use this method of construction for lighthouses.

Gibbs Hill was the second of this type ever built & probably one of the best, the first being erected in Jamaica in 1841. Elevation of light is 375 ft. which provides a range of 26 miles.

The new lighthouse did its job reasonably well and was of particular use to vessels approaching Bermuda from the west & southwest quadrant. It was, however, somewhat obscured by the land from vessels making a landfall at the pilot station at the eastern end of the Island, and therefore in the 1870s provision was made to erect another and smaller lighthouse on St. David's Island.

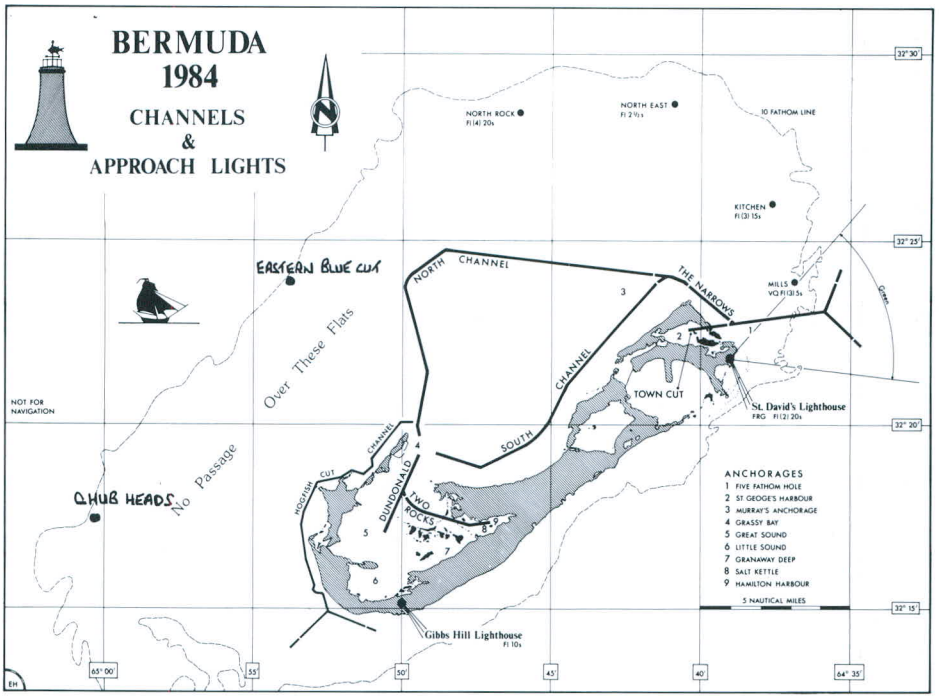
St. David's Lighthouse was designed and constructed on site using the local coral limestone cut into building blocks from the hill upon which it now stands. Octagonal in shape, standing some 55 ft. above the ground, the structure was completed in 1879. It was later raised so that the light could be clearly seen over some hills located to the northwards at St. Georges.

Bermuda developed as a tourist resort, and with the opening of the Panama Canal, international shipping stopping at or passing the Island increased. The early 1900s saw a number of vessels wrecked or stranded on the northern reefs.

The most prominent of these was a passenger-cargo vessel. *Madiana* in 1903. Whether to increase the size of St. David's light or to erect an offshore beacon on the north rocks became a "hot potato." Eventually the decision was made to erect a beacon on, or as close to the hazardous reefs as possible, and in 1911/12 North Rock Beacon was established. Changes in lighthouse technology and the introduction of the acetylene gas optics were instrumental in following this course.

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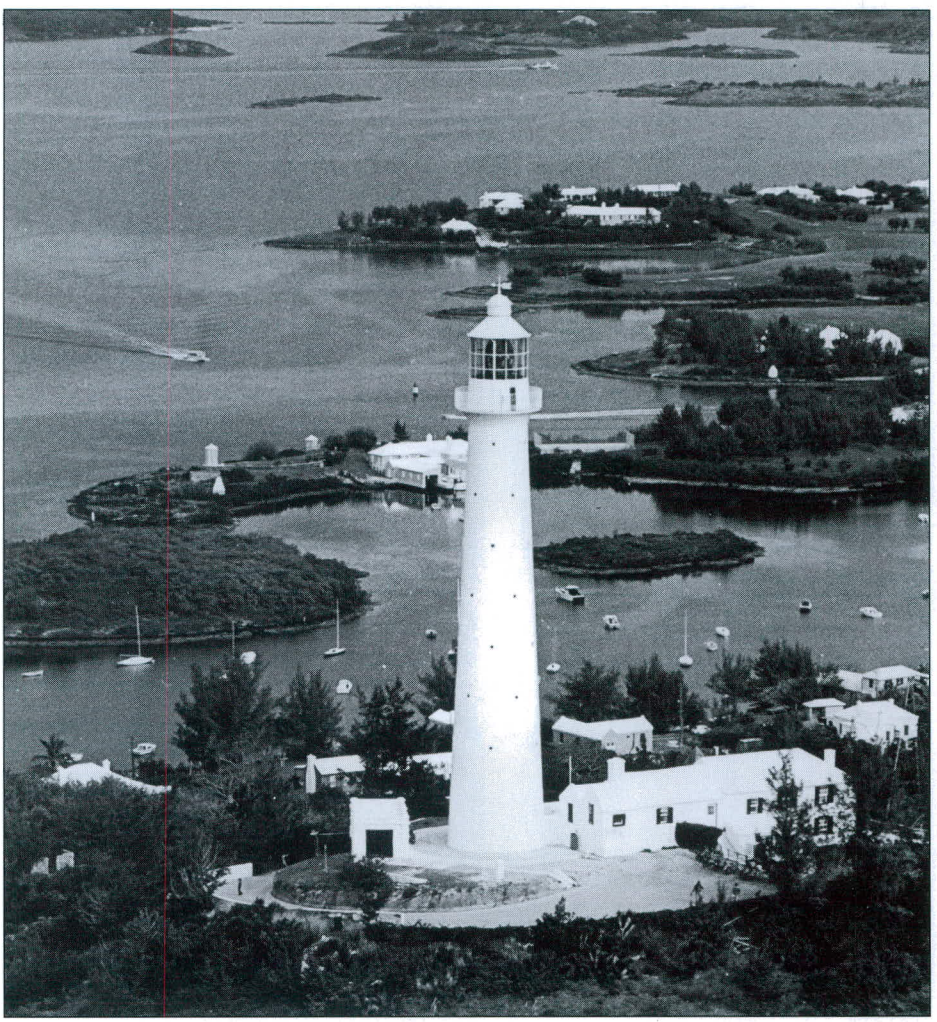




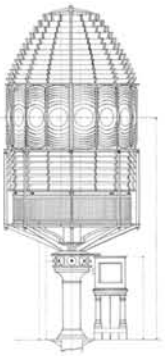
Left – The North Rock Beacon is typical of the small unmanned lights established to warn vessels of the off-shore reefs. Photo by author.
Below – Gibbs Hill Lighthouse. Photo by the Bermuda News Bureau, courtesy of the author.

Ships continued to come and go and the problems of ships running aground seemed to be reduced to acceptable levels. However, the size and type of ships changed dramatically, as did the crewing and Registration requirements and a new problem was identified.

A number of very large (super) tankers and general cargo vessels ran aground on the outer reef edge during the early 1980s. Due to the problems of toxic cargoes and oil pollution associated with these large vessels, wrecks were now of a very different complexion than previous ones. In the currently "environmentally aware" age, the breaking up upon the reefs of a fully laden tanker (such as the Exxon Valdez) is fully appreciated as a catastrophe. As part of the initiatives taken by the Government to prevent any further disastrous shipwrecks from occurring, a series of four offshore beacons were erected at approximately 6 miles distance from each other and close to the edge of the outer reef, northward of the main island. These structures are about 50 feet in height and are designed to be big enough to be seen by the unwary approaching mariner before he hits the reef. They are distinctively colored and lighted to be unmistakable, warning passing ships to navigate clear of the reefs. So far they appear to be doing a good job.



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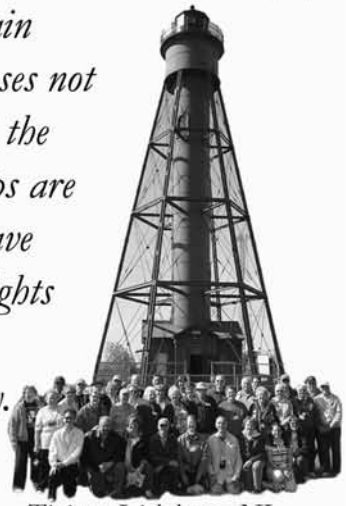
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