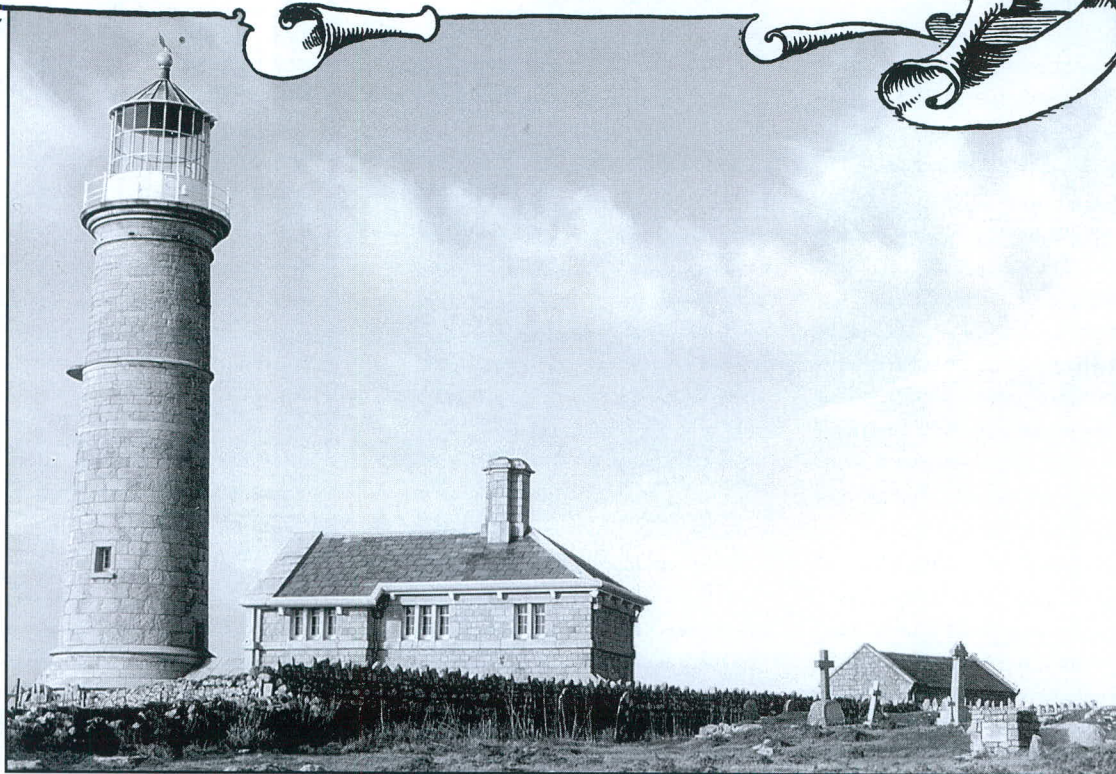


My Stay at the Lundy Lighthouse

BY MARIE MARTIN



The Lundy Island Light Station tower, keeper's dwelling and stone pig sty, now a cottage. Photo by Marie Martin.

I read somewhere, years ago, that one could stay at an old lighthouse somewhere in England. It sounded like the stuff of which dreams are made, and provided me with hours of fantasies. I envisioned myself going there for a month or two and relaxing, looking out upon the pounding waves.

I learned that the lighthouse was located on Lundy, an island off the coast of Devon. The Lundy Island folk sent me excellent literature answering almost all my questions concerning what to expect on such an unusual venture. My favorite line from the literature was the admonition to "bring a torch." I had visions of trudging up a darkened hill towards the lighthouse with a burning torch in my hand — like the peasants in *Frankenstein*. A friend provided the correct translation: "bring a flashlight."

I flew to London in a state of giddy anticipation, stayed overnight, and was on my way the next morning. Getting to Paddington Station was a hellish effort of dragging my suitcase up and down flights of subway stairs. I finally collapsed comfortably in a tram bound for the Southwest of England.

Three hours later, I changed trams in Exeter and moved towards the Devon Coast. The last stop was the town of Barnstable, followed by a bus ride to the seaport town of Bideford, which is pronounced "Biddyford" in the West Country accent (the porter on the train practiced saying it properly with me, so I didn't sound like a dumb Yank). The taxi driver, on our way to the hotel, was dismayed to hear that I planned to go to Lundy, since he said he had not seen the Lundy boat docked at the Quay. There was disconcerting news at the hotel too, the host had called down to the quay about sailing time for the Lundy Island boat, and learned there was a distinct possibility that it wasn't going to sail!

I had been aware that making such a trip in December was taking the risk of not being able to go. I told myself over and over to be prepared for a disappointment. I had even worked out a contingency plan of heading up to Wales and staying at the lighthouse at Great Orme. Nonetheless, I was devastated at this news.

While there was still some light left, I walked back down to the Quay and discovered why the cabby hadn't been able to see the boat. The tide was all the way out and the boat was sitting on its broad beam on the sand, so low behind the pier that only some of its rigging was visible from the street. The boat, *M. S. Oldenburg*, was a medium-sized craft, with a small crane on the foredeck. I went inside a shack to talk with the folk who were obviously ministering to the *Oldenburg's* needs, and they seemed a little more optimistic about sailing the following day.

The same cab called for me in the early morning and took me back to the *M. S. Oldenburg*, now riding high on the incoming

tide. There was a blackboard by the gangplank that read "Welcome to Lundy, the passage today will be ROUGH." A small crane was loading plywood crates containing our luggage and supplies for the Island into the hold. Finally they let us onto the boat. I thought I'd stay up on the open deck to watch the town lights go by, but a tall man in nautical garb with stripes on his epaulets (the captain?) told me to go below and stay below where it's nice and warm. I selected a seat by the window near the port bow (that's the left-hand side towards the pointy end, for all you landlubbers) and gulped down enough Dramamine to stabilize a space platform.

I sat in a fine glow of drowsiness and well-being that is usually induced by large quantities of Dramamine. The river mouth has a sandbar, and there was much nautical palaver about "crossing the bar." It seems you do it right, or go swimming. The minute we crossed it, the sea got bumpy. No big surprise, we're in the North Atlantic in December, I didn't think it would be a lake.

Then the seas got rougher. It wasn't until a sickly gray light of dawn illuminated the sea that I realized into exactly what I had gotten myself.

We were climbing and descending waves as big as two story houses with troughs between them as wide as a two lane road. The crests of the waves were flat. The boat, once on top of the crest, would sail for a moment as level and smooth as a car. Then she would proceed forward until most of her length was cantilevered in mid-air, and then she would drop in an arc and CRASH!! into the trough. The latter producing that roller-coaster effect where your stomach flies up in your rib-cage until it presses against your upper molars. At that point, we would be sitting at about a 45-degree angle, and, looking out horizontally, there would be a small mountain of water advancing directly towards the top of the boat. This gave the illusion that the wave was going to send the vessel underwater. But then the ancient miracle of the boat builder's science would come into play, and the prow would carve a big scar into the base of that obsidian wave, and for a minute everything *would* be underwater. When you could see out the windows again, you'd be climbing up the side of the next wave. And then the process would repeat itself again, and again.

I was jazzed! I was awestruck! Despite the first twinges of *Mal-de-mer*, I absolutely loved the excitement of the seas. The person with the stripes on his shoulders came around to offer reassurance. I asked him if all this had a force rating. He said we were experiencing Force 8!!!! Gale force seas on the Beaufort scale! He also said this was the roughest sea in which the *Oldenburg* could sail. "We don't sail if it's rougher than this."

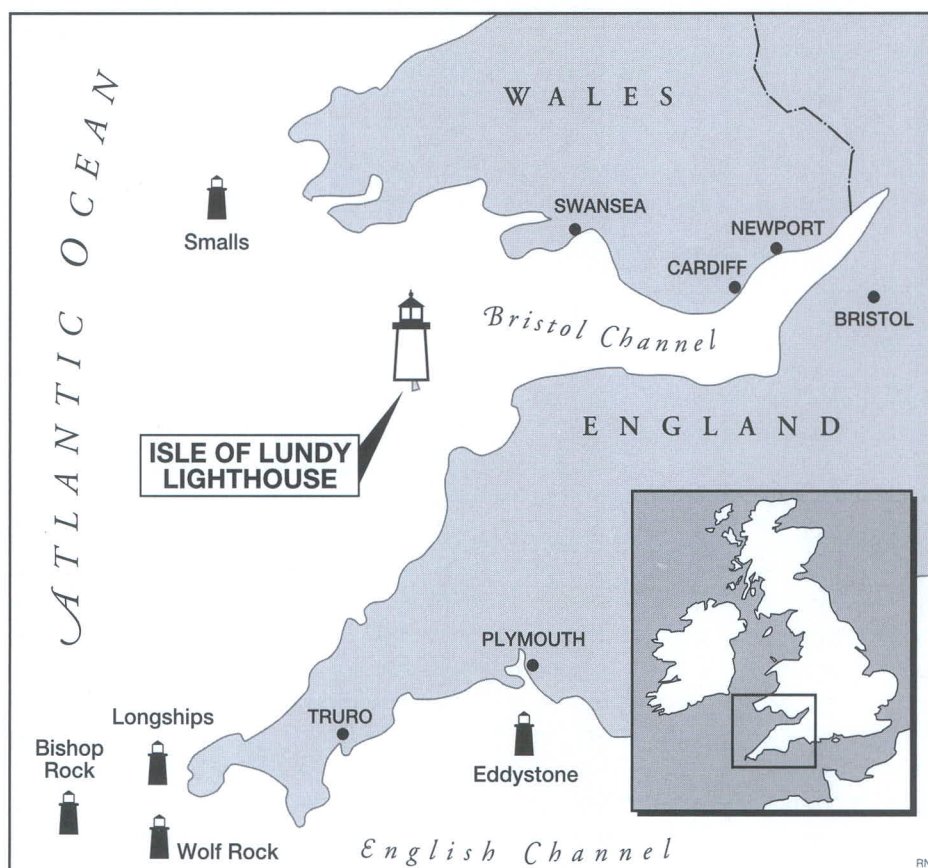
Until then, we had been sailing directly into the waves. Each time, the bow windows would be covered with water for a minute, and then clear. All of a sudden we hit a really big wave, and some sort of implement came loose outside and whacked against the window. The two elderly Lundy Island gentlemen behind me gave an involuntary shout, and then one of them said to the Captain, "Ee wot was swabbin the deck is gone, and 'is broom just hit the windscreen!" We all laughed. But now either the boat, or the waves had changed course and we began cutting across at an angle. This changed the ship's motion from porpoising to rolling and porpoising, and everybody started to get sick.

Although it was clearly impossible, the seas now got even more violent. All the chairs in the lounge slammed over on their

backs. There was a rack next to where I was sitting that contained foul-weather gear and hard-hats. The hard-hats exploded off the rack like popcorn out of a pan and went reeling and skidding all over the cabin floor. Everything in the galley started to fall over and break. Something metallic, which sounded as heavy as a refrigerator, fell over in the engine room. A young seaman in white overalls, looking worried, came running for all he was worth, and dived into the engine room hatch. I suspect he was supposed to be the battener of whatever had fallen over, and was about to get hell for not securing it.

By now all you could hear was roaring, crashing, and people getting sick. At this point I lost it, but at least I was a class act. A man somewhere behind me was sick in a resonant baritone that could be heard all over the ship.

More of the great granddaddy waves came along, and then, as if we had all gone deaf, we hit the lee of the Island and the sea turned into an aquamarine, glassy, smooth lagoon more like Hawaii than Lundy! Three hours of gale force seas and twenty miles of ocean were behind us. The Island launch was already on its way to our mooring.



I staggered along in the small group of people walking towards an opening in the boat's side. When it came to my turn, I looked down at the launch — a foot or two away horizontally, three or four feet below, and bobbing up and down wildly — and wondered how I was going to get onto it without falling into the water. Not to worry, there were about six brawny seafaring folk around the transfer point and they lobbed me from one to the other like a sack of potatoes until I landed with a thunk on the icy-wet metallic deck of the launch. I kept trying to hold onto some portion of the launch to keep from falling over, and each time I did, a sailor would detach my hand, pointing out that I had grabbed a winch/cable/pulley or other apparatus guaranteed to mangle my hand as soon as we were under way. In a green nauseated blur, I imagine I finally ended up clinging to a couple of total strangers who at least didn't look as if they intended to mangle my hand.

The launch was a World War II surplus boat straight out of one of those movies where a bunch of GI's storm a deadly beach. We sailed slowly towards an incredible small harbor beneath towering rocky gray cliffs. Then the launch put on a burst of speed as it neared the sand, the front ramp flopped down, and I felt naked without a rifle as we ground to a halt.

Everybody hopped off the launch, ankle deep in water, and without a word of

orientation, started trekking up a steep trail along the cliff. I still felt like I was made of rubber from being sick. Trying to start a conversation with my fellow travelers, I commented to a man hiking by "Weren't those waves an incredible sight?" He grumpily responded "All I saw was the bottom of a bloody white paper bag!"

Some people hiked fast, others (me) hiked slowly. We became strung out along the trail until I was totally alone. I thought I would die as the steep walk went on forever. It started to rain, and I struggled into my Sou'Wester. Dressed for the cold voyage, I became drenched with sweat at the exertion of the climb. When I finally staggered into the pub, I was half dead.

A word on the accommodations is in order here. The lighthouse was built in 1820. There were three properties available to rent at the lighthouse. The largest was the actual keepers quarters. This was a five bedroom, two-story house attached to the tower. I could have afforded to stay there, but I imagined it might get creepy in such a large place alone, so I opted for the adjacent "Old Light Cottage." According to the guidebook, this was originally the light keeper's pigsty, but was turned into a single-person accommodation. Okay, okay, I know! Here I've traveled halfway around the globe and if I wanted to be in a pigsty, I could have stayed home.

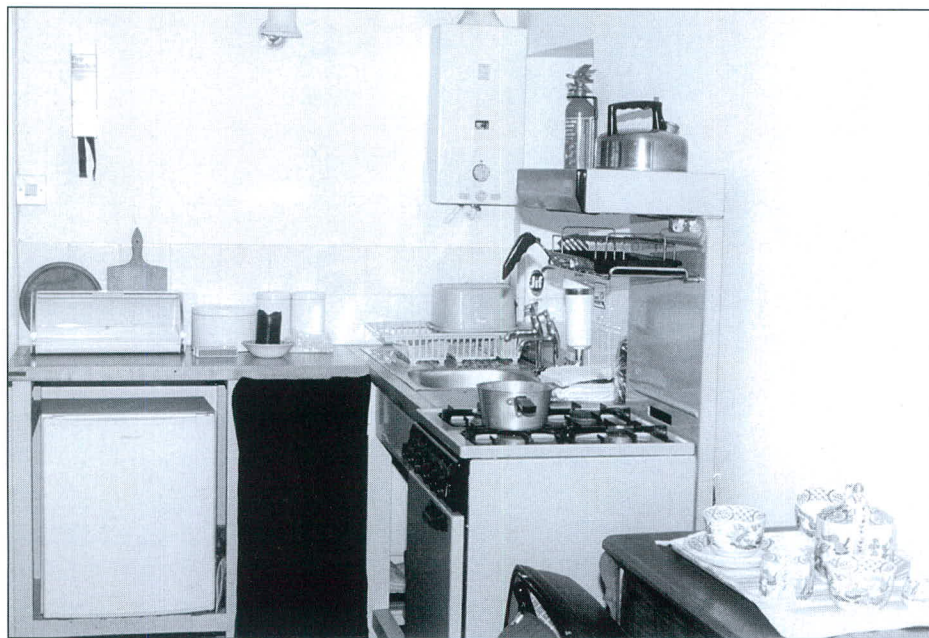
Map in hand, I slogged into the cold

rain again, still climbing upwards along what was supposed to be the village. There wasn't a living soul around, and outside one tiny shop (closed) the place looked like the middle ages, a rocky path between incredibly ancient stone walls and deserted buildings. (There are no vehicles on the island.)

I passed a sheep pasture or two looking in vain for the lighthouse. The fog and rain were very thick, I couldn't see more than about 100 feet in any direction. My glasses were wet, further reducing my visibility, and the map I was holding was rapidly disintegrating. I was looking for a wall with a footpath next to it that should lead me to the lighthouse. Problem was, I found a wall, but no path. I backtracked and wandered around. I found another wall; it kept raining and the wind buffeted my poncho and backpack. I was getting very wet. By now I had been wandering in the open for about an hour-and-a-half. I was exhausted and soaked. By some miracle I saw a lone woman pushing a baby stroller. I was near hysterics, and begged her to help me. She took me right to a gate.

I followed the wall (no footpath, just ankle-deep grass, mud, and sheep doody) and went through three wrong gates. I flogged myself onward until a gust of wind pushed the fog away for an instant and I got a glimpse of the lighthouse, which was a lot farther away than it looked on the map. The other thing I could see for a moment was a wind generator lying on its side. The guidebook had said "Electricity will be provided from 7 in the morning until midnight. There is a wind generator on the island, and under the proper conditions it can provide power all night." Oh great! Under the proper conditions it provides power, and under improper conditions, it falls over!

With my last ounce of strength I flung myself into the door of my cottage. Thank God the heat was on — a wall-mounted gas apparatus was going full blast. I divested myself of dripping outer garments, and stood shivering next to the heater. My luggage was nowhere to be seen, so I had no dry clothes to change into. My significant other had warned me that all the heating devices in the cottage would probably be electric, so I was intrigued by the fact that I had a gas stove and heater. I looked outside the window and saw that I had a



Kitchen of the cottage which was converted from a pig sty. Notice the hot water apparatus over the stove. Photo courtesy of the author.

butane tank about the size of a kitchen wastebasket. More about this later ...

I went back to the pub and ordered a ploughman's lunch. A big gust of wind roared outside and doink, the power went out in the pub! The ploughman's lunch arrived as I was dragging a table and chair as close to the huge fireplace as I could without going up in flames. The divine creamy Stilton cheese did much to restore my strength and spirits. I made it back to the cottage, and a few moments later, a young man arrived with my luggage. I couldn't wait to get into dry clothes. As I opened the suitcase, I had a mental image of the duct-tape-wrapped plastic packages I had seen being loaded on the *Oldenburg*. You guessed it, everything in my suitcase was somewhere between wet and damp. Then, just as night began to fall, *doink*, out went the power in the cottage! I did have a lantern and a couple of candles, but did not relish my first night in a strange place without electricity. And then the whole ordeal was over. The lights came back on, I installed my cheery plaid sheets, found a quartet of fluffy brown wool blankets, made myself some tea, broke out my Alastair MacLean, and watched the lighthouse disappear into the darkness.

When I finally tunneled under the big fluffy quilt (the power did go out at midnight), I lay comfortably in the candlelight listening to the horrendous winds and the rain beating on the cottage windows. Despite the afternoon's misadventures, I was very glad I had come to Lundy. I fell asleep with visions of monster waves dancing in my head.

I slept really late the next morning. The whole idea of coming here was to have an inexpensive and restful vacation. I got myself up and sipped tea while reveling in the sight of the lighthouse by daylight, and the awesome view of Ackland's Moor out my other window (for some reason, I could never remember "Ackland's Moor" and kept thinking of it as "Alzheimer's Moor"). When I climbed over the stile to trek down the moor to the track, I spied a white blur heading my way, fast! Since the sheep I had encountered on the previous day had all run at my approach, I assumed that this one resented my invasion of her Moor, and that I was about to get butted, big time. I braced myself for the onslaught, but the critter stopped short and danced about giving all the signs of an animal who is delighted to see someone.

Carefully I put my hand out and patted the woolly head. She followed me clear to the track and I had a devil of a time keeping her from following me through the gate. When I got to the store, I asked what I could buy that would be a treat for a sheep. The storekeeper said he didn't think I'd be able to get near any of them. I said, "I've got one that wants to sit in my lap." He said, "Oh! That's Happiness. She was hand-raised by a young couple that live on the island." I bought a box of Wheatabix, a British cereal, and found that both Happiness and the Moor Ponies were crazy for it.

Happiness continued to be my little pet for the duration of the time on the island. I bought a lot of Wheatabix and she rapidly learned to grub around in my backpack and find the treats for herself. The Moor Ponies, on the other hand, turned out to be a real pain, since they remembered the treats and would positively mob me whenever they saw me.

I spent day two just relaxing. I wandered around the medieval castle (built by Henry III in 1244) situated on an incredible cliff near the south end of the island. I walked as far as Admiralty Lookout, a World War I outpost that, like all the properties on the Island, can be rented. Admiralty is so far from the dubious civilization of the non-existent village that it has gaslights and an outdoor privy.

There was a lovely Anglican Church all alone on a windswept hill. It was very damp

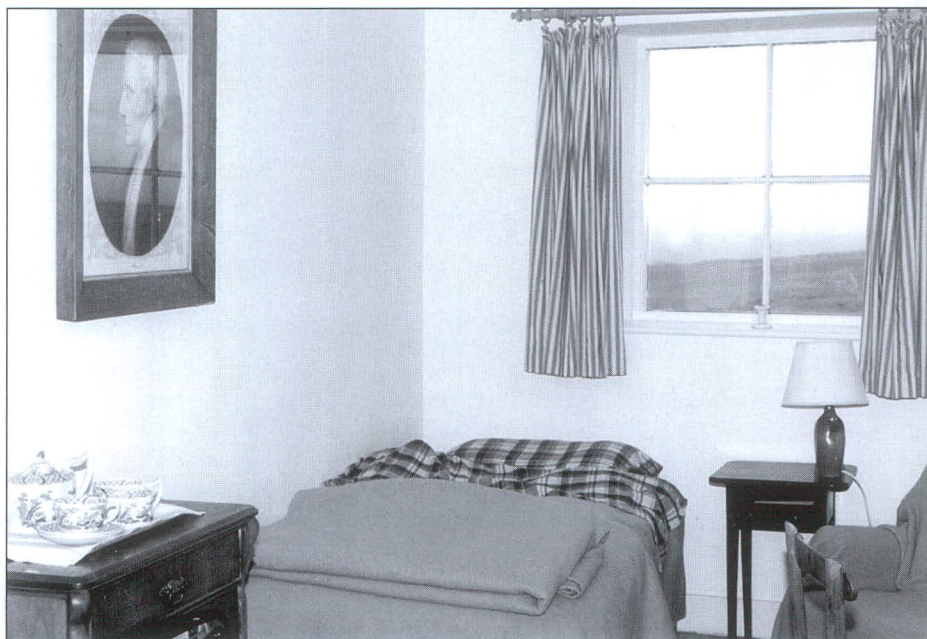
inside the church and, to add to the grungy atmosphere, there were dead black birds all over the pews and the floor. I asked at the pub what was going on with the dead birds. The guy behind the bar said they fly inside and get trapped and that the Vicar was going to be very displeased at finding them there.

The day before I left on this trip, I had received the U. S. Lighthouse Society's magazine, and it had, coincidentally, contained an article about the Lundy Island light. I had been dismayed to learn that it was near an old Celtic Cemetery and surrounded by one of those Druid Stone Circles. Had I known that in advance, I might have reconsidered going there alone, but by then it was too late.

Ye Gads! The cemetery was right next to my cottage, and I could actually see the ancient Celtic Crosses out my window. The mini-Stonehenge was incredibly ancient and covered with green moss. I wandered around looking at the gravestones in the bright daylight and didn't think too much about it.

The big keeper's quarters were unoccupied. I was all alone on the hill with the lighthouse, so I had the use of both properties, and would spend time reading before the huge fireplace in the big house, and then sleep in the smaller one. I really got my money's worth!

That night when I put out the light, I discovered that the wind had stopped, and it was dead still. Now, in the candlelight, the nearness of the cemetery came back to, um,



The bedroom of the cottage with a 'charming' view of the cemetery. Photo courtesy of the author.

haunt me. I am like James Thurber; I don't believe in ghosts, but I'm afraid of them just the same. Despite the fact that I am supposedly a rational person there is a big yellow atavistic streak down my back when it comes to death, cemeteries, and stuff like that. Here I am, in a silence like a vacuum, on a hill on an island in the middle of the North Atlantic, all alone with the grave of the nearest ancient Celt about 10 feet away from my bed! I amused (probably not a good choice of words) myself with creepy thoughts for awhile.

I started to worry about my intended hike to the north end of the Island on the following day. Hiking on rough trails in remote places should be done on a buddy system, and I would, of necessity, be doing it alone. So I conjured up pictures of me turning an ankle somewhere and freezing to death, alone overnight.

Then suddenly, the wind came back with a vengeance. The windows rattled, the door banged, wooo- wooo sounds screamed off the eaves, and the lighthouse tower emitted awesome bass notes like some humongous organ pipe. I fell sound asleep. For all I knew, a bevy of *haints* could have been climbing out of their graves, flickering my candles, and pulling the chain on my old-fashioned toilet. I didn't care. I was snoring peacefully under my four woolen blankets.

I decided to begin the assault on the north end of the island with a monster English breakfast. I made a point of telling the gal behind the bar that I was going to hike there, in case something happened to me. She said she had been on the Island for five months and still hadn't been up to the north end. I asked her why and she said the only time she had tried to make the hike her boyfriend had broken his leg on the trail. Oh, wonderful! That did a lot for my confidence.

The whole island is only three miles long but the ruggedness and remoteness of the terrain makes it forbidding. There are three lighthouses on the island, one each at the very north and south ends, and one at the highest point, which is where I was staying. I finally reached the north end of the island; the wind was beyond horrendous. The lighthouse is stuck to some craggy rocks and accessible only by a long ladder from the sea. There was all sorts of Coast Guard hardware around it: beacons, radar, and stuff.

Having achieved my goal, I could now meander on the return trip. The island is crossed by three walls located at the quarter, half, and three-quarter points. The track, or only footpath, runs down the middle of the Island. There are scenic points all along both coasts, so I zigzagged back and forth from one side to the other as I returned. The west coast, facing the full force of the North Atlantic winds, was rugged and wild, the east coast, in the lee of the wind, was mild, dreamy, and much more tame. There were numerous intriguing ruins, a wild boggy pond with a beautiful stream running out of it, and countless other breathtaking spots along the way. I spent the entire day walking and arrived back at the lighthouse just as a heart-stopping sunset was flaming behind the tower.

That night the winds exceeded anything I have ever experienced. I definitely gained insight into the lonely life of a keeper. By that time, if a ghastly Celtic *Haint* had risen from his grave and knocked upon my door I'd have invited him in just for the company.

Next morning I found the seas had gone to Force 9 and the *Oldenburg* couldn't sail. We were now effectively prisoners of the Island.

The people at the pub knew that I was a helicopter pilot and introduced me to another guest who was one also. We nattered about flying for awhile and ended up agreeing to charter a helicopter to take us off the Island.

Now I was really torn. On the minus side was the fact I was living for the opportunity to take another wild and woolly boat ride, on which I would miss out. On the plus side, the weather had been worsening for days. I had no indication that it would even improve before all my available time was up. The big deciding factor was that we were told there was already snow on the mainland. I had also been increasingly concerned about that aforementioned cute little butane tank at the cottage. Namely, I'd had the heat on full for several evenings now and I worried that I'd run out of gas. Under the conditions up there, I would quite literally freeze to death if I did. This is not a joke, an unheated stone house on a hill in bitter cold will leach the life right out of your bones, and then they'd have to bury me with all those ancient Celts!

Having sealed my fate, I then spent most of the morning and early afternoon hiking around the south lighthouse and the adjacent beach and jetty. It was one of the most

unreal, mind-boggling places I've ever seen. If I saw it in a movie, I'd think it was all special effects.

This was the same area we had landed in the launch, but I'd been too seasick to appreciate it. Now I snooped in and out of small caves, poked around the lighthouse, and grooved on the greeny crystal clear water. Returning, I meandered up the aforementioned steep path, and mused for awhile by a pond with an old stone mill. The latter being about as English a place as I've ever seen — doubly dramatic with the vast gray Atlantic for a background.

I rambled back to the pub sometime after one o'clock, and the other helicopter pilot told me the 'copter would be arriving at three!! I had assumed that, since we were supposed to sail the following day, we would fly the following day. I ran screaming into the pub and offered my firstborn child to anyone who would arrange to get my luggage down to the field where the helicopter would be landing. I huffed my way up to the cottage, and began a frantic packing job. Knowing that any 'copter with 5 passengers would be fairly heavy, I needed to lighten my load of baggage. I felt as if I was in one of those German Zeppelin movies where they throw everything, including the men, out the door in order to stay in the air. I put the absolute essentials into my backpack. Outside of clean underwear and a Lundy T-shirt, I left with essentially the clothes on my back and not much else. As I was running out the door, I ran back and grabbed my final box of Wheatabix. Happiness was waiting for me as usual, and I gave her the whole box, hugged her, and wished her Godspeed. My luggage reached the pub just after I did.

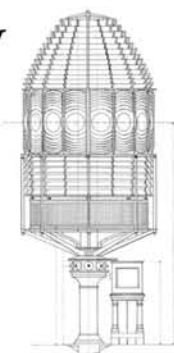
Then I and the helicopter pilot's family of four trudged up to a sheep field waiting for our magic carpet. We heard a wop-wop in the distance and the helicopter arrived, driving a herd of terrified sheep and chickens before it. Luckily they swerved where we were standing, because for a moment I thought I was going to be stampeded to death by the sheep of Lundy Island.

We were each given foul-weather survival gear to put on; as if we would last more than a minute or two in Force 9 seas and icy water in the event of a crash.

As we lifted off, I blew a kiss to the lighthouse.



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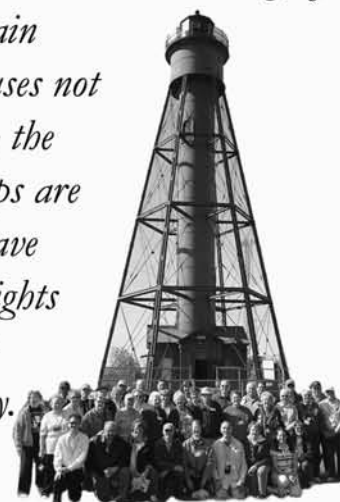
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