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SW England Lighthouse Tour

September 5th – September 21st, 2012

By Ken Mulder

All photos by the author.

During our tour of SW England, we traveled more than 2,000 miles by boat and by bus, seeing more than 35 lighthouses. With a great local guide in Jake Simpkin, and the always-excellent ULSHS Team Sherwood, we explored the fascinating and friendly English coastline of Somerset, Cornwall and Devon. We saw four of the world's greatest offshore lights, getting very close indeed to two of them. Our trip was interspersed with visits to Roman ruins, medieval castles, ornate cathedrals, and even a walk through a gorge, but of course the prime attraction for our group was the lighthouses. In advance of the trip, one lighthouse stood out. For many in the group, viewing the Eddystone Lighthouse was the primary reason for signing up for the trip.

The current Eddystone Lighthouse is the fourth light to stand on the Eddystone rock. The first was Winstanley's Lighthouse, an elaborate wooden structure that unfortunately lasted only five years before it and its designer were swept away by a November gale. The second lighthouse, known as Rudyerd's Tower, was also made of wood. This tower lasted for almost 50 years before it was destroyed by a fire. The third tower was known as Smeaton's Tower after its designer John Smeaton. This tower, constructed of interlocking granite with marble dowels, lasted for over a hundred years. It would probably still be guarding Eddystone today except that in the 1870s it was discovered that the rock on which it was erected was cracking. Its replacement, the current Eddystone Lighthouse, was promptly begun nearby in a more sound location. The top part of Smeaton's Tower was dismantled and reconstructed on a hill overlooking Plymouth harbor, where it stands today. We had the opportunity to climb Smeaton's Tower and see first-hand the arrangement of candles which provided the light. Although the tower itself was a marvel of engineering, the optics in this light were not. With 24 large candles, this light when first lit provided only minimal light.

Eddystone is located approximately 13 miles offshore from Plymouth Harbor. Our trip to see it took place in two boats, a dozen of us in each. Assigned to the two boats at random, those assigned to Boat 2 discovered that they'd won the boat lottery for



The top part of Smeaton's Tower now sits on Plymouth Hoe.



The current Eddystone Lighthouse is known as the Douglass Tower after its designer. The base of Smeaton's Tower rests nearby.

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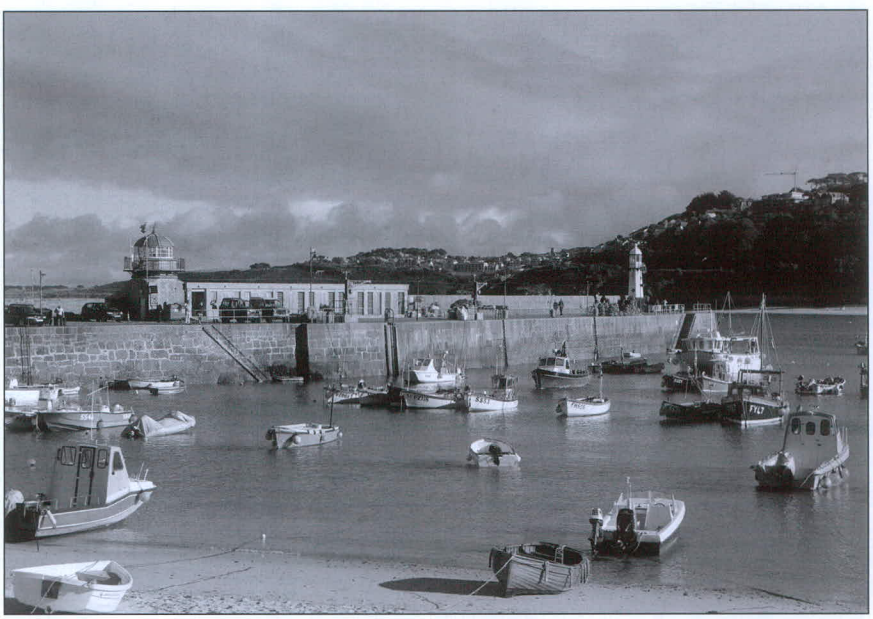
Avonmouth North Pier Lighthouse is surrounded by USLHS members in hard hats and "hi-vis" vests.

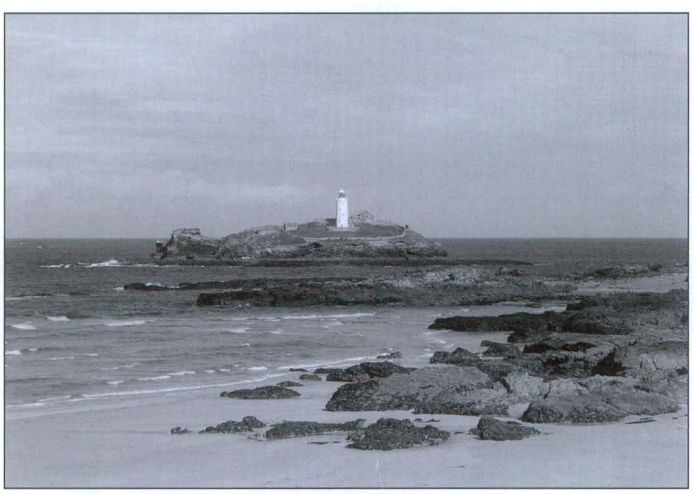
that day. Although the two boats looked similar, Boat 2 had room for most of the group to squeeze inside and avoid the ocean spray, which was followed later in the day by the rain. The occupants of Boat 1, unfortunately, got thoroughly soaked. On the positive side, we all had the opportunity to get as close to the most famous lighthouse in England as anyone could wish.

Our visit to Eddystone took place near the end of the England trip, which began in Bristol. While in Bristol for three days, we had the opportunity to see several nearby lighthouses and lightships. Avonmouth is a suburb of Bristol and the port for the city of Bristol. The Avonmouth Pier lights are located within the working harbor and thus not normally accessible. USLHS connections, however, arranged an invitation for us to walk the north pier and climb the light. Because of the location within the harbor, we were escorted and required to wear "high fashion" hard hats and high-visibility vests. The 1908 North tower is a 53-foot unpainted granite tower still equipped with a Fresnel lens.

Another interesting stop was our visit to Blacknore Lighthouse. The Severn Estuary, on which Blacknore Point is located, experiences the second highest tidal range in the world, second only to the notorious Bay of Fundy tides in Canada. The tidal range at Blacknore at times approaches 50 feet, making navigation hazardous. Bill Shier, president of the Blacknore Lighthouse Trust, opened the lighthouse for us. Julia Elton, Deputy Lord Lieutenant of the County of Somerset, also met our group there. Ms. Elton is a lens expert and answered our questions about the unusual "stacked" 4th order Fresnel lens, technically known as a biform dioptic, in the Blacknore Lighthouse.

Further west along the Bristol Channel, we spent three days exploring the area around Lynmouth. Lynmouth is the harbor town of the East and West Lyn Rivers, while Lynton sits near the top of the cliffs almost a thousand feet above sea level. Lynmouth and Lynton are connected by an unusual funicular railway powered by water from the Lyn Rivers. Our very fine hotel was situated part of the way up the steep slope above the harbor, and provided beautiful views as well as interesting logistics getting to and from the hotel in a bus or on foot.





Above: St. Ives Harbor lighthouses sit on Smeaton's Pier and guard the entrance to the harbor.
Left: Godrevy Island Lighthouse sits about three miles from St. Ives. It was the inspiration for Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*.

The food in Lynmouth was exceptional, but in fact the food on our entire trip was quite good. A full English breakfast was available to start each day. For lunch we often enjoyed a Cornish pasty or fish and chips, followed by an ice cream cone topped with rich chocolate sauce and garnished with a truffle stick. Our dinners varied from good to excellent, from buffets to gourmet food ordered and served individually.

Lynmouth is the site of an almost unbelievable story of courage and determination which took place in 1899. A 1,900 ton three-masted ship signaled that it was in trouble off the coast in a gale. The Lynmouth lifeboat crew was unable to launch in Lynmouth due to the weather.

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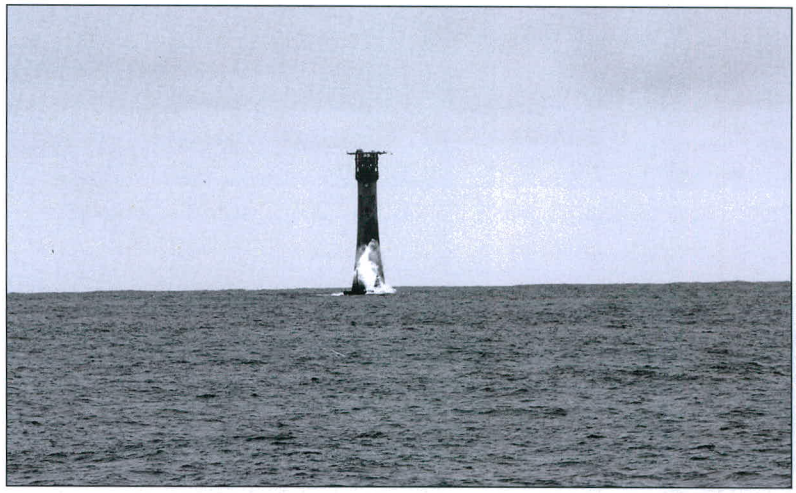


Longships Lighthouse sits on dangerous rocks just a mile offshore from Land's End.

Undaunted, they enlisted locals to help, and transported their lifeboat, which weighed 10 tons with its transport carriage, more than 15 miles across the steep hills to the more protected Porlock Harbor. In places the road had to be widened to allow the lifeboat to pass. Arriving in Porlock 10 hours after they began, they immediately launched and proceeded to rescue the 19-member crew of the stricken vessel.

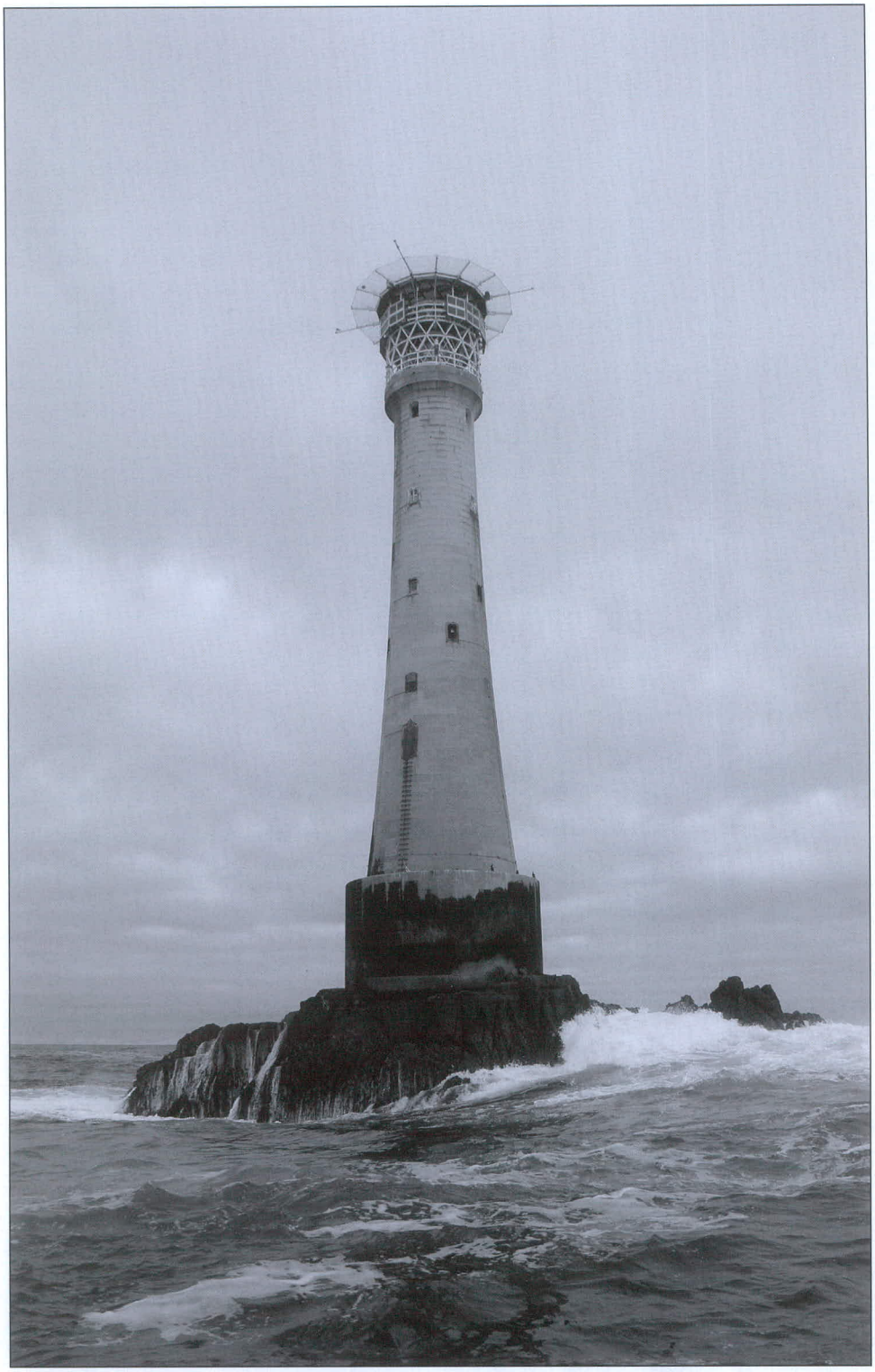
We experienced our own less dramatic version of a gale while in Lynmouth. Our schedule called for us to board boats and travel to Lundy Island to see and visit the three lighthouses on that island. Unfortunately, strong winds for both of the days we were in the area required cancellation of the trip. We were fortunate that this was the only segment of the trip which had to be cancelled due to weather. We did get a pleasant surprise the next day, however, when we visited the Hartland Point Light. We discovered that, from our vantage point high above Hartland Point, we could see in the distance the South Lundy and Old Lundy lighthouses. We agreed that a distant view of a lighthouse is better than no view at all.

Bus travel in SW England gave us a new appreciation for the U.S. road system. The roads we traveled in England were narrow and winding. There is no shoulder; hedges and trees line the road closely in most places. We noticed that as we neared a lighthouse, the road became narrower and narrower, until often it became a single lane, with traffic allowed from both ways! Even the main roads had just enough room for two vehicles to meet. In towns or villages parking is allowed on one side of the road, blocking that lane. Vehicles must duck into open spots to allow oncoming cars and buses to get past. We were very glad to let our competent bus driver Jerry deal with the traffic. On the plus side, the British are generally very polite, and we saw that exhibited on the road as well as in personal interactions. The countryside we passed through



Even on a relatively calm day, the spray from waves hitting Wolf Rock Lighthouse demonstrates its exposed position.

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Bishop Rock Lighthouse guards the western approaches to the British Isles.

was very picturesque. With its rolling hills and small green fields outlined by hedges, it is like nothing in the U.S.

St. Ives is an enchanting town by anyone's definition. With its pier lights in the harbor, and Godrevy Lighthouse situated on a small island across the bay, it's even more special for lighthouse lovers. We were able to enjoy some time in the town, and also traveled around the bay to get a closer view of Godrevy Lighthouse on a beautiful sunny day.

Over-commercialized Lands End has the last of everything if one believes the signs. For us, though, the main attraction was an absolutely stunning view of Longships Lighthouse less than a mile away. The rocks that surround it give ample evidence of its usefulness. Longships is one of four magnificent offshore lights we saw on our trip. All were difficult for the keepers to access, as evidenced by the helipad which Trinity House installed on the top of each to allow safer access.

For most of our group, the highlight of the entire tour was our boat trip out to Bishop Rock Lighthouse off the Scilly Isles. In fact, everything about the Scilly Isles leg of our journey was exceptional. It began with the ferry ride on the *Scillonian III* from Penzance to St. Mary's Island. With excellent weather, light winds, bright sunshine and blue skies, we were able to get good views of 10 lighthouses during the ferry ride. First came the Penzance Harbor and Newlyn Harbor lights, followed shortly by Tater Du Lighthouse along the Cornwall coast. Just offshore came Longships, which we also saw from Land's End. Next was the impressive Wolf Rock Lighthouse a few miles farther offshore. As we neared the Scilly Isles (pronounced silly), we were able to see all the beacons of the Scilly Isles from the ferry.

The Scilly Isles have been the scene of hundreds of shipwrecks. For many reasons, navigation in this area has always been hazardous. Circular tides between Land's End and the Scilly Isles change direction every two or three hours. There are many rocks offshore hidden from view even at low tide. In the days of sailing ships, charts were poor, and the Scilly's may have been the first landfall for a ship after months at sea. The most notable of the shipwrecks occurred in 1707, when the commander-in-chief of the British fleet led his squadron, whose navigators thought they were miles away, into the Scilly's at night and in rough weather. Four British Navy ships were sunk and almost 2,000 men perished.

Engineering difficulties in building lighthouses on remote sites in Cornwall and the Scilly's delayed the introduction of critical navigation aids for many years. Early lighthouse builders encountered man-made obstacles as well as natural ones. Cornish "wreckers" felt that it was a violation of God's will to do anything to prevent them from benefitting from the bounty of the sea, as "harvesting" the shipwrecks was known. Delays due to local resistance were common, and even outright sabotage was not unknown.

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Round Island Lighthouse was originally fitted with a huge hyper-radial lens; it now has a modern optic.

We had two boat trips during our stay on St. Mary's Island. The first took us to see the lighthouse on Round Island. Although it was windy, our course kept us sheltered from the worst of the Atlantic swells. Our skipper took us within a few yards of the steps mounted on the face of the rock of Round Island. The building of this lighthouse was not easily accomplished, as this steep cliff face was the only way to get workers and building materials onto this small island in 1887. Lighthouse keepers undoubtedly experienced many anxious moments landing or leaving from this post, which was automated in 1987.

Our second boat trip in the Scilly's took us out to the 1858 Bishop Rock Lighthouse. The Scilly Isles are 25 miles west of Land's End on the mainland, and Bishop Rock is the most westerly of the Scilly's, thus the most westerly piece of land in the United Kingdom. It is exposed to the full sweep of the Atlantic for almost 3,000 miles.

Leaving St. Mary's Island, we first went past St. Agnes Island with nice views of that lighthouse, the first built in the Scilly Isles. We then began to move through the islets of the Scilly's. There are 140 islands in the Scilly's; only five of them are inhabited. All rocky, the largest is St. Mary's at a little over two square miles, while the total size of all the Scilly Isles is only about six square miles.

Wildlife was abundant on these rocks. Atlantic gray seals dozed in the sun; some moved off at our close approach while others simply ignored us. Our ship's dog, Bella, got very excited by the seals. Birds covered many of the rocks as well. Black-backed gulls claimed high spots on the rocks; flocks of oystercatchers with their black and white bodies and bright red bills scampered about the rocks; lines of cormorants watched our approach; stately gannets flew by. With ocean swells lifting our boat, we passed within a few feet of many of these rocky outcrops, while enjoying the views of Bishop Rock Lighthouse in the distance.

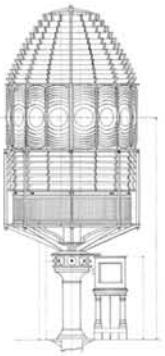
Our course eventually took us between two rocks only a short distance apart, and we made our way toward the Bishop Rock Lighthouse. The last mile and a half was quite rough, as the swells were breaking on the rocky bottom beneath us. Our jaws dropped as our skilled captain brought us within 50 feet of the base of the lighthouse. For true "wickies" it just doesn't get any better than that. What a fantastic ride!

Our tour of SW England included many other enjoyable lighthouse stops. We toured the lightship *Sula*, including a climb to see its Fresnel optic. We watched the magnificent first order Fresnel rotating in Trevose Head Lighthouse. We viewed the lovely Pendeen Lighthouse overlooking the rocky coast near Land's End. Some members of our group toured Lizard Point Lighthouse while others climbed down to Tater Du Lighthouse. We took a short boat trip to view Lynmouth's Foreland Point, situated high up the steep slope overlooking the Bristol Channel. We toured Lantern Hill Lighthouse in Ilfracombe, claimed to be the oldest continuously operating light in England. All of these adventures added up to an exceptional USLHS trip.



A short boat ride from Lynmouth harbor brought us out to see the Lynmouth Foreland Point Lighthouse.

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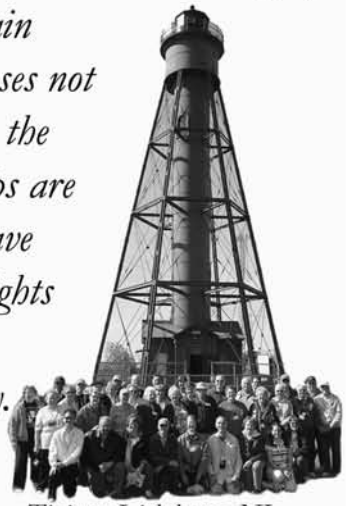
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