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Scarborough Lighthouse (Scarborough, North Yorkshire)



History

Scarborough's lighthouse stands on Vincent's Pier, built in the 18th century and named after its engineer, William Vincent. Defining a date of initial construction for the lighthouse itself is difficult due to the lack of archive material, but research suggests that building commenced sometime between 1801 and 1806, after which a permanent brick structure existed, paid for by many of the vessels entering the harbor.

Scarborough Lighthouse in the early 19th century consisted of a brick tower with a flat top surrounded by iron railings. A coal brazier burned on the top platform during the night and a warning flag was flown during the daytime. Undoubtedly, the light would have been intermittent due to the wind and height of the waves. The coal brazier was soon replaced by six tallow candles placed in a circular tin that resided in an oblong-shaped window beneath the flat roof. A watchman was on duty to replace the candles as they extinguished. In 1818, a copper reflector replaced the tin. One of the difficulties of this arrangement was that the lighthouse emission could be confused with lights showing from the town itself, to the rear of the harbor area. Shutters on appropriate windows helped to ease this problem.

In the summer of 1840, a gas supply had reached the harbor area and the lighthouse. The decision was also made at this time for the harbor master, who then resided in the town rather than at the lighthouse, to



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live in specially built premises adjoining the lighthouse tower. Thus in 1843, accommodation was added to the lighthouse tower, and was used by harbor masters and their families until 1937. Today it is used by the Scarborough Yacht Club (not open to the public). The watchmen worked from a brick-built hut to the rear of the lighthouse called the water house, which is standing today.

During this period, the tower was also heightened by 17 feet, in order to make the light more visible. The gas-fueled lantern, called the Bude light, gave off a brilliant and powerful beam, but in 1845, after the fuel bills came to an exorbitant £60 per annum, it was exchanged for a smaller four-inch burner, consisting of five gaslights. At the same time, a tidal gauge was installed at the head of the pier and a black ball replaced the flag that had been used for daylight warnings. Two of the five gaslights were lit permanently during the long dark winter nights.

While there were alterations to the lighthouse during the late 19th century, but sadly very little archival evidence exists from this period that would allow an accurate description of any changes. The most dramatic event in Scarborough's history was yet to come, and the lighthouse played a key role in what is now known as "The Bombardment."

At around 8 a.m. on December 16, 1914, in the early months of World War I, the peaceful routine was shattered by a thunderous noise. German battle cruisers Derfflinger and Von der Tann had taken advantage of the disguising effects of the early morning mist that plagues the Northeast coast of England. They mercilessly shelled the town with 12-, 11- and 5.9-inch guns. The attack continued until around 8:25 a.m., during which time 500 shells were recorded. The vessels then steamed northwards towards the town of Whitby which incurred a similar fate. Eighteen civilians were killed during the Bombardment of Scarborough, scores were injured and damage to the town's infrastructure was severe.

The lighthouse was badly damaged by the bombardment. A shell clipped the lighthouse tower and tore a gaping hole through its center. A shell also damaged the harbor master's living quarters. The shell that holed the lighthouse tower was the Germans' parting shot before steaming northwards. The damage was so serious that the structure was deemed unsafe and was pulled down three days later on December 19.

The lighthouse remained without its tower until its reconstruction in 1931 through public funding. During its reconstruction, a foghorn was also added, sounding off a single two-second blast every minute. The foghorn sounds in f sharp, and is run by electricity. During World War II, the foghorn doubled as an air raid warning. The light itself had changed to a white occulting light fueled by electricity.

In the 1980s, the current lantern room was constructed. The rest of the tower and the spiral staircase date from the 1931 rebuilding. Storm shutters are still erected manually over the rear facing windows during heavy weather.

The last full 24-hour watch at Scarborough lighthouse took place in 1997. After this date, the decision was taken to man the lighthouse during the summer season only. The harbor master himself is now responsible for the permanent supervision of the harbor and the lighthouse. The title for workers at the lighthouse is Tidal Officers, whose duties include checking the boats are berthed safely and operating the foghorn, pier bridge and other duties.



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Location

