





# South Foreland In The 20th Century

Extracted from: *Light On The Forelands* by Ken & Clifford Trethewey, Jazz-Fusion Books (2022)

Major transformation of the site and equipment; the Low Light is taken out of service; the High Light gets a new flashing light; a century very different from the past

## Transformative Times

As if there had not been plenty already, at South Foreland, the arrival of the 20th century was immediately the time for major change. The original purpose of the lighthouse had been to protect shipping by offering a line of sight to mark the southern end of the notorious Goodwin Sands, but, as we know, sand is a notoriously unreliable material, shifting in great measures under the influence of heavy weather.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, as the sandbanks had taken up positions that were well removed from the line of sight offered by the lights, it seemed to many seafarers that the best course of action was to either move the line of sight or just to dispense with it altogether. At other sites where leading lights offered such lines of safe passage (a good example being George Knott's station at Bideford Bar Light - see p184) the Low light was built to be moveable so that the line could be changed if the position of the sand bars changed. However, it was not practical to move the South Foreland Low Light; it would need to be demolished and rebuilt, a

plan that would not have been acceptable to Trinity House. On the other hand it was possible simply to take the low light out of service and to concentrate the efforts and resources in the High Light where it could be given the benefit of the latest technological developments. The first recorded proposal to take the Low Light out of service was in July 1883, but it was not until 1900 that a third and final proposal was accepted by Trinity House.<sup>1</sup>

Until this time, the lights of South Foreland had been fixed, that is, a constant brilliant light from the electric arc was magnified by the catoptric apparatus that was not rotated. There was, therefore, no flash. Now there was an opportunity to install a major upgrade to the light, in particular to make it flash white.

The process of taking the Low Light out of service commenced in 1904 with removal of the fixed dioptric apparatus, whereupon it was taken to the TH depot at Blackwall. All other supporting equipment was removed and the lighthouse and land would eventually be put up for sale. Trinity House would have nothing further to do with it.

<sup>1</sup> Beck, p45, para 7.1

## A Second-Hand Lens

Still with future service ahead of it, the High Light was prepared for even bigger change as old equipment was taken out and new hardware put in. Specifically, a new optic would be installed that would be rotated to make the High Light flash for the first time. But Trinity House did not commission a brand new apparatus to be designed and supplied from Chance Brothers - well, not one for South Foreland. For some unknown reason, the Elder Brethren decided to have a new optic for St. Catherine's Light on the Isle of Wight, and to have the old one brought to South Foreland.

The optical apparatus recycled from St. Catherine's consisted of sixteen vertical panels, each with a lens at its centre, and with fifteen curved prisms above and below (see p384). Originally manufactured in 1888, it had been mounted prior to the adoption of the mercury bath method and rotation was possible only when mounted on rollers. The friction that was implicit in this design meant that rotation was slow and it took eight minutes to make one revolution. Even with sixteen panels, each making a flash, it meant that just one flash of five seconds occurred every 30 seconds. This was considered to be slow and sub-optimum. However, once it became possible to float the optic in a mercury bath, the friction was reduced almost to zero<sup>1</sup> and, installed in the lantern at South Foreland, it could now be rotated every forty seconds and would provide sixteen flashes at equal intervals - in this case 2.5 seconds. The flashing light was displayed for the first time on 23 November 1904.

The light source in use in 1904 continued to be the original Holmes carbon arc lamp, but now that only one light was in service, two of the generators in the engine house were decommissioned.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Every host who has ever demonstrated the rotation of an optic floating in mercury has done so by making the heavy (4 tons) weight move with a gentle push of one finger, as our host is doing in the photo on the right.

<sup>2</sup> Beck, p50.

**RIGHT TOP:** Lighthouse optical machinery is notoriously difficult to photograph because it is generally a large item in a small space. The South Foreland optic is especially hard because of its overall height. In this image the tree panels, each of which makes a flash on rotation, are the dominant feature. Part of the apparatus for mounting and operating the tungsten filament light source is at the bottom right.

**RIGHT BOTTOM:** This image concentrates on the lower part of the equipment. The attendant's hand rests on the base of the rotating part. Above it is the large cast iron support upon which the glass panels are fixed and that rotates with them. Beneath the base, bottom left is the grey metal trough that holds the mercury. Bottom right, behind a green cover plate (added recently to protect straying fingers) is a steel roller bearing. It actually bears little weight and makes only occasional contact with the rotating machinery if the optic moves slightly out of the vertical as it floats.



## Mercury

The revolving mechanism from St. Catherine's lighthouse was installed onto a new support frame with a clockwork rotation mechanism below and a bath of mercury above. This use of mercury is worth some comments for the remarkable features it entails. Apparently it was Fresnel who in 1825 first suggested its use, but the idea was not taken up - perhaps it was thought too strange? Thus, it was not until 1892 that the French lighthouse authorities tested it at La Teignouse and first employed it a year later at Cap de la Hève. Its success was so remarkable that there was a sudden increase in the demand for mercury.

Known as quicksilver, mercury is found either in its natural state or, more likely, as the sulphide ore called cinnabar. A mine at Almadén in Spain became the most important cinnabar deposit in the world, exploited from Roman times until 1991. Simply heating the red powder in air is enough to separate the metal from its ore. Mercury is a unique substance being a liquid metal at normal temperatures and with an extraordinarily high density - some 13 times greater than water - that allows heavy metal objects to float in it. "What's remarkable about that," you ask. "Huge metal ships float in water!" Well, yes, but in this case, metal objects do not exactly float as rest upon it, making barely an indentation, as the image on this page shows. Furthermore, the ship is not solid metal and its overall density - the weight compared to its volume - is less than  $1 \text{ g/cm}^3$ . So non-scientists should be truly amazed at this property of mercury.

Significant quantities of mercury were required for each lighthouse lens, the amount required at South Foreland has been reported as 370 kg (820 lb) or 27 litres (6 gallons).<sup>2</sup> At the same time as this equipment was being manufactured, another was in production to support the new optic being designed at St. Catherine's, the idea was still very new since the first use in British lights had been only in the late 1890s at the new lighthouses on Lundy Island.

Referring to the design of the mercury bearing, a manual<sup>3</sup> published by Chance Bros. reported:

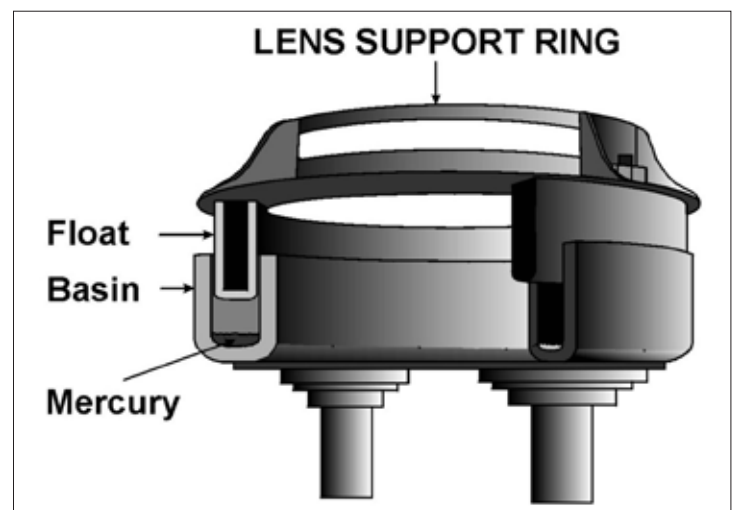
*"These must be designed so that the trough can be lowered for the purpose of cleaning, the weight of the apparatus being taken in the meantime by the vertical rollers. In the single column type, the column has a screw cut on it, and the trough is supported on*

*a circular table which screws up or down on this. To clean the trough is therefore a very simple operation. Tommy bars are inserted in the holes provided in the table, and by this means it is screwed down until it is clear of the float, which remains supported on the vertical rollers. The mercury can be drawn by the cock provided, and the necessary cleaning done. This trough should not require cleaning more than twice a year."*



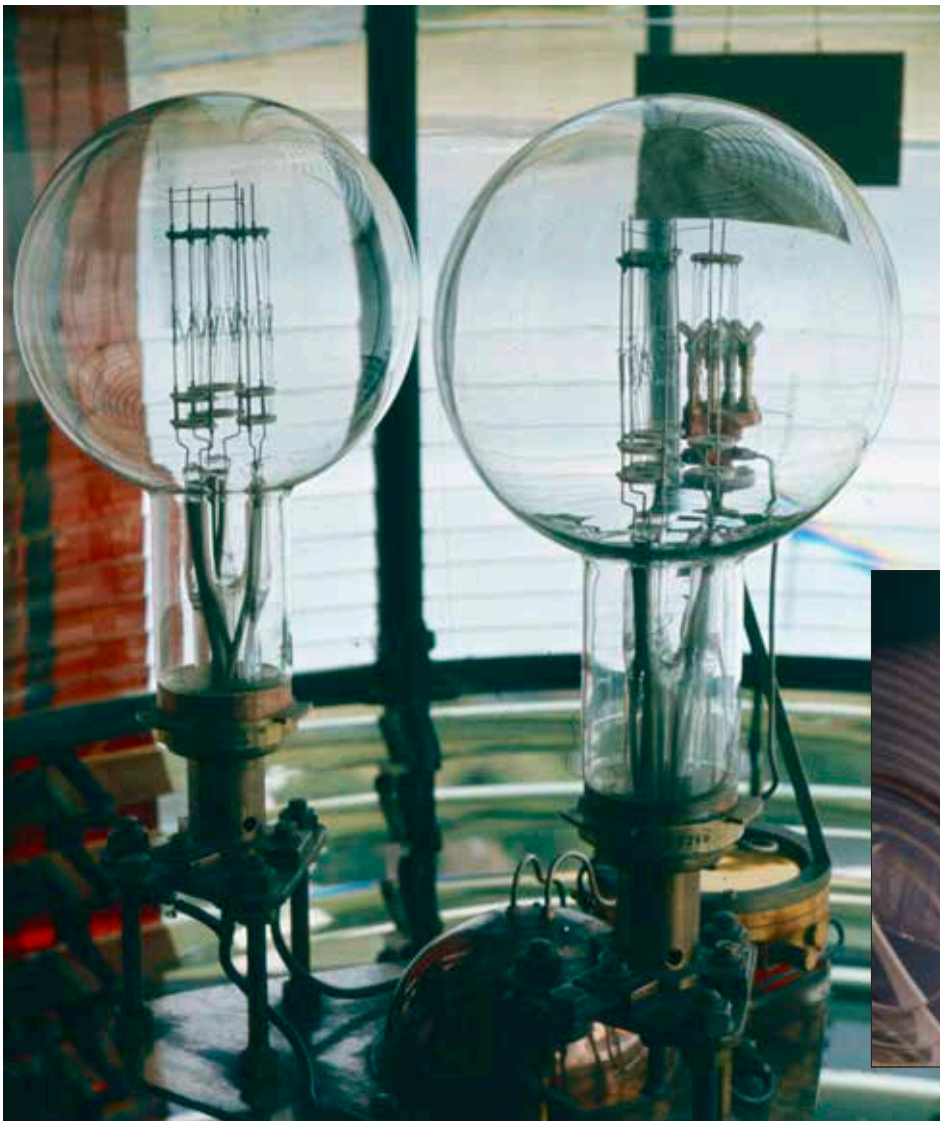
ABOVE: a UK £1 coin floats easily on a volume of mercury. With a density of about  $8.6 \text{ g/cm}^3$  it makes only a slight indentation in the liquid metal that has a density of  $13.5 \text{ g/cm}^3$ .

BELOW: A diagram showing the typical arrangement of a mercury flotation bearing. Rarely is it possible to ever see the remarkable yet simple features of the design. A 'U'-shaped basin in the form of annulus or ring contains the mercury. The entire apparatus to be rotated - often simply called the 'lens' - has a close-fitting component (labelled 'Float' below) attached to its support ring. As the lens is lowered into the basin, it floats on the mercury in the same way as the coin in the photo above. Not shown are the rollers that keep the optic balanced in the horizontal plane during the rotation.

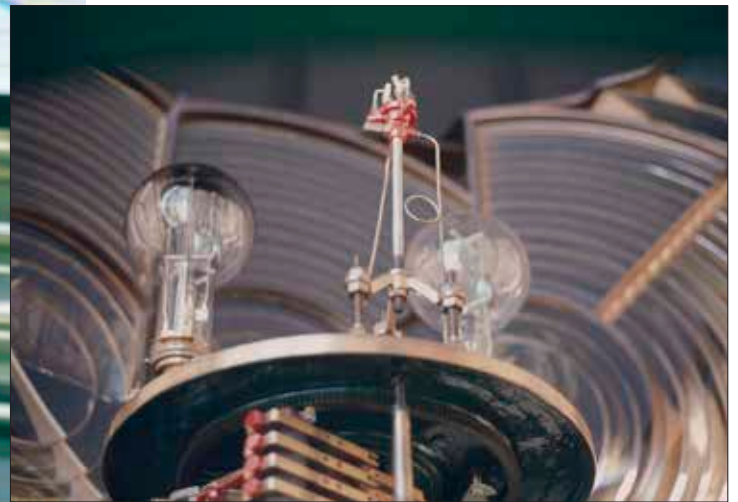


<sup>2</sup> Beck, para 7.2.2, p46.

<sup>3</sup> Chance Bros.: Modern Lighthouse Practice, 1910, p55.



LEFT: A typical light table that was in use throughout the Lighthouse Service for much of the 20th century. This one was seen at North Foreland in 1974. At the bottom, slightly out of view is a triangular base and on each of two vertices are identical 3.5 kW tungsten filament light bulbs having glass globes of about 200 mm (8 ins) diameter. Out of view and immediately behind the right hand bulb an acetylene gas burner is located on the third vertex of the base. The image BELOW shows the burner on a similar (but circular) light table at Pendeen lighthouse.

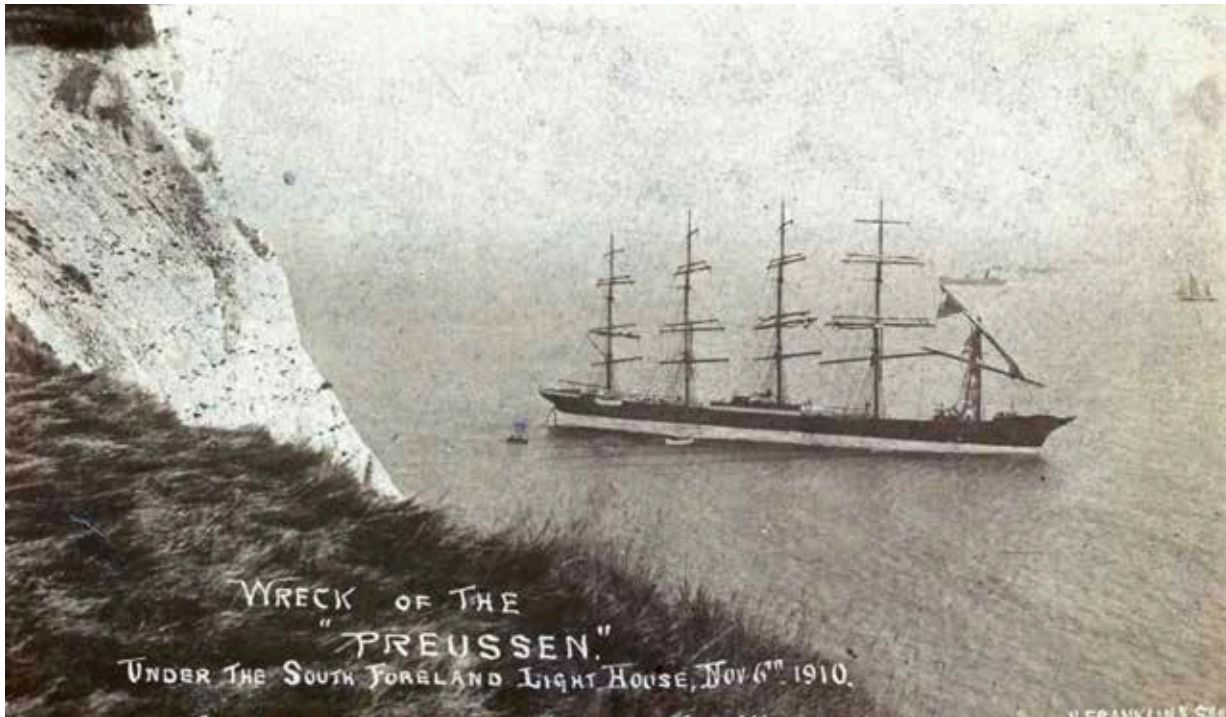


## The Light

A part from the desire to magnify a light for a maximum brilliance at sea, we have already discussed at length the numerous methods of illumination in lighthouses. Even with the great advance offered by carbon arc lamps, the equipment and methods required were far from ideal, requiring much attention and maintenance from the keepers. Only with the invention of the tungsten filament light bulb, with which most older readers will be familiar, did the reliability of the light source reach acceptable standards such that they remained in use for another five decades or more. These were, of course, best suited where there was a reliable supply of mains electricity. At South Foreland, the 1922 supply was of 10 kW and this was stepped down with a transformer in the oil cellar and this provided the necessary 100 V supply for the lamp.

To maintain uninterrupted illumination there were usually not one but two back-ups. If one of the bulbs should burn through its filament, the table would be turned as soon as possible so that

the reserve bulb was moved into the focal point of the optic. At first, in early installations such as South Foreland, this action was performed by the keepers, but later designs included an automatic function that detected the failure of the first and immediately switched the second into position. The second back-up was necessary, for if the electricity supply failed then a third source dependent upon a gas flame could be used, once again being switched into place automatically. These light tables operated in a horizontal plane, but many others were designed to work in the vertical plane, and this was the case at South Foreland, which has been difficult to photograph, but parts of which are seen in other photos in this book. The auto-changer installed by Chance Bros in 1928 was in use until automation of the light in 1969. Automation necessitated the removal of acetylene as back-up and a change to a smaller battery-powered 500 W lamp in case of mains failure. A clear photograph of the current lamp changer and a full explanation of its component parts is shown on p381.



ABOVE: An old postcard of the world's largest sailing ship aground beneath South Foreland lighthouse.

### Piccadilly of the Sea

A small booklet with this title<sup>1</sup> was published during 1910 that gave a brief history of the parish of St. Margaret's at Cliffe. It was an inspired title that did not reflect the content written by J. Harris. Yet the *Dover Express* contains within its pages countless reports of collisions, groundings and men lost overboard within easy sight of those white cliffs and not all of them were the result of storm or fog.

The author had in mind an image of the horse drawn traffic that had become infamous at this major landmark at the junction of Regent Street, Piccadilly and the Haymarket. At Dover it was not the cross-channel ferries between Dover and Calais that were attracting attention. It was the approach to the Downs that saw possibly hundreds of ships pass Deal each day. In 1910 the age of the sailing ship was almost at an end and the opportunity for the light keepers to have a grandstand view of events that would become historic, was changing. Two of those events which happened whilst the Knott Family are still in charge of the lights are worth recording here.

The first was the maiden voyage of Isambard Kingdom Brunel's gigantic steamship *Great Eastern* on Friday 9th September 1859 from where she was built at Millwall on the Thames to Weymouth. It was just four days before Brunel died of exhaustion and overwork. At 700 ft (213 m) long and 32,000 tons,

she was the largest ship ever built. She was designed to carry 4,000 passengers to North America, but her real success was as a trans-Atlantic cable layer.

The *Illustrated London News* devoted several pages to this first, fateful voyage in its edition published on the 17th September and one of its astonishing illustrations shows the view through a porthole as she passes South Foreland and Dover Castle. She never reached Weymouth. She suffered a boiler explosion off Hastings in which five men were killed.

The second event began just two years later in 1861 when five, fast, sailing clippers began to vie for the privilege of being the first to arrive in London Docks with the new crop of China tea. The crop had been picked, dried and packaged and was ready to sail by the end of May each year as the clippers assembled to jostle for an advantage over one another. It then became a race over 14,000 miles to be the first to arrive in London and claim the premium price. Each year was the same, and each voyage lasted 3 months. Two clippers stood out among the others; the *Tai ping* and the *Aerial*. In 1866 these two, together with a third clipper sailed on the same tide from Foochow and arrived in London on the same tide just 90 minutes apart. It was an astonishing feat and Henry Knott would have been there to witness it. He died before the *Cutty Sark* began her voyages in 1870, but the tea races were over. Steam ships and the Suez Canal had put an end to it.

<sup>1</sup> Harris, J.: *Picadilly of the Sea*.

On Sunday 6th November 1910 the light keepers watched in astonishment as the largest sailing ship in the world, *Preussen*, ran aground close to the South Foreland on her passage from Hamburg to Valparaiso. She had no less than 30 sails on square-rigged yards with 15 fore and aft sails between the masts. She was made entirely from iron, including her 5 masts, with 6 yards on each mast, and she was an impressive anachronism, which made a spectacular sight stranded close inshore to the South Foreland in Crab Bay. Inevitably she attracted hundreds of sightseers, but no one was in any danger and the rescue services didn't know what they should do as it soon became clear that she was too heavy for the large number of tugs that had gathered around her.

This all began after she had passed down Channel on the previous day under tow from a tug which was cast off when she reached Newhaven, as the crew began the enormous task of setting sails. During this complex operation the ship was not entirely under control and they became distracted sufficiently to collide with the Newhaven-Dieppe ferry causing considerable damage to her bow. *Preussen* turned back requesting access to Dover Harbour. Under tow by three tugs she paused off Dungeness to take on a Dover pilot and by 10 a.m. on Sunday morning all seemed normal. It was then that the Meteorological Office issued a gale warning and things began to go badly wrong. An extraordinarily graphic account is worth reading in the *Dover Express* under the heading "The crew who refused to be rescued." This German ship gradually disintegrated where she lay, but at the end of October 1911<sup>2</sup> she was still there, broken and deserted, whilst insurance companies fought over the claims that were the inevitable result.

### The Old Lighthouse has a New Owner

The change in ownership seemed to make little difference to the circumstances at the South Foreland Low Lighthouse - now retitled the Old Lighthouse. Algernon Bathurst was probably thankful that Anne Kirkin had agreed to remain in her position as Housekeeper when he became her new employer.

It was 8.30 on a Sunday morning late in November 1910 and Ann Kirkin was sitting at breakfast looking out of the window when she was surprised to see a fox running along the bank of the kitchen garden. She called her dog and chased the fox across the garden until it was cornered in

the scullery yard. With no way out, it leapt over a wall and headed for the coach house where again it was trapped. Leaping through a window, breaking it in its haste, it ran back over the kitchen garden and leapt the fence onto the Downs where it disappeared.

Half an hour later the fox met its end and became the property of Mr. Barry the landlord of the *Green Man*. When the full story became clear, he presented the head and brush to Anne Kirkin who had it treated and mounted, but she always said that although he was a fine fellow he was not as big as those she had seen in the West Country.<sup>3</sup> It was a story to relate to the guests who arrived to spend a convivial weekend at the Old Lighthouse. However, it invokes one final thought - where was the coach house and the scullery yard?

In 1891<sup>4</sup> Algernon Bathurst was the middle brother of three boys, Stuart, Algernon and Allen, and, together with their younger sister, Mary, they were all living with their parents at 19 Sinclair Road in Kensington. Algernon senior was a barrister, and his sons were following in his footsteps with Stuart already having been called to the Bar. None of them were married and all the boys had been registered in the Kensington District in 1862/1Q, 1863/2Q, and 1865/1Q respectively, although the census attributed them to Paddington.

Algernon senior wrote that he had been born in Somerset, Wilts in about 1822, but he was the fifth son of Lt. General Sir James Bathurst (1782-1850) and his wife Rosetta (née Alexander) who was born in Marylebone in 1839. For fifteen years from 1880 he had been the Revising Barrister at the Revision Court which met in Westminster Hall and at its last session in September 1894 he prophetically predicted his demise by commenting that it was his to be his last appearance.

Algernon senior died on Saturday 16th February 1895 and although his boys moved across London to the Tothill Fields in Westminster,<sup>5</sup> Rosetta took Mary to Folkestone where they acquired a property at 16 Castle Hill Avenue, which was not dissimilar to their corner-terraced house at Sinclair Road with its three floors and garret rooms. They enjoyed a privileged life with four members of staff, a housekeeper, two housemaids and a cook.<sup>6</sup> The house fronted a wide boulevard which still leads down to the Leas, just a short ten-minute walk away, and this was the

2 *Dover Express*, 27 October 1911.

3 *Dover Express* 2 & 16 December 1910.

4 1891 Census, RG12/39 Folio 168 p6.

5 1901 Census, RG13/94 Folio 74 p9.

6 1901 Census, RG13/847 Folio 131 p14.

epitome of the Edwardian promenade on a Sunday afternoon.

It was inevitable that Rosetta's boys would become frequent visitors to Folkestone and when details of the Old Lighthouse at South Foreland crossed Algernon's desk in the office at Lincoln's Inn Fields, as an Executor of James Neale's estate, it was the obvious place to buy. The census taken on the 2nd April 1911 found him there with Anne Kirkin as housekeeper and Edith Baker as the housemaid, but Algernon had three guests.

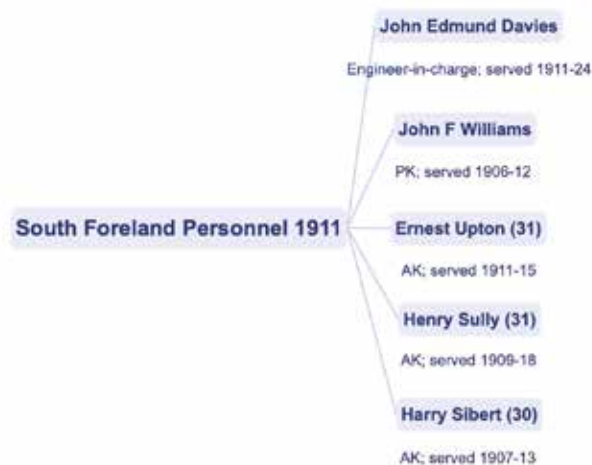
Two of them were a married couple with the strangest of names – St. Barbe Russell Sladen and his wife Dorothy. Her husband was a partner in the family firm of solicitors and at 38 he was an active member of the newly created Territorial Army and by the onset of war in 1914 he was a Major in the 5th Battalion of the Queen's (Royal West Surrey) Regiment. His diaries and correspondence have documented his army career in detail and it was as Lt. Colonel Sladen that he was killed by a shell whilst conducting an inspection near Passchendaele on the 12th March 1918. He is buried in the Ypres Reservoir Cemetery.

The third guest was another unmarried London-born gentleman from Holborn. He was a 57 year-old<sup>7</sup> stockbroker named Algernon Barnaby Coxhead, yet the 1901 census revealed nothing more about him beyond the fact that he was sharing a boarding house at 5 Gloucester Walk, Kensington with four elderly ladies from Quebec and Western Australia.<sup>8</sup>

In 1913 the *East Kent Times* drew attention to the new phenomenon of a lighthouse being sold by Trinity House as a private dwelling. It continued;

*“Such a lighthouse may be seen at South Foreland where the splendid outlook and striking situation at the top of celebrated cliffs together with the excellent patch of garden and ground attached to the lighthouse, quickly found an eager purchaser. There was not a lot of alteration needed to turn this old lighthouse into a delightful and very attractive seaside residence, for it was of a more modern style than some similar structures disposed of for ordinary dwellings. The lighthouses at Withernsea and Beachy Head, being of the sugar-loaf type are not quite so well adapted for the average family although they are now private dwellings.”<sup>9</sup>*

With the clouds of war beginning to gather over Europe those last weekends at the Old Lighthouse



became precious before the war intervened exactly one year later and put an end to the relaxed frivolity. Rosetta Bathurst died in Kensington towards the end of 1916/4Q aged 77, suggesting that she may have retained her property in Sinclair Road. The First World War changed lives permanently, but a little of the story of the Old Lighthouse has now been uncovered for future generations to read.

### The Four Light Keepers of 1911

Only half of the crew of 1911 was there on that fateful weekend in August 1914 still in the future of our story, but they all deserve their place here. The station still had an Engineer-in-Charge who has already been introduced as John Davies, but John F. Williams (1906-12) was the elder light keeper at 37 years old. Of the remaining three, two were 31 – Ernest Upton (1911-15) and Henry Sully (1909-14) – and Harry Sibert (1907-13) was the youngest at 30 years old, but he was also the longest serving keeper.

Harry Sibert's family was complicated, steeped in the tradition of lighthouse keeping, and when he came to St. Margaret's he was a bachelor. On the 12th September 1908 he travelled the length of England to west Cornwall where he married Flora Trehwella Wilson in Sennen Parish Church. Unusually, her father Richard had been an Assistant Keeper on the Longships for more than 20 years since his arrival as a young man of 21 before 1881. Whilst at South Foreland there were no children, but their first daughter was baptised Nesta May on the 16th May 1913 on St. Mary's in the Isles of Scilly suggesting that the family had moved to the Bishop Rock Light, but it could have been Round Island.

This move also highlights the intricate web that

7 GRO Index, 1853/4Q St. Pancras District.

8 1901 Census, RG13/21 Folio 72 p32.

9 *East Kent Times*, 6 August 1913.



was spun around a keeper's career as Henry Sully had been on the Bishop in 1901. When his elder brother, Arthur, married in St. Bride's Parish Church near Newport in Glamorganshire in July 1904, he gave an address in the Scilly Islands, and his brother, Herbert, signed the register as a witness - probably as his best man. Henry Sully returned to the islands himself in the following year to marry Florence Knott, but the parish registers for the islands are not available to me. I would not be surprised to find that Arthur was his best man.

Herbert's father-in-law was Arthur Knott, born on the South Foreland Lighthouse to George Knott and Catherine in 1857. He had begun his working life in Appledore as a shipwright, but in the 1880s he joined Her Majesty's Preventive Service as a boatman, and that was almost as bad as being a light keeper for its frequent moves to coastal towns anywhere in England and Wales. Florence had been born in Swansea and by 1891 the family were back in Dover. Arthur had been promoted to Preventive Officer when the family were living at the Parade on St. Mary's, Isles of Scilly in 1901, and it was here that young Florence caught the eye of a newly trained light keeper called Henry Sully.

They had come to South Foreland in the year following their marriage. They were still there when war was declared and Florence presented Bert with their first - possibly only - child, Arthur. However, it is satisfying to note that their time on the light pushed the boundary of the Knott Family tenure of the South Foreland light another four years further forward, but that might not have been the end of the matter.

Ernest Joseph Upton was yet another man born on a lighthouse in 1880. This time it was in Suffolk at the rather stately Lowestoft High Light in the Yarmouth Road, just 20 minutes walk from the town centre a little over a mile away. By 1901 he had completed his training and was lodging on the Parade, Hugh Town on St. Mary's, Isles of Scilly. He must have been on the Bishop Rock, but his lodging with Jane Phillips was nine doors away from the Knott Family, and may be a clue to the meeting of Florrie Knott with Henry Sully.

What brought Ernest to the Isle of Wight is unknown, but it was in Cowes that he met Annie Barton, daughter of a bricklayer who had been born in Northwood a mile from the West Cowes waterfront. They married on the Isle of Wight in 1907, but no marriage registers are available to view on-line to confirm the details of my research. They came to South Foreland in 1911, before the census,

and they came from Hartland Point in North Devon where their first daughter, Kathleen, had been born. A new daughter, Dorothy, joined her sister Kathleen at South Foreland later that year (1911) and their son Ronald was born there at the beginning of 1915. Annie was nearly 30 years old when she married Ernest, and with the addition of Ronald she was now 37. As if to underline that fact there was no further birth registered for Annie née Barton.

It is tempting to assign the role of senior keeper to John Williams simply because of his age, but in this case that is misleading. It transpires that John had no particular connection with lighthouses beyond the fact that he was born and lived in the neighbourhood of Poplar. In 1881 Byron Street<sup>10</sup> was in a district teeming with people, a short walk from the East India Docks and the Trinity Buoy Wharf. He may have grown up with Catherine Drury. They may have shared the same school, but although her home in Albert Street<sup>11</sup> is no longer there the census shows that the two streets were not far from one another. They married locally in Queen Victoria's Jubilee Year, and were still in the district five years later, by which time John must have been a trained light keeper and ready for his first appointment. This reasoning makes him, not the senior LK, but the most junior one, and South Foreland was probably their first light as a family.

John and Catherine stayed on the light for 5-6 years. They were in step with a similar pattern for the other three keepers, but only two of them - Sully and Upton - would be there on the 4th August 1914 when war was declared against Germany. Sadly, there is a large gap in the keepers' record from 1911 to 1920.

## Dark Clouds Over Europe

The crowds began to gather on the Leas and the East Cliff at Folkestone from about noon on Friday 10th July 1914 for the arrival of the Royal Navy's First Battle Squadron. For almost an hour nothing moved on the water when suddenly there was a stir among the crowd. Something had been seen. It was nothing more than the 'destroyer' *Bellona* arriving from the Downs, which dropped anchor west of the southeast pier. Another hour went by and nothing happened and rumours began to circulate that they were at Deal and not coming until late afternoon.

Soon after 2 o'clock the rumour was proved

<sup>10</sup> 1881 Census, RG11/501 Folio 91 p46.

<sup>11</sup> 1881 Census, RG11/503 Folio 17 p26.

wrong as a thick haze of smoke was detected on the eastern horizon. Soon two grey hulls could be clearly seen followed by six others, steaming in a line from South Foreland down Channel at a distance from the coast. The crowd was now alive with expectation and growing even larger as the squadron began to turn to starboard abreast of the Leas bandstand, and circled around to head towards Dover. Suddenly they turned towards the shore in an impressive manoeuvre that formed two lines with HMS *Marlborough* to the front.

As if to one command, all the ships dropped anchor together with a huge splash and the raucous rattle of chains through the hawses about a mile from the shore. Within seconds pinnaces touched the water, and the one from the Flagship was heading to the southeast pier<sup>12</sup> to collect the Mayor of Folkestone and his small entourage of dignitaries. It was just before 3 o'clock and the Navy was at their best, on show to the public.

Vice Admiral Sir Lewis Bayly, with his senior officers, entertained his guests for nearly an hour in his spacious day-room at the stern of the Flagship, whilst quietly, and without fuss, a contingent of naval police went ashore to meet their civilian colleagues from the local force. Among that group was Petty Officer Frederick Rowland Knott, grandson of George Knott and a Ship's Corporal (policeman) on the *Marlborough* under the orders of the Master at Arms. This was a precaution that was sorely necessary as quietly sitting there, riding at anchor, were 6,588 officers and men of the Royal Navy – if their crews had been complete. The reputation of 'Jolly Jack Tar' was a challenge for any town.

The residents of a seaside holiday resort could be excused for not knowing that the *Bellona* was a light cruiser and not a destroyer. Perhaps her four funnels and diminutive size had misled them to believe otherwise. Compared to the eight battleships that were now on view, she was small at just 3,500 tons and I wonder how many of the spectators knew that they were looking at the results of the *Dreadnought* Programme that had swept aside all the old and useless Victorian vessels. Up to four new ones were built each year from 1905 and this squadron had representatives from 1909 in *St. Vincent* and *Superb*; 1910 saw *Collingwood* and *Vanguard* (the former built in Devonport), whilst 1911 added *Colossus*, *Hercules* and *Neptune*. The Flagship *Marlborough* was the newest ship in the squadron

and the largest ship, a sister to the *Iron Duke* now Flagship to the Grand Fleet under the leadership of Admiral John Jellicoe. She had been commissioned at Devonport in March where she was built and had been completed and accepted by the Navy in June. Her paint was barely dry, as the old salts would have said, and, with her squadron, would soon be seeking out the German High Seas Fleet that culminated in the Battle of Jutland. For now, she was visiting Folkestone as guests of the Town Council and it would be a weekend to remember.

The *Folkestone Herald* summarised the events during the following week; it was an astonishing programme that would not be attempted today. No incidents were reported by the police. There were entertainments, sports and grand meals, at all times, all over the town in clubs, halls and hotels. The ships were open to the public during Saturday and Sunday and no doubt Fred Knott was allocated a spell of duty during that period. His 'oppo'<sup>13</sup> on the *Hercules*, Petty Officer Hogan was adept at wheelbarrow races. In three races he won £2-5s for himself, and probably didn't live that down for quite a while.

On Saturday afternoon Folkestone was the coastal marker for an air race from Hendon Airfield to Paris and back for a prize of £500. Fifteen aircraft took part and it had been only five years since Bleriot staggered across the Channel and crash-landed in a field between Dover and South Foreland. What a weekend it had been!

On Monday afternoon, the Squadron recovered their anchors and set sail westward at about 2 o'clock, heading for Spithead and another Fleet Review.

## The Onset Of War

As First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, was in Admiralty House on the evening of Tuesday 4th August 1914 as the clock ticked away on the Belgian ultimatum. He later wrote in his memoirs;

*It was 11 o'clock at night and the windows of the Admiralty were thrown wide open in the warm night air. Under the roof from which Nelson had received his orders were gathered a small group of admirals and captains and a cluster of clerks, pencil in hand, waiting. Along the Mall from the direction of the Palace the sound of an immense concourse singing "God save the King" floated in. On this deep wave there broke the chimes of Big Ben; and, as the first*

<sup>12</sup> This is probably now known as the eastern harbour arm.

<sup>13</sup> Naval slang for 'opposite number', i.e. a colleague of equivalent standing.

*stroke of the hour boomed out, a rustle of movement swept across the room. The war telegram, which meant "Commence hostilities against Germany," was flashed to the ships and establishments under the White Ensign all over the world. I walked across the Horse Guards Parade to the Cabinet room and reported to the Prime Minister and the Ministers who were assembled there that the deed was done."*

Henry and Florence Sully had a drama of their own at South Foreland Lighthouse. She was expecting to give birth at any moment, but that moment took 7 days to arrive. Arthur Henry Sully was born in a world at war on Tuesday 11th August 1914, but it was almost another three weeks before Henry walked into Dover to inform the Registrar.

With the country at war, Principal Keepers at light stations had been informed by Trinity House to observe a strict neutrality, which made little difference to South Foreland as it seems to have been 'business as usual' with no clear idea of what was different. The lighthouses remained fully manned, but eventually many would be extinguished, and only lit when orders were received to light them for a specific reason - normally, an important passing convoy. It is unclear how the initial wave of patriotism responding to Lord Kitchener's call to arms affected the light keepers. They were predominantly young men with young families and of course they were seen as essential to the war effort, but little is known of the detail at each individual light and South Foreland was no exception.

It is also unclear what happened to Henry Sully and Ernie Upton, for it was possible to mount a watch with just two men, as had always been the practice at North Foreland. John Davies must have still been there to maintain the engines. The situation was not ideal, but this was war. It could be done.

It wasn't long before Dover Harbour was transformed into a naval base as scores of ships of all shapes and sizes began to assemble within the confines of the piers. Both lights on the Admiralty Pier and South Pier had a two-man crew in 1911, and William Warder was there after his spell at the South Foreland with Edmond Knott. We do not know if these lighthouses were manned during the war, but life would have been extremely difficult without light keepers.<sup>14</sup> Belgian refugees were landed at the pier amid scenes of total chaos, and in December 1914 two undetected German aircraft each dropped

two small bombs close to the Admiralty Pier. These are now considered to be the first aerial bombs ever dropped on England.

With war came censorship, and the newspapers descended into the realms of patriotic stories and domestic trivia sprinkled with essential announcements. Soon, the Military Authorities in Dover declared that the Shakespeare Cliff and the South Foreland were prohibited areas and anyone who thought that they should have access to the areas, for whatever reason, needed to apply for a permit. That edict must have affected the lighthouse keepers and their families as well as the supply of necessary stores.

Another of the 'exigencies of war' that impacted the lighthouse was conscription. When this was introduced in 1916 there was a long list of people who believed that it didn't apply to them. Local panels were set up to review every case on its merits. Around St. Margaret's it was mainly farmers who attempted to retain at least one able-bodied man, usually a waggoner, to help around the farm. However one application came from Mr. C. J. Jones of St. Margaret's Central Fruit Stores who applied for exemption for a Mr. H. D. Horn who was 32 years old. Although Horn was a market gardener, he supplied coke to the South Foreland lighthouse, and on that basis the application was approved.<sup>15</sup> The 1911 census told a slightly different story. Charles Jones was a village-born lad who, at 31, was a greengrocer and coal merchant. His younger wife was Emme, who had been born in Penge on the southern fringe of London. Lodging with the family and assisting in the business was Herbert Horne, who at 26 had also been born in Penge. So the newspaper report is almost right, but there is a slightly different emphasis on the story when it is known that Herbert was Jones' brother-in-law. To be fair, however, five years had elapsed between the two records and circumstances had probably changed.

Food of a different kind was the motivation behind the application of the Folkestone Food Planning Committee to seek permission from the C-in-C, Dover Patrol for fishing to resume from the area. Vice-Admiral Bacon agreed to fishing boats being allowed to fish offshore between Beachy Head and South Foreland provided they did not exceed one mile from shore, and he agreed that lobster pots could be used, but lobsters were the quarry and not an unknown and unwelcome mine.

As late as July 1918 there was a flurry of court

<sup>14</sup> Humphries, Roy: *Dover Patrol 1914-18*. No detail is given.

<sup>15</sup> *Dover Express*, 02 June 1916.

cases involving residents of St. Margaret's showing lights from their doors and windows. Several fines of 5 shillings were meted out, but one particularly argumentative case involved the owner of South Foreland House and resulted in a fine of £2. Yet nothing was said throughout those war years of the lighthouse operating on greatly reduced power. However, even that reduced light was a welcome sight to the scores of vessels that constituted the Dover Patrol, and had to find the safety of the harbour under difficult conditions.

With the Armistice in November 1918, the nation stopped. Yes, there was a celebration that no more young men would be lost, but there was a sudden realization of exactly what had been lost. Every family in the land had been touched by suffering of some sort. Families were scattered. Wives had discovered work and independence, whilst their men fought for their lives and their freedom. Technology had been pushed forward and new demands would be made, but one thing was certain: every community would have a memorial and life would never be the same again.

As the lighthouse reverted to normal operation and the South Foreland downs were reopened to public access, the question for this book remains unanswered. Who were the light keepers during those dark years and how was the light operated?

The only evidence available are handwritten scraps of paper from an unknown source hidden safely away in the St. Margaret's Village Archive. Three names are quoted – Edmund Davies, 1912, 1914, 1917 and 1924, and E. S. Pells and H. H. Sully, both 1918. My reader will already know that three keepers have traditionally been accepted as a typical lighthouse crew allowing a proper watch system to operate. The scant evidence suggests that Henry Herbert Sully was there throughout the war years, and Upton and Pells were the colleagues who kept him company. It has already been explained that Sully married Florence Knott from Dover, a niece of my ancestor George Knott so their family tie to Dover was quite strong.

Ernest Stevens Pells, however, was born at the Lizard light in 1881 when his father was light keeper to James Core, the light's Engineer-in-Charge. In 1918 he was 27 years old and had married Laura Baker in the early summer of 1906 (2Q) in the Poole area not far from his father who had retired to Weymouth after his service ended around the same time on the new Portland Bill light. The first child born to Ernest and Laura was registered in the Weymouth District whilst Ernie served on the

Portland Breakwater light, but during the next few turbulent years the couple found their way to Dover, whilst Ernie took up an appointment at South Foreland. A son named Sydney John was born on the light on the 8th June 1916, but it was a week later before Ernie walked into Dover to register his new arrival.

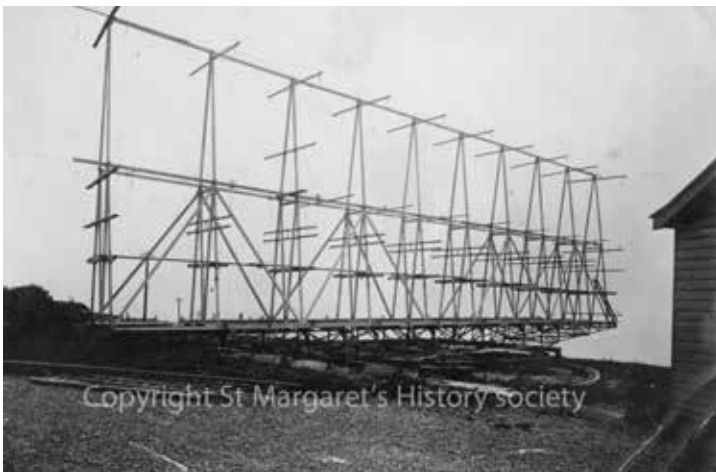
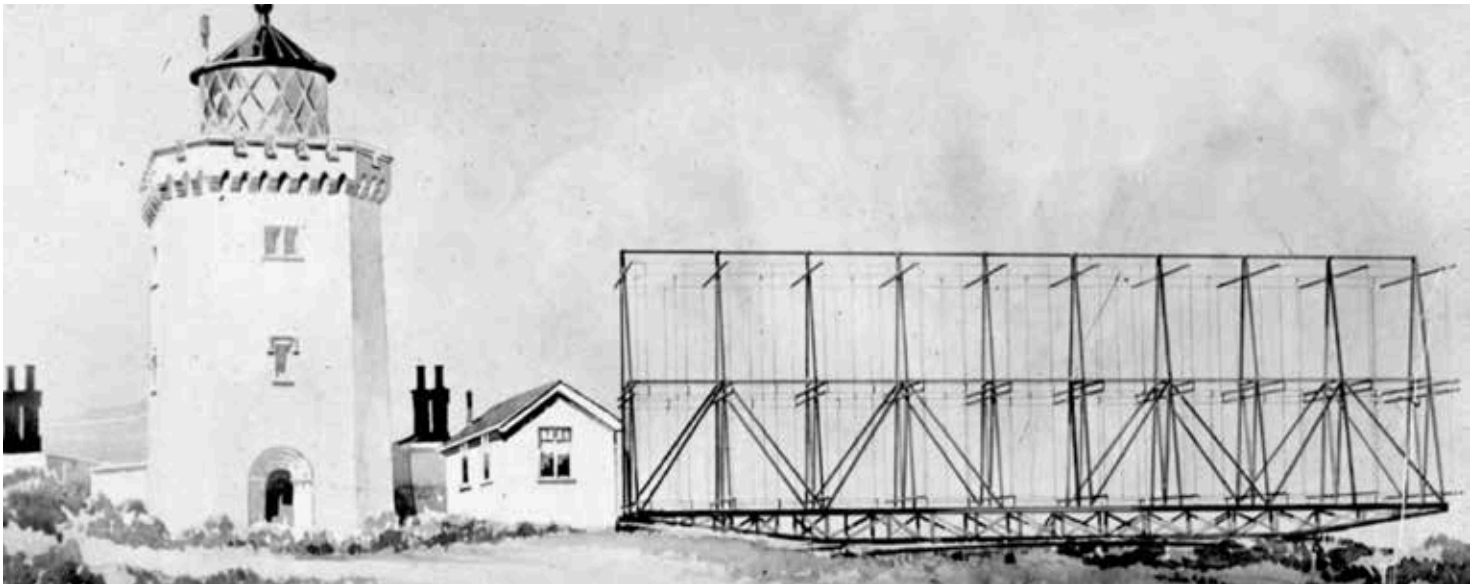
The inclusion of the name, John Edmund Davies is easily explained as he was the Engineer-in-Charge of the light in 1911 and there could not have been any light without his presence and maintenance skills through the dark years of the war. It is clear that his dates have been extracted from some unknown document, but it represents a continuous service to the light throughout the years of war and beyond. As has already been said, he came to the light following the retirement of James Core, but instead of bringing a wife, he brought his unmarried sister Rhoda to keep house for him. His must have been a tragic story as in 1891 he was at home in Hamilton Terrace, Steynton, Milford as a 27 year-old bachelor mechanical engineer.<sup>16</sup> In 1901 he had charge of the Lizard light, but he was already a widower. Without any other clues, his common names preclude any realistic chance of uncovering that story. He had turned 50 when war was declared so it made sense to retain his knowledge and his skills in that location.

When James Core retired he chose a house at 12 Sydney Street in Walmer, which is well back from the seafront and parallel to the main railway line. A visit there today finds a quite confusing mix of housing styles and the house that was bought by Mr. & Mrs. Core and known to them as Arakon Lodge, may no longer be there. On Saturday 17th January 1920, James Core died and he was buried, not at Walmer, but in the churchyard of St. Margaret's at Cliffe on the following Tuesday 20th January. An announcement in the *Dover Express* on the following Friday described James Core as "the Chief Engineer of the Trinity House at the South Foreland Lighthouse for many years."

His once impressive memorial, sadly now broken, carries the words, "**He Was A Good Man.**"

---

16 1891 Census RG12/4533 Folio 6 p6.



ABOVE: The Marconi rotating antenna in front of the High Light.  
 LEFT CENTRE: Viewed from the front of the lighthouse, the antenna can be seen on its circular mount. The shed seen in the top image is visible on the right.  
 LEFT BOTTOM: Looking down from the lighthouse gallery the outline of the circular mounting can be discerned in the grass as a crop mark.

### Marconi's Direction-Finding Antenna

Marconi was quick to exploit all the possibilities his inventions offered, one of which was the transmission of radio signals to ships at sea to enable navigators to fix their bearings. Trying out different methods, at South Foreland in 1923 he installed a rotating wireless beam transmitter that operated in a manner similar to a modern radar antenna. He was able to receive its signals on his own steam yacht up to 150 km distant, although the optimum distance was decided to be about half as much.

The equipment was mounted on a circular concrete base about 11 m in diameter, the site of which can still be seen from the lighthouse gallery as a crop mark on the lawns just in front of the lighthouse (see the photo, left bottom).

In such a rapidly developing field of technology, the equipment was quickly outdated and so its operational life was short. Though partially excavated in the past, the site remains largely untouched since it was filled in after the equipment was removed and sold for scrap metal in the 1930s. It is likely that much of the original foundation remains in place.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> National Trust Conservation Management Plan, p159-161.

## An Intimate View

William Beardsell was born in Stockport in 1865 the eldest son of Joseph Beardsell. He went to Manchester Grammar School and became a successful merchant in Madras in India. On his retirement to England, King George V conferred a knighthood on him on the 12 August 1920. He settled at St. Margaret's where he bought the Lower Lighthouse and established a somewhat eccentric estate. After failing to transport a windmill to the site from elsewhere in Kent, he decided to have a replica smock mill built by a firm of millwrights from Canterbury, which they completed in 1928.<sup>1</sup>

*"This is a rough account of the 'Middle Buildings' that lay between the two lighthouses, as given to me by the senior staff of Sir William Beardsell's Estate at the old or Lower Lighthouse at St. Margaret's Bay when I worked for him from 1936 to 1940. My predecessor was the late Mr. Frank Simmons."*<sup>2</sup>

*"The Old Lighthouse isn't so old, being only about three years older than the present one. The two lighthouses worked in conjunction with one another, being known as the High and Low Lights, the idea being that any ships coming down Channel outside the Goodwin Sands would know they were clear to pass towards shore when the two lights were directly in line.*

*"The Middle Buildings were, as you might say, the heart of the matter containing engine and boiler rooms, fuel store, workshop, furnaces and also four cottages for the engineers. Behind the Middle Building, on the same level, were two flat concrete surfaces, one about a foot higher than the other, but joined by a step and all around the outside was a low wall and beneath the whole was a reservoir. The flat surfaces were for cooling hot water which was pumped up on to the upper flat and then cascaded over the step to the lower one, which then went through the grating into the reservoir below where it was cycled around to use again.*

*"Although I was told at the time, I cannot remember the type of engines used in the engine room. I do know there was a huge pit for the flywheel to revolve in. Apparently the engine had been shown at the Paris Exhibition in 1863. They were steam engines driving generators of some sort to make electricity. Apparently they used pencil shaped carbons to produce the light by making the carbon arc from one pencil to another. Quite a number of the carbons could be found around the house and grounds.*

*"Until Sir William had it demolished in the 1930's, there was within the seaward boundary a long low brick*

*building about 100 yards long with no windows and only an occasional door in the side. This was used when filled with steam or smoke, to test the penetrating power of the light generated. By putting the light at one end, flashing the light along the inside of the building and marking the wall, they could get a good idea of similar conditions found in thick, foggy weather.*

*At the S.W. end of the middle building is the well house. The well, nearly 300 feet deep, goes down to sea level and is laddered and staged from top to bottom (I have looked down into it). The well obtained its water from the same spring that flows into the sea under the lighthouse today. The well was sealed over during the last war. About 40 yards south of the well and a few feet from the cliff edge was a concrete slab about 12 feet square. This apparently was the cap of another well going almost to the base of the cliff which again had ladders and staging all the way down. This was involved with an experimental foghorn near the base of the cliff. When it became disused it came in very handy for dodging the coastguards of that time.*

*When Sir William lived in the Low Lighthouse, there were four cottages at the Middle Building. Nos 1 & 4 were the living quarters of the Head Gardener, Mr. Sutton and the Chauffeur Mr. Tonbridge. Nos 2 & 3 were used as a paint shop and a store room. No. 3 was used in the winter months mainly. In the autumn work was done on the windmill to make it safe during the winter months. The windmill was part of the lighthouse estate occupied by Sir William's sister Mrs. Scott. In winter, even with the brake full on, you could stop the sweep going around in fairly high winds. To correct this we used to take out all the shutters from both the leading and trailing edges of the sweeps, also all the operating rods for the same, leaving just the skeleton of the sweeps as they are today. All these shutters and operating rods were stored in No.3 cottage where they were painted or cleaned ready to be replaced in the spring. The final safety precaution was to place two pieces of oak timber 6ins x 6ins x 2ins through the main drive wheel, wedging it tight so that it couldn't move. This was under the bowl at the top.*

*During the early 1930s Sir William had the idea of making a walled garden which he wanted made to look 'old' with arches, old doors, pillars etc., so the old light test building as demolished. Apart from the plan for the walled garden, all the building and laboring was done by the estate staff. Everyone was an amateur. There was not a bricklayer among us. The light building was pulled down, all the bricks cleaned of old cement, to be used in the making of the walls. This walled garden was built in the winter months only, in addition to normal winter work, over a period of six years. It was completed in the winter of 1939-40. These were winters of very hard work, but when looking back, very worthwhile. The sad part of this story is that Sir William died a year later, the first winter he had spent in this country for years.*

*I walked through the gardens several times just after the war. Although it was dilapidated, it still retained its peacefulness and beauty.*

*The Middle Building has gone now, but the lighthouse still stands. I wonder if the experts who examined the cliff after the big cliff fall under the tower will be right, that the Low Light will still be there on the peninsula after the cliff has fallen away on either side." ♦*

1 An extract from an article by Lorraine Sencicle and published in the Dover Historian at [www.doverhistorian.com](http://www.doverhistorian.com)

2 This article is reproduced courtesy of the St. Margaret's History Society at [www.stmargaretshistory.org.uk](http://www.stmargaretshistory.org.uk).