

# Forelands Lighthouses

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

## 1600-1700

Lights shown on the Forelands are amongst the first to use dedicated structures we now call lighthouses; Entrepreneurs recognize ways to fund lighthouses now unrelated to Christian institutions; The provision of lighthouses becomes a business.

The attention concentrated upon the coast of East Anglia in the early decades of the 17th century tells us much. Inspection of the map today with its rounded, sandy coastline and absence of submerged rocks might lead us to wonder what all the fuss was about. However, this type of coastline is prone to frequent and significant change because of the shifting sands and coastal erosion, and there is much evidence to support the idea that there were many more hazards to ships that hugged the coastline in the 17th century than there are today, especially in the absence of guiding lights. The coasters shuttling back and forth on constantly variable bearings - so as to round the great kidney bean that was East Anglia - were dealing with extensive, featureless flat landscapes with minimal landmarks and sandbanks that shifted position with every storm.

In 1618, a patent was granted to Sir William Erskine and his partner Sir John Meldrum to erect lighthouses at Winterton - the apex of the East Anglian coastline for coasters making way to the north and south. Strangely, they did so despite objections from Trinity House who had apparently decided to do the same, clearly showing that

there was no clearly established system for the management and administration of lighthouses at such an early date in English history.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Stevenson records that besides a single light at Winterton village, they had two further lights two miles north at Wintertonness - probably a leading light arrangement. The two men had found profit in keeping lights, and Meldrum went on to establish more lights on the North and South Forelands.

For many years men have been steadfastly keeping lights on the heights of the South Foreland, the closest point of approach of mainland England to France, from where, on a clear night, a distinct view of the lights of Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne is obtained. The South Foreland lighthouse is located about one mile south of St. Margaret's Bay on top of a 100 m (300 ft) chalk cliff. The upper tower, the one that we now know as the South Foreland Lighthouse, stands on rising ground well back from the site of the lower tower where the sad remains of a once fine lighthouse still stand dangerously close to the cliff edge.

<sup>1</sup> David Alan Stevenson: *The World's Lighthouses Before 1820*, p99.



Charles the second by the grace of god King of England Scotland France & Ireland  
Defender of the Faith &c To all to whom these presents shall come greeting Wherby  
our late deare & royall father of blessed memory by his Letters patent under his great  
Seale of England bearing Date the 13<sup>th</sup> day of ~~May~~ April in the thirtieth year  
of his Reigne (writing as therein is written) Did for the Consideration therein expressed  
nominat<sup>e</sup> & appoint Gerrard his Esq<sup>r</sup> to maintain & continue the said Light  
houses & Lights there & yett erect & being at Winton townesse & Orfordness in the Countie  
of Norfolk & Suffolke (being five in number) & so alter renew remove & change the  
said Light houses or any of them at occasion should require so receive the Dutie paym<sup>t</sup>  
thereof according to the intent of the same Letters patent for & during the Term therein  
mentioned & hereafter in these presents expressed And our said late royall father  
by his said Letters patent for him his heirs & Successors Did give & graunt unto the said  
Gerrard his Esq<sup>r</sup> his Exors Adms<sup>r</sup> & Assignes full & libery licence power and  
Authority that hee hee his heirs Exors Adms<sup>r</sup> & Assignes at this their  
owne cost & charges should & might lawfully maintain continue alter renew  
remove & change the said Light houses & Lights as aforesaid And for the good  
charges formerly susteyned & borne by Sir John Meldrum Kn<sup>t</sup> deceased & from thence  
to thence hereafter to beo susteyned & borne by the said Gerrard his Esq<sup>r</sup>  
Adms<sup>r</sup> & Assignes in & about the erecting maintainig altering renewing  
removing & exchanging of the said Light houses & Lights erected at Winton townesse  
and Orfordness aforesaid our late royall father Did for him his heirs & Successors

ABOVE: Letters Patent: This image shows the first page of a licence awarded to Sir Edward Turnor by Charles II on 15th October 1661 for lighthouses at Winterton Ness and Orford Ness. The licence was granted for a term of sixty years and followed the expiry of an earlier one to Gerard Gore that was bought by Sir John Meldrum in 1618 and set alongside a similar one permitting the lighthouses at North and South Forelands providing Meldrum with significant income.

The date at which a light was first shown on the South Foreland is uncertain. In his authoritative book, David Alan Stevenson<sup>2</sup> states that in 1387 a hermit was recorded as dwelling on this headland, but there was no mention of lights. Hague, possibly using the same source, also records a hermitage of St. Margaret's Strait, Kent, near the site of the present South Foreland (lighthouse) that was probably associated with the showing of a light.<sup>3</sup> However, in medieval times the maintenance of coastal lights had come to be considered a Christian duty, and monks and priests maintained lights, and said masses for the souls of lost sailors. Accepting that there is no known proof, we can be confident that the presence of practitioners of Christianity in coastal locations was generally associated with the showing of lights and these are now called Ecclesiastical lights. We have seen in Chapter 2 that they were almost entirely eliminated during the Reformation.

References to the St Margaret's Hermitage often come from the work of Rotha Clay<sup>4</sup> who begins Chapter 4, "Light-Keepers on the Sea Coast" with a quotation from the time of Henry III:

*"It is a pious work to help Christians exposed to the dangers of the sea, so that they may be brought into the haven out of the waves of the deep."*<sup>5</sup>

Without mentioning lights, it is clear that this was the method in question. Thus, we read that an indulgence of 40 days was granted in 1367 by Simon de Langham, Archbishop of Canterbury<sup>6</sup>, to those who would support the "poor hermit, Brother Nicholas de Legh, of the hermitage of St. Margaret's Strait, Kent." Nicholas would display a lantern in a cave each night to guide mariners safely past the dangerous Goodwin Sands.

Contrary to the modern view that lights were an obvious asset, the same view was not prevalent in the middle period. The showing of any lights was risky, for they could easily bring pirates and enemy raiders safely into the harbours and coastal towns.

2 Stevenson: p24.

3 Hague and Christie, p26.

4 Clay, Rotha Mary, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*. Methuen & Co. London, 1914. pp51-2.

5 Patent Rolls of the Reign of Henry III, 1232 to 1247, Reprinted by HMSO 1901, p392.

6 Archbishop Langham was originally a monk of the Benedictine order who rose to high office as Treasurer of England (1360), Bishop of Ely (1362), Chancellor of England (1363), Archbishop of Canterbury (1366) and Cardinal of San Sisto Vecchio (1368), appointed by Pope Urban V. *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1885-1900, Volume 32 - Langham, Simon by Charles Lethbridge Kingsford.

By the end of the 15th century the risks were thought to have diminished somewhat. In those days St. Margaret's Bay was almost circular in shape with a narrow entrance to the sea. Extraordinary climatic conditions during the 18th century and later harbour works at Dover, which altered the set of the tides, caused serious erosion along this coast leaving the Bay less indented today. The cave of de Legh has probably long since disappeared beneath the waves, with the many cliff falls since those early days.

A century or so before Nicholas de Legh, guilds of mariners had been formed at the principal ports in England and by the end of the 15th century three of these, by then well established, became corporate bodies bearing the name Trinity House. The London branch of this foundation, the Trinity House of Deptford Strond, was formally incorporated by Henry VIII in 1514. Then in 1566, it was charged by Act of Parliament with the responsibility for lights and seamarks:

*"... whereby the Daungers may be avoyded and escaped, and Shippes the better come into their Portes without Peryll".*

The Corporation of Trinity House was at first reluctant to build lighthouses that were considered likely to help the King's enemies. They could make it easy for "wreckers" to display false lights and it was claimed that light dues would be a burden on shipowners and merchants!

Intent on combating the dangers to ships around the Kent coast, some imaginative people shone a spotlight upon the Goodwins. The first recorded private proposal for a light-tower in East Kent was made by Gawen Smith in 1580, however his scheme for placing a beacon "fyrme and staide" upon the Goodwin Sands, was never realised. He planned that, should there still be a wreck upon the sands, his structure would provide an abiding place for the shipwrecked. Should Good Queen Bess have given him leave to go ahead with his scheme, he promised to one day deliver to her hand "Grasse, herbe, or flower" grown upon the sands and then to prove the soil firm enough for his tower to bear the weight of cannon for the defence of the channel! This ambitious application was carefully folded and endorsed "the demands of Gawen Smith touching the placing of a beacon on the Goodwyne Sandes." It was then duly filed away for posterity.

In 1623 John Coke (later Sir John), a "nautical expert", was backed by English and Dutch mariners when he also suggested a means by which a light might be exhibited upon the Goodwins. The exact





ABOVE: Sir John Meldrum, lessee of the two lights at North and South Foreland from 1636

nature of the proposal is not known but it is believed to have been a scheme for a moored vessel, showing a light by night. Whatever the idea was, it too was apparently shelved.

1629 saw yet another petition, this time from Captain Thomas Wilbraham, Mayor of Rochester, and others. This group of men prepared at their own cost to establish:

*“... a light upon the main at or near the Goodwins whereby every meanly skilful mariner could on the darkest night, safely pass the place of danger”.*

The term “on the main” is thought to indicate another proposal for a floating light of some description. Whatever the intended form of the beacon the petition proposed that English ships passing through the Downs should pay light dues of one penny a ton, and every “foreigner” three halfpence. Hardy<sup>7</sup> believed that this latest scheme failed because lights, for which a tax had already been demanded, had already been established on the Forelands! Hardy went on to describe these lights.

*“These were, neither of them, very elaborate buildings, nor should we fancy, efficient lights; each was built of timber and plaster, and had at its top a*

7 Hardy, W J: *Lighthouses - Their History and Romance* (1895).

*lantern in which were stuck a few candles.”*

There was certainly a light of some sort exhibited at North Foreland from 1499, and in the early 17th century it was said to be a half-timbered farmhouse with a lantern in the roof. The more generally accepted view is that light towers were not erected on the Forelands until 1634 when a Patent was granted to Sir John Meldrum.

## Letters Patent

Such was the loss of ships on the Goodwins that Shipowners, Masters and Merchants in 1634 petitioned Trinity House for a light to indicate the Goodwin Sands. Trinity House, who at that time were newcomers to the management of lighthouses and were really little more than a seamen’s charity, rejected the idea out of hand claiming, amongst other things, that the light would be more likely to guide England’s enemies to her shores. The Corporation declined saying that the introduction of a toll would be a grievance to navigation and that if they thought that a light had been necessary they would have put one there.

The story goes that the King himself was then approached. Perhaps the King was already aware of having a lighthouse owner in his midst. The result was that a Letter Patent was subsequently granted to Sir John Meldrum.

John Meldrum was born in Scotland around 1584 and became an enthusiastic servant to both King James I and his son King Charles I. He was a professional soldier who served in Ulster from 1610-13 and in the Netherlands from 1613-22. His successes must have pleased the King and Meldrum was granted lands in County Fermanagh and was knighted in 1622.

In 1618, he bought a half share of a patent for a lighthouse patent already established at Wintertonness whereby one penny per ton of cargo could be charged on passing ships. It is clear that the revenue was substantial for the patent was complained about in the parliament of 1624, but the king refused to consent to its abolition.

In 1635, now with Charles I on the throne, Meldrum had become aware of the problems caused by the Goodwin Sands and with his previous experience of lighthouses applied for and in 1636 was granted another patent for lighthouses on the North and South Forelands.

Faced with Meldrum’s *fait accompli*, Trinity House approached the Privy Council and offered to take



ABOVE: Robert Osboldston Junior (d1715), generous benefactor to the Greenwich Hospital. He bequeathed his land and the ownership of the Forelands lighthouses to the charity upon his death. Image in the public domain: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Robert\\_Osboldston,\\_d.1715-RMG-BHC2924.tiff](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Robert_Osboldston,_d.1715-RMG-BHC2924.tiff)

the three towers over, but they were told that their proposal 'comes out of time'. Both the North Foreland and the South Foreland towers remained under common ownership and their stories are virtually inseparable.

The two lighthouses on the white cliffs of Dover were at first merely huts constructed of timber and plaster. On top of these was an open platform where a coal fire was kept burning in a cast iron grate. In return for the relatively small outlay and a £20 per annum rental Sir John was entitled to charge a halfpenny per ton of cargo carried past the light. Soon he was making no less than £1,900 per annum and Trinity House, smarting with the knowledge that it might have been they who were making the profits, sourly complained to the King about profiteering.

Sir John employed an agent in Deal whose job was to manage the North and South Foreland lights, and to whom the light dues were finally paid after

collection in Dover and other ports by the respective harbourmaster. The light dues were not always easy to collect. It appears in some cases that the harbour masters were sending the toll money to a rival lighthouse owner, William Bullock at Dungeness.

By 1640, Meldrum seems to have become at odds with his royal master and wrote a letter to the King that still survives in which he spoke of having served Charles and his father over a period of 36 years with ...

*"... the zeal I have had to Your Maiesties Fathers service in Ireland, in settling the Province of Ulster; and to your own service at Rochell".*

For his role in the Ireland he had been granted lands in Fermanagh and Donegal. However with England now becoming engulfed in civil war he was highly critical of the ...

*"... rashnesse, arrogancy, and ambition of some presumptuous spirits, who have drawn Your Maiesty upon ruinous precipices, which could not but bring forth wretched effects. I could finde no better way to do Your Maiesty a more agreeable service, then by stopping the course of a Civill War, so far as could fall within the compasse of my endeavour".*

Once the English Civil War began in 1642 Meldrum took the side of the Parliamentarians and was involved in numerous military actions. During a period of time spent at the siege of Scarborough, he corresponded with the Royalist Sir Hugh Cholmley who indicated - perhaps out of vindictiveness - that the only reason he had chosen the side of the Parliamentarians was to preserve his income from the lighthouses.<sup>8</sup> Meldrum was killed during this action in 1645.

### The Osboldstons

Perhaps because of his growing involvement in politics, Sir John Meldrum sold part of his share in the lighthouses after two years. The original lease granted to him was for fifty years from 1640 onwards, but in 1642 it was taken over by Robert Osboldston (Senior), the first of three generations of his family to own the lighthouses. The Osboldstons<sup>9</sup> were far more conscientious in their stewardship of the lights than Meldrum had been, and did their

<sup>8</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1885-1900, Volume 37 - *Meldrum, John* by Charles Harding Firth

<sup>9</sup> There is a well known family by the name of Osboldstone originating from Lancashire. Osboldston is a recognised variation of the spelling, but there seems to be no proof that they were the same family.





ABOVE: A rare old postcard of the North Foreland lighthouse shows the structure in the pre-1842 form.

best to ensure that their keepers always performed their duty to the full.

By 1683, North Foreland was in the ownership of Robert's son, William, a wealthy London mercer. Its open fires were enclosed by glazing i.e. an early version of the lantern. We saw in Chapter 2 some of the problems associated with the use of glass, which was of poor quality and brought about ventilation problems with coal fires. Apparently the keepers at that time were not as attentive as they should have been and the tower was burnt to the ground. William Osboldston was required to have it rebuilt. For a while the light at North Foreland took the form of a swape, this was a candle in a glass lantern suspended from light - a long pole, a common arrangement in earlier times (see p39).

When the lease awarded to Meldrum ran out, it was William who in 1690 obtained a renewal for a further thirty years. In 1705, a third Osboldston - William's son Robert - took over the remaining

period of the lease, but passed away ten years later in 1715.

Osboldston employed two men each receiving £13 a year plus accommodation and fuel. It was low pay even for those days and the men were known to supplement their income by fishing during daylight hours. No doubt the keepers were weary by nightfall and found it not an easy task to tend the fires right through the night, a particularly difficult and dangerous job on windy nights. The lights burned 32 chaldrons of coal a year, at around 30 shillings per chaldron (see p37-39). All that coal had to be raised to the top of the towers by the keepers. It is perhaps understandable that occasionally the lights did not burn as brightly as they should. Mr Chitty, the Parish Assessor of Rates, and the Vicar, Mr William Barney were asked by Osboldston to let him know if the lights were failing. Each received a chaldron or two of coal for their trouble, Nevertheless, in 1707 Sir John Byng complained to the Admiralty that he "... could scarcely see the light all night long."

About 1690, the keepers experienced some difficulty with the Press gangs and came close to being conscripted on several occasions. They wrote to their employer to seek his help but Osboldston replied that if they attended to their duties at the lighthouse instead of going fishing during the day, they would have no cause to fear the Press gangs. He was genuinely worried by the matter, however, and wondered how it was possible for the men to keep good lights throughout the night if they had spent the previous day out in a fishing boat. The men were consequently forbidden to engage in any other activity other than that for which they were paid and accommodated. Osboldston even wrote to the parish priest and asked him to look out sometimes as he went to bed and, if he saw that the lights were dim, to reproach the men on his behalf.

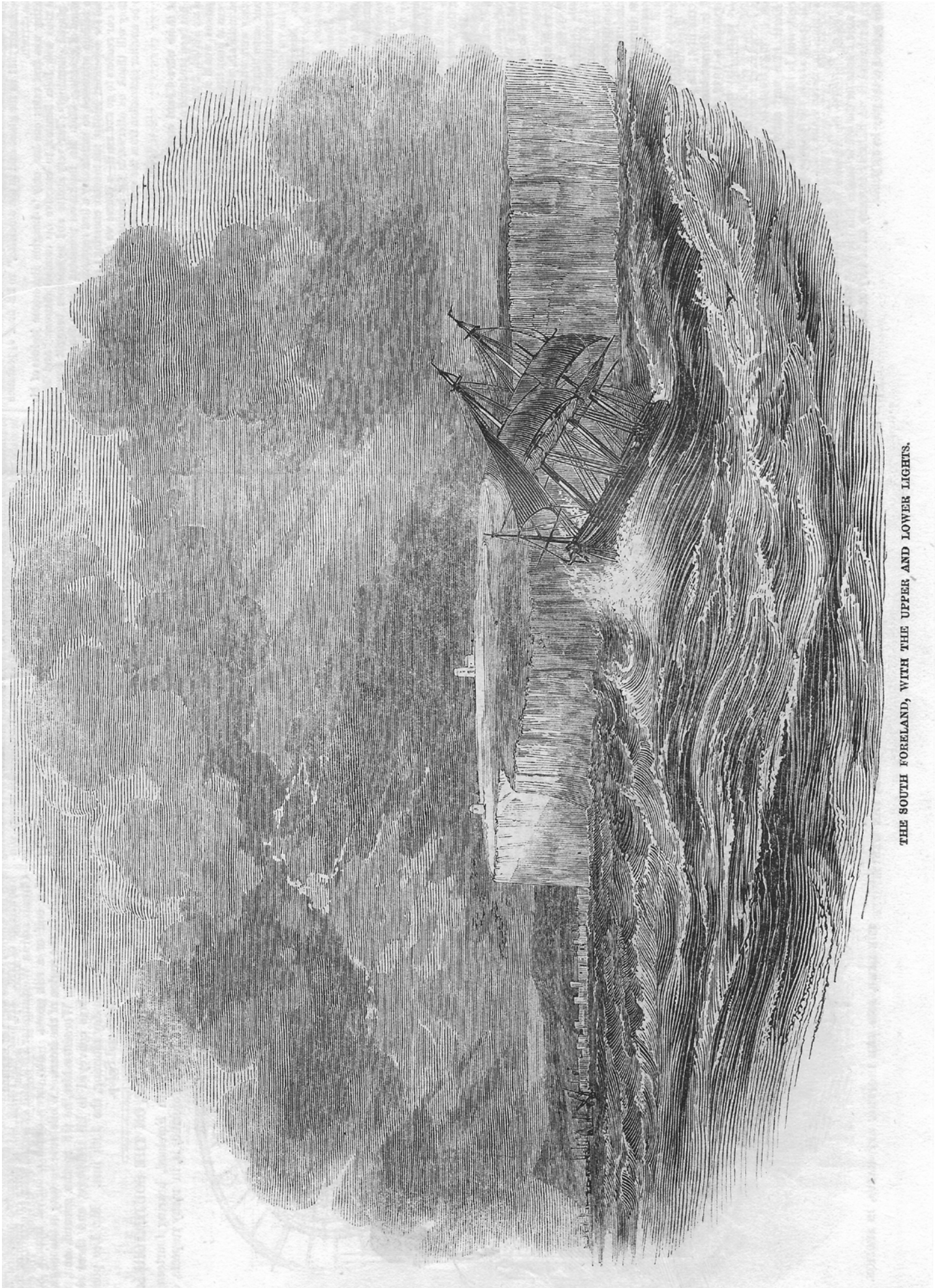
Hardy wrote that at the North Foreland:

*"... a new tower of flint and lime was set up at the North Foreland in 1694, and then a coal fire was used to light the lighthouse. This was soon after completely gutted by fire, and for a long time the only light shown there was a lantern containing one candle, stuck on a pole!"*<sup>10</sup>

Sadly, Hardy's details are confused because the new tower of flint, lime (and brick) was constructed in 1691 because the earlier one had been destroyed by fire in 1683.

<sup>10</sup> Hardy, p89.





THE SOUTH FORELAND, WITH THE UPPER AND LOWER LIGHTS.