

SOME HISTORY OF THE COASTWISE LIGHTS OF
LANCASHIRE AND CHESHIRE

PART III.

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THE ROCK

BEFORE the perch was placed on the rock, where the New Brighton Lighthouse now stands, it was known as the Black Rock and appears thus on Morden's Map 1700. It is only exposed at about three-quarter ebb, and when unmarked must have been a very real source of danger to shipping. Before Captain (afterwards Admiral) Denham charted Liverpool Bay and buoyed the channel, which with various alterations has been used ever since, all ships entered and left the Mersey by the Rock Channel, which ran roughly parallel to the Wallasey shore from "The Rock" to about opposite Leasowe Castle.

In 1683 Liverpool Town Council, as we have already seen, ordered the perch to be brought from Crosby, or a new one erected here. The perch was a strong pole, firmly fixed in a hole in the rock, and well stayed. The hole and the rusty fastenings to which the stays were fixed could still be seen as late as 1930. At the upper part of the pole was a diamond made of thinner planks, surmounted by a vane. At least that is what the one was like which immediately preceded the lighthouse, but they were so often repaired or renewed that no doubt they were not all precisely similar. They were frequently washed away, and when this occurred their absence was very much felt and resented by the mariners using the port.

In 1819 it was found floating in Bootle Bay, and was rescued and re-erected. In 1821 on the night of March 18th, it was again washed away, and the Surveyor was instructed not only to re-erect it at once but to submit plans for a *lighthouse on a small scale*. Three years later, in March, 1824, the perch was again washed away, and by December in the same year it was felt

that some more permanent structure was necessary. The Council had been requesting the government to erect a fort at this point for some time, but as the two schemes were related the erection of the lighthouse was delayed. In spite of constant applications by the Council to the Board of Ordnance, nothing happened, so finally the Council told them on March 25th 1825 that unless they had a reply shortly, to their memorial presented about eight months previously, they would proceed to erect a lighthouse forthwith.

The trouble seems to have been whether the Board of Ordnance, could get the Council to build a lighthouse, to also serve as a fort, or the Council persuade the Board of Ordnance to build a fort with a lighthouse on it. This may sound fantastic, but on 25th April 1825 Captain Kidson, representing the Board of Ordnance, met the Council, and decided that a lighthouse should be built, but that if when completed, he thought one or two heavy guns should be placed in the lighthouse for the defence of the port, the Committee should consider providing them. The Corporation four days later (April 29th 1825) agreed that if the Board of Ordnance would build their battery on the Perch Rock they (the Council) would contribute a sum equal to what it would cost them to build the proposed lighthouse to the same height as the platform of the proposed battery.

This was not done, possibly because the lighthouse would have been too far from the actual point of the Black Rock and because its appearance would have been most unusual, sitting as it were on the edge of the battery, but whatever the reason they decided at last to erect it on its present site. Things were moving, if only slowly, and in March 1826 tenders were asked for, and a contract was made by the Surveyor with Mr. Fleetwood Williams for stone from Anglesey, the price not to exceed 1/6d. per cubic foot delivered at Liverpool. In April 1826 Mr. Tomkinson's tender for building was accepted. The foundation stone was laid by the Mayor, Mr. Thomas Littledale, on 8th June 1827, the structure having been designed by Mr. Foster.

All this delay was naturally greatly resented by those engaged and interested in the shipping of the port, and the matter was brought officially before the Council by the agent of His Majesty's Steam Packet Company, which had obtained the contract to carry

the mails between Liverpool and Dublin. He sent a letter which was read at the Council on 25th August 1826, to the effect that the service would commence running on the 29th and must sail every night at five o'clock, and that the Lord Postmaster begged that a temporary light be provided for the three winter months till the lighthouse be completed. The work did not progress very rapidly, as it was only proceeded with during the summer months. As there were no houses for the workmen nearer than Liscard village, cottages were erected for them on the sandhills between what is now Virginia Road and the shore. After the lighthouse was completed, these erections were occupied by the donkey-driving community and others, whose conduct and reputation gained for this district the name of "The Devil's Nest". By 13th May 1829 the Surveyor reported to the Council that he had accepted the tender of Robinson and Wilsons of London, to make the lantern and machinery for the sum of £2,300. The masons had completed their work by June 1829, and each received a bonus of £3 for good conduct. In July it was decided that the railings round the gallery should be copper instead of cast iron, at an increased cost of £190.

The Chairman reported on 21st July that he had inspected the work and had presented the workmen with £10 to express his satisfaction. At a Council Meeting on 9th February 1830 rules and regulations to be observed by the keepers of the lighthouse were approved and adopted, and the Dock Committee agreed to pay the sum of one sovereign per annum to the Corporation as an acknowledgment for the use of the lighthouse, but not as rent. Touzeau, recording this fact in 1910, says that this sum is still paid annually.

This lighthouse is built of Anglesey granite, the stones being cut to a certain geometrical form and made to dovetail into one another, each course of masonry united by dowels, trenails, etc. The whole was coated over with Puzzellani, a volcanic material procured from Mount Etna, which in time becomes harder than the stone itself. The masonry is solid up to 36 feet, where a spiral staircase commences leading to the keepers' quarters. The house excluding the lantern rises ninety feet above the rock, and the diameter at the base is 35 ft. The cost was £27,500. The light was first exhibited on March 1st 1830. It had a revolving light, driven by clockwork, and exhibited two white lights and one deep

crimson every three minutes. Their range was about 15 miles seaward. When there was 12 ft. of water over the Rock Gut Bar a yellow light was shown at a lower window facing the south-west. Two bells were tolled in foggy weather.

Two keepers divided the week into four days in the lighthouse and three on shore. In 1925 automatic lighting replaced the resident keepers. When the lighthouse was in line with the Bootle Landmarks, which stood on the site of the present Alexandra Dock, and the landmark on Breeze Hill, Walton, it marked the fairway of the once important Rock Channel. These landmarks, built of brick in 1829, were two pillars 100 ft. high and were removed about 1880 when Alexandra Dock was made. In the Mersey proper there is only one real lighthouse and that is the Dungeon Light on Hale Head. It was built sometime before 1848 (for it is described by Stonehouse in *Lacy's Pictorial Liverpool*), by the Commissioners of the Upper Mersey Navigation. It has a fixed light visible for 8 miles.

There are of course lights on the various landing stages, and other obstructions which extend into the river, but they do not come within the scope of this paper. One structure I should like to mention, however, is the remains of the miniature lighthouse which stands on the river wall behind Woodside stage. One passes it if one goes up from the stage by the uncovered way on the extreme right of the bridge.

When looking along the eastern bank of the river from the Cheshire side it was no easy matter to distinguish the illuminated clock of St. Nicholas Church among the numerous lights, yet Denham in his *Sailing Directions* says that when this clock is illuminated it will be a fine beacon for ships entering the port.

Another light that has passed away is the North Wall, or as it was often called, the Bootle Light. It had not a very long life. It stood on the seawall at Bootle and was built by the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board in 1877. One of the most vivid recollections of it by old residents of the Wallasey district will be its foghorn. Known as the Bootle Bull, its voice could be very clearly heard on the Cheshire side, especially at New Brighton, when there was fog on the river.

A good description of the Mersey in fog is given by Captain Bone, from whom I take the following:—

“Over to the west, on the Rock Lighthouse, there sounds a clang of bells at timely intervals-sonorous notes, tenor and bass, that carry far enough; but loud over all the river voices a deep raucous bellow from the east marks the lair of the ‘Bootle Bull’-officially the North Wall Fog Syren. Hoarse, clamorous, insistent-never could Bull of Bashan have tongued a note like that! Fading to an unearthly wail, it rasps out a message of warning, and mariners take heed when the ‘Bull’ speaks, and steer a proper course to keep the fairway. Far down channel, beyond the Crosby Lightship we hear the roar of the Bull, and though the weather with us is no more than misty, we know of thick fog in the river.”

(Broken Stowage, by Captain David W. Bone.)

It was found necessary to demolish this building when the Gladstone Dock was being made. It was discontinued in 1927, and has been replaced by a white concrete structure about 400 yards north of the Gladstone Dock entrance which is fitted with an automatic light.

Formby Old Lighthouse was originally a landmark, and according to the printed Diary of Nicholas Blundell of Crosby it was being built in the year 1719, for he says that on September 17th of that year he and his wife rode out to see this landmark at the Grange. Fearon and Eyes’ Chart of 1737 shows this landmark working in conjunction with a lower mark, a perch, and John Eyes’ Chart of 1767 reveals that the perch has been superseded by a tower. Burdett’s Chart, 1771, gives the height of the Upper Landmark as 120 ft. and the lower as 90 ft.

In 1833 the Upper Landmark was converted into a lighthouse, to be used in conjunction with the Formby Floating Light, which had just been established (1st August 1834), showing a steady yellow light in concert with the Formby Lightship which was red. It was a circular brick tower 120 ft. high. On 1 February 1838 the light on the new Formby Lighthouse was altered to a fixed red. In 1839, on 10 October, the light was extinguished, for on the opening of the Victoria Channel the Crosby Lighthouse superseded it. Therefore it resumed its earlier functions as a landmark. On 16 October 1851 the Formby Old Lighthouse was again relighted and continued to function till 6 October 1856 when the light was finally extinguished.

It was standing until August 1941, when it was dynamited by the authorities, the reason being, it was said, that it offered too

good a landmark for an approaching enemy. It lies there now (1944), a pile of rubble, which can be seen from the railway. The first Crosby Lighthouse was erected by the Dock Committee of Liverpool, under Captain Denham's supervision, and lighted on 10 October 1839 when it superseded the Formby Lighthouse. Built of wood, it appeared from the seaward as a fiat-faced shaft, with width one fifth of its height, shored up on both sides. It exhibited a fixed red light at an altitude of 81 ft. above high-water mark. This wooden structure was replaced by the second Crosby Lighthouse, built of brick by Jesse Hartley in 1847, but described as a "stone" tower 90 ft. high. It stood about 1100 yards to the north of the wooden one. The light was first exhibited on 2 November 1847. It was discontinued on 16 October 1851 (when Formby Old Lighthouse was relighted) but relighted on 6 October 1856 when the Old Formby Light was discontinued. It was destroyed by fire on 2 February 1898 when three people lost their lives. A temporary light was instituted, but this was finally abolished in July 1898.