

# Lightvessels around the British Isles

By Geoff Walker



**The Corporation of Trinity House of Deptford Strond**, also known as **Trinity House** (and formally as The Master Wardens and Assistants of the Guild Fraternity or Brotherhood of the most glorious and undivided Trinity and of St Clement in the Parish of Deptford Strond in the County of Kent), is the official authority for

lighthouses in England, Wales, the Channel Islands and Gibraltar. Trinity House is also responsible for the provision and maintenance of other navigational aids, such as lightvessels, buoys, and maritime radio/satellite communication systems. It is also an official deep-sea pilotage authority, providing expert navigators for ships trading in Northern European waters.

However, by the early 1970's most manned Lightships were becoming redundant and were being replaced by unmanned vessels or indeed, by permanent lighthouse structures. This narrative sets out to briefly describe, and give an insight into, the happenings of Lightships, prior to those events being implemented.

Trinity House is governed by a court of thirty-one Elder Brethren, presided over by a Master. These are appointed from 300 Younger Brethren who act as advisors and perform other duties as needed. The Younger Brethren are appointed from lay people with maritime experience, mainly naval officers, and ships' masters, but also harbor masters, pilots, and any others with maritime skills who may be able to contribute a valuable service.

The Corporation came into being in 1514 by Royal Charter granted by King Henry VIII under the name "The Master, Wardens, and Assistants of the Guild, Fraternity, or Brotherhood of the most glorious and undivided Trinity, and of St. Clement in the Parish of Deptford-Strond in the County of Kent." The charter came as a result of a petition, put forward on 19 March 1513 by a guild of Deptford-based mariners. This came about because of incidents and troubles with unlicensed Pilots on the River Thames so a request was made to the then King, for a license to regulate pilotage.

In 1566, Queen Elizabeth I's Seamarks Act enabled Trinity House to establish, erect and set up a system of buoys, beacons and navigation marks to assist shipping with the view to reducing the risks to ships sailing about the coast of England, Wales, the Channel Islands and Gibraltar.

The method by which this service was to be funded was by the imposition of “**Light Dues**” on all commercial ships entering ports in the British Isles, and its dependencies such as the Channel Islands and Gibraltar, whereby a fee was charged based on their net registered tonnage. The Commissioners for Irish Lights are responsible for such in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, whilst the Northern Lighthouse Board is responsible for services in Scottish and Isle of Man waters.

The service is supported by a fleet of modern ships, known as “**Tenders**”, which provide maintenance and monitoring of all lights, buoys, and beacons; nowadays including electronic aids to navigation, as well as Radar beacons. The headquarters of the corporation is the present Trinity House, which was built in 1796. The building has a suite of five state rooms, which is located at the city of London, close to Trinity Square, and Tower Hill, within view of the Tower of London, and the River Thames.



The Trinity House Tenderer “**Patricia**” in the process of maintaining a buoy off Cowes (IOW) during 2017. This is only one of several purpose-built vessels operated by Trinity House for such purposes.

The old **Royal Sovereign** Lightship located 8.6 miles off Eastbourne, marking the Royal Sovereign Shoal. It has now been replaced by a large single pillar tower – platform structure, complete with helicopter landing deck.



Life on board a Lightship could be boring and not suited to all, although there was always enough shipboard maintenance to keep the crew fully engaged in addition to watchkeeping duties, but their main duty was to keep the light functioning. In recent years conditions and terms of service dramatically improved for those serving onboard, but in the 1950-60s a traditional full crew of each lightship was two officers, who served alternatively one month on the ship and one in port at a Trinity House Depot, and nine men who were divided into three classes – seamen, signalmen and lamp trimmers, who each served two months on board and one on shore. A Trinity House Lightship Tender would pay a monthly visit to replenish provisions, stores, and other consumables. Nevertheless, there were always a good number of high-quality applicants, made to Trinity House, so manning was never an

issue. The security of a steady and pensionable occupation with a highly regarded organization such as Trinity House was always an attraction to those with a maritime background.

Foggy weather was a time of real anxiety, every man was ready for any emergency as there was no telling when the black shape of an errant ship might loom out of the mist and bear down on their vessel. Breaking loose from the moorings and drifting from their anchorage was another danger that often befell lightships. When this happened the lightship immediately communicated with the shore by radio, to get their true bearings and ask for assistance, at the same time sending radio warnings that they were adrift, to commercial shipping.

Generally, it was the weather that was the biggest threat to Lightships and their crews. Such was the case when tragedy struck Trinity House's **South Goodwin Lightship** just north of the narrowest point of the Dover Straits in England. On the night of the 26/27th November 1954, the South Goodwin Lightship's anchor chains failed during a Gale force 12 storm, sometime between midnight and 0100hrs. Ashore, the Ramsgate and Deal coastguards were concerned, but visibility was poor. At about 0115hrs the East Goodwin Light Vessel watching in alarm, saw its sister ship drifting past six miles north of their station.

Shortly afterwards the Lightship grounded on the the Goodwin Sands and capsized coming to rest on her starboard side. The crew had been seeking safety in the galley but when the vessel capsized the crew became trapped beneath the galley door, which was submerged. The entire crew of the South Goodwin Lightship lost their lives that night. Amazingly, the one person who miraculously survived by the will of God, was not a member of the crew, but a supernumerary ornithologist from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries who had been on board fulfilling his professional duties. The sole survivor was rescued by an American Helicopter based at nearby Manston airport. At low water, the wreck of the Lightships is still visible.



A sad image of the capsized South Goodwin Lightship, also showing the rescue helicopter landed on a nearby sandbank, close to Keller Gut. It had been impossible for lifeboats from Ramsgate and Deal Coastguard, to approach the stricken Lightship due to the shallowness of the surrounding water. This was by far the worst tragedy to be experienced by any Lightship during peacetime. The next replacement ship was decommissioned and was towed away on 26 July 2006.

# A summary of former Lightships and their Fate

## England

Bar-Mersey Estuary (maintained by Mersey Docks and Harbor Board)

Barrow Deep - Barrow Deep channel, Thames Estuary

Black Deep - Thames Estuary

Brake - Brake Sand, near Goodwin Sands

Bull - Bull Sands, mouth of the Humber Estuary (maintained by Humber Conservancy Board)

Calshot Spit

Cockle - North Sea

Cork - Cork Bank, off Harwich

Corton - North Sea

Crosby - Mersey Estuary;( maintained by Mersey Docks and Harbor Board)

Docking Shoal - Norfolk coast

Inner / Outer Dowsing - North Sea; (**Inner Dowsing was the last manned lightship station, replaced by the Dowsing lighthouse in 1991**)

Dudgeon - North Sea (the Dudgeon Lightvessel was bombed by the Luftwaffe on 29 January 1940. Only one crew member, survived. The incident was the subject of a 1940 British Government propaganda film, Men of the Lightship)

Edinburgh - Thames Estuary (the name refers to the Edinburgh Channel)

English and Welsh Grounds - Bristol Channel (now a clubhouse in Bathurst Basin, Bristol)

Falls - Dover Strait

Formby - Mersey Estuary, (maintained by Mersey Docks and Harbor Board)

Galloper - Galloper shoal, North Sea

Girdler - Thames Estuary

Gull - marked the Gull Stream on the Goodwin Sands - was rammed and sunk on 18 March 1929 by the City of York, resulting in the death of Captain of the lightship.

Gunfleet - Gunfleet Sands, Thames Estuary (replaced by Gunfleet Lighthouse in 1850)

Haisborough - North Sea

Humber - maintained by Humber Conservancy Board

Kentish Knock

Knoll - Smith's Knoll, North Sea; off Norfolk

Leman and Ower - North Sea

Longsand - Thames Estuary

Morecambe Bay

Mouse - Mouse Sand, Thames Estuary

Nab - Straits of Dover; replaced by the Nab Tower in 1920

Newarp - North Sea

**Nore - Thames Estuary; the world's first manned lightship, 1731**

North Goodwin

Northwestern - Mersey Estuary, maintained by Mersey Docks and Harbor Board

Outer Gabbard - North Sea

Owers - Owers Bank, off Selsey Bill. Replaced with a beacon.

Royal Sovereign - off Eastbourne; replaced with Royal Sovereign lighthouse 1971

Shambles - the Shambles Bank, off Portland Bill

Shipwash - North Sea, off Harwich

South Goodwin lightvessel replaced the land based South Foreland Low lighthouse, also known as Old St Margaret's Lighthouse. On 25 October 1940, the South Goodwin Lightship was bombed by the Germans and sunk. The replacement lightvessel, LV90 sank on 27 November 1954 when cables to her two sea anchors broke during the worst storm in two centuries. See references above.

Spurn - Spurn Head. Maintained by Humber Conservancy Board. A former Spurn lightvessel is preserved at Hull Marina.

Swin Middle - Swin Channel, Thames Estuary

Tongue - Tongue Sands, Thames Estuary

Lynn Well - entrance to The Wash; replaced with a Large Automatic Navigation Buoy (LANBY) in September 1973

Would - North Sea

## **Scotland, Isle of Man**

Lightvessels in Scotland and the Isle of Man were maintained by the Northern Lighthouse Board, with the exception of one, maintained by the Clyde Lighthouse Trust. Only the North Carr station was manned.

Bahama Bank - off Maughold Head, Isle of Man; replaced by Maughold Head lighthouse 1914

North Carr - Dundee

Otter Rock - south-west of the Isle of Mull.

Skeirinoe - Sgeir In-ao, near Scalpay, Harris

## **Wales**

Scarweather

Former Welsh lightships were maintained by Trinity House. Remaining substitute navigational aids still are.

Breaksea - off Barry (Breaksea Spit), Bristol Channel. Replaced by a LANBY, then a lightfloat and currently a lighted buoy with RACON radar facility

Helwick - off Worms Head

Milford Haven Lightvessel

Scarweather - Swansea Bay; replaced with buoy 1989

St Gowan - off Pembrokeshire coast. The station once carried the name St Govan, i.e., spelling change

## **Northern Ireland**

Petrel Lightvessel

South Rock Lightvessel

## **Decommissioned lightvessels**

The central records of the UK's light vessels were lost when Trinity House was bombed in 1940.

Light vessel LV1, now Haslar Marine club house

LV1; Light Vessel 1 was built in 1946 by Philip & Son Ltd., Dartmouth, England. In 1993 she was decommissioned and sold to Dean & Reddyhoff Ltd., Southampton, for use as marina club house at Gosport, Hampshire.[19]

LV3; Light Vessel 3 was built in 1947 by Philip & Son. It sank off the coast of Israel in 2000

LV4; Light Vessel 4 was built in 1947 by Philip & Son. She was decommissioned in 1989. In 1991 was sold to the Musée de Bateau in Douarnenez, France, for £40,000. She has been restored and renamed "Scarweather".

LV5; Light Vessel 5 was built in 1947 by Philip & Son. She was deployed as relief lightship to replace vessels undergoing refit or otherwise out of commission. She served, among other stations, the South Goodwin in 1961, the Tongue in 1973, the Falls from 1973 to 1976 and the Varne in 1977. Her last station was the South Goodwin again, before being withdrawn from service for conversion to unmanned operation.

LV8; Light Vessel 8 was built in 1949 by Philip & Son and decommissioned in 1991. In 2005 Radio Waddenzee bought the lightship and towed it from Rotterdam to Harlingen, Netherlands, where she is used as a radio station.

LV11; Light Vessel 11 was built in 1951 by Philip & Son and decommissioned in 1988. She was saved from scrap and towed to the repair yard in the Waalhaven in Rotterdam, Netherlands. Rebuilt into a maritime restaurant.

LV12; Light Vessel 12 was constructed in 1927 by Goole Shipbuilding and Repairing Company Ltd., and decommissioned in 1975. After being acquired by the Hull City Council, since 1987, she has become a museum vessel in Hull Marina.

LV13; Light Vessel 13 was built in 1952 Philip & Son and transferred to Hamburg in 1991, where she was used as a restaurant and hotel.

LV14; Light Vessel 14 was built in 1953 by Philip & Son, decommissioned in 1991, and opened in 2000 in Cardiff as a church ship. Works No.1246, it was removed from Cardiff docks on financial grounds on 18 May 2015 and towed to Sharpness for drydocking and refurbishment. The press had stated that it was to become a floating museum at Newnham in Gloucestershire and was reported as being seen there in August 2016.

LV15; Light Vessel 15 was built in 1954 by Philip & Son, sold in 1988 and is now used by a church charity Fellowship Afloat at the mouth of the River Blackwater at Tollesbury in Essex

LV16; Light Vessel 16 was built in 1954 by Philip & Son. She was decommissioned in 1988 and currently serves as the Sea Cadets training ship TS Colne Light moored at the Hythe Quay in Colchester

LV18; Light Vessel 18 was built in 1958 by Philip & Son, sold in 1997, was used by pirate radio nostalgia stations (RSLs & BBC Essex) from 1999 to 2007, and in 2011 was restored and opened to the public at Harwich.[26]

LV21; Light Vessel 21 was built in 1963 by Philip & Son and saw most of her service off the Kent Coast on the Varne and East Goodwin stations. The vessel is now in private ownership and has been transformed into a floating art centre and performance venue. Currently moored at St Andrew's Quay, Gravesend, Kent

LV23; Light Vessel 23, now called the Mersey Planet, was removed from Liverpool on 21 September 2016. Location Sharpness docks, where in 2017 it was the subject of an ownership dispute

LV38; Light Vessel 38 was built of oak in 1860 and was retired in 1941. It was scrapped at Grays in 2011

LV44; Light Vessel 44 was built in 1869, sold in 1945, and now lies derelict at Pitsea Country Park

LV50; Light Vessel 50 was built in 1879 and originally stationed off the Isles of Scilly. It was decommissioned in the 1900s and bought by the Royal Northumberland Yacht Club in 1952 for use as a clubhouse. It was still in use in 2013

LV55; Light Vessel 55 was built (along with LV54 and LV59) by Charles Hill & Sons of Bristol in 1885. It was in service until springing a leak in 1953 and was towed to Barry Docks for repair.

LV67; Light Vessel 67 is now a wreck somewhere off the west coast of the British Isles.

LV72; Light Vessel 72 was built in 1903 by John Crown & Sons of Sunderland for Trinity House. LV72 was one of two Light Vessels which saw service on D Day carrying the name "JUNO" the ship marked a safe passage through a minefield for the landing craft en route to the invasion beaches. She was sold out of service in 1973 to Steel Supply Co., Neath for scrapping. When sold she was the oldest vessel in the Trinity House fleet. After decades of neglect, she is now lying in poor condition, severely listing on a mud berth near the River Neath's Swing Bridge and does not float

LV78; spit Light Vessel 78 was built in 1914 by John I. Thornycroft & Company of Southampton. Formerly plinthed ashore at Ocean Village, in 2010 she was moved to Southampton Docks for a planned restoration. Moved to Solent Sky Museum in December 2019

LV80; Light Vessel 80 was built at Liverpool in 1914. Sold in 1977 and last seen at Hoo near Rochester in 2004

LV83; Light Vessel 83 sank in 1967 after a collision and lies at the bottom of the North Sea off Easington, Cleveland.

LV86; Light Vessel 86 was built in 1931 on the Isle of Wight, was sold in 1974 and is now used as a houseboat at Hoo Marina in Kent

LV87; Light Vessel 87 was built in 1932 in Glasgow. She was sold in 1973 and now belongs to the Haven Ports Yacht Club in Suffolk

LV88; Light Vessel 88 was built in 1936 by Philip & Son and began service at the Cockle station, was sold in 1977, and was last seen in Rochester in 2004

LV89; Light Vessel 89 was built in 1936 by Philip & Son. She was decommissioned in 1974, became a pub in Bristol, and was broken up in 1995

LV90; Light Vessel 90 was built in 1937 by Philip & Son. On 25 October 1940, the South Goodwin Lightship was bombed by the Germans and sunk. The replacement sank in a storm in 1954 at the South Goodwin station. The next replacement South Goodwin Lightvessel was decommissioned and was towed away on 26 July 2006

LV91; Light Vessel 91 was built in 1937 by Philip & Son. She was decommissioned in 1977 and became a floating museum in Swansea

LV93; Light Vessel 93 was built in 1939 by Philip & Son. She was sold in 2004 and moved to the London Docklands. She is now in use as a photographic studio and location

LV94; Light Vessel 94 was built in 1939 by Philip & Son. She was decommissioned in 1990. In 2008 it was moored in Amsterdam and hired out for events

LV95; Light Vessel 95 was built in 1939 by Philip & Son. She was sold in 2004. In 2011 she was being used as a recording studio at Trinity Buoy Wharf in London

Nowadays, with upward of **400 commercial vessels** using the Dover Strait every day, It's under full radar surveillance and **operates** a Traffic **Separation Scheme** ( TSS ). The **Channel** Navigation Information Service ( CNIS ) provides a 24 hour radio and radar safety service for all shipping in the Dover Strait. Similar TSS operate in most major waterways within the British Isles and the movement of marine traffic is closely monitored throughout for security and safety reasons.

In 2020 **Trinity House** still remains incorporated, very active and is fully committed to, a charity dedicated to safeguarding shipping and seafarers, providing education, support and welfare to the seafaring community with a statutory duty as a **General Lighthouse Authority to deliver a reliable, efficient and cost-effective aids to navigation service for the benefit and safety of all mariners.**

With the virtual demise of the Lightship (with a very few exceptions) Trinity House continues to maintain over 60 lighthouses around England, Wales, the Channel Islands and Gibraltar. These highly visual aids to navigation range from isolated offshore towers exposed to the open sea — such as Eddystone, Bishop Rock or Longstone lighthouses — to shore-based stations in some of the nation's most beautiful locations, such as Lizard, Bardsey, Nash Point and Peninnis lighthouses.



End

References: Trinity House Archives

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