

Clay, Rotha Mary., The Hermits and Anchorites of England. Methuen & Co. London, 1914.

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IV. LIGHT-KEEPERS ON THE SEA COAST

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.

(Patent Roll, 1247)

Whilst the hermits of the island, the forest, or the cave, chose their haunts chiefly with a view to solitude, there were others who took up their abode with more regard to the direct service of their fellowmen.

The Church was the pioneer in many works of mercy and utility, including the provision and maintenance of beacons, bridges, roads, harbours, and even forts. Tynemouth Priory kept up a lamp on St. Mary's Island near South Shields, and in foggy weather a bell used to ring from the chapel for the benefit of mariners. Probably the towers upon Inner Farne and on Coquet Island (Plate II) were designed for a similar purpose. When a sea-mark was required on the coast of Ireland, a tower was built at Hook (Co. Wexford) by the monastery of St. Saviour, with the assistance of the Earl of Pembroke.¹

The chapel of St. Nicholas on Lantern Hill, about 100 feet above the haven of Ilfracombe, was, and still is, used as a lighthouse. Year by year throughout the winter a beacon burned on the top of this chapel "as if it were a star flashing in the night": so wrote Bishop Veysey in 1522, when he testified to its usefulness in stormy weather, and invited people to stretch forth a helping hand for the upkeep of the guiding light.² On the promontory near St. Ives, there was another conspicuous sea-mark. "There is now," says Leland, "at the very point of Pendinas a chapel of S. Nicolas,

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and a pharos for lighte for shippes sailing by night in those quarters."

Hermits used frequently to act as coastguards and light-keepers at these lonely stations. In the days of Edward III, John Puttock settled on the seashore near Lynn, where he erected, at his own great cost and charge, "a certain remarkable cross of the height of 110 feet," which proved a boon to seamen

sailing up the Wash. Recognizing the services of the solitary of “Lenne Crouche” (who dwelt in a cave in the bishop’s marsh), the mayor and commonalty petitioned the Bishop of Norwich to admit him to the order of hermits (1349). Possibly some such ministry was performed by the hermits of Cley by Blakeney Haven and of Cromer.

It seems probable that a leading light was shown from the chapel at St. Edmund’s Point. Near the old village of Hunstanton, the low-lying shore of the Wash is broken by a ridge, rising at places to 60 feet in height. On the heights part of the cliff, near the lighthouse, are the ruins of St. Edmund’s chapel (Plate XX), founded as tradition says, by the saint after he had escaped the shipwreck. The building seems to date from Norman times, with doors and windows of later date. The site has been recently excavated, and the walls (3 feet thick), show that the chapel was 79 x 24 feet. Possibly this was the cell occupied by Thomas Cooke the hermit, who in 1530 was maintained by the L’Estranges of Hunstanton.

There were other hermitages on the shores of the North Sea, at Saltfleet Haven, at Skegness (near Ingoldmells Point), and at the mouth of the Humber. The last-named, the chapel of Ravenserespoune, was re-built at great expense by Matthew Danthorpe, shortly before 1399. Because it was situated “where the king landed at the last coming into England,” Henry IV granted the place and the chapel of St. Mary and St. Anne to this hermit and his successors “with wreck of sea and waif and all other profits on the sand for two leagues round”.^[1] The possession of these privileges seems to have called out the sympathies of the succeeding chaplain, for in 1427 Richard Reedbarowe had much on his heart the dangers of the Humber and the frequent disasters, for lack of sea-mark and lighthouse :—

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ST. EDMUND'S-ON-THE-CLIFF, HUNSTANTON

Plate XX : St. Edmunds-on-the-cliff, Hunstanton.

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So that the seid Richard, havynge compassion and pitee of the Cristen poeple that ofte tymes are there perished, and also of the Godes and Marchaundise there lost, hath begunne in weye of Charite, in Salvacon of Cristen poeple, Godes and Marchaundises comynge into Humbre, to make a Toure to be uppon day light a redy Bekyn, wheryn shal be light gevyng by nyght, to alle the Vasselx that comyn into the seid Ryver of Humbre.³

The enterprising man had begun his tower, but needed assistance in finishing it. He accordingly made a petition to Parliament, setting forth that the tower "may not be made nor brought to an ende withouten grete cost," and proposed that a tax should be levied on every ship entering the Humber ; to this suggestion the merchants and seamen of Hull had already agreed. The Commons, in response to these business-like proposals, made special request to the king's Council, and the matter was settled. It was arranged that for ten years the mayor would take tolls from each ship at a fixed tariff according to her tonnage, and that the money thus raised should be applied under the survey of certain merchants and mariners in completing the tower to serve as a beacon, and in finding a light to burn therein. Whether Richard Reedbarowe ever saw the fulfillment of his enterprise does not appear.

The terrible frequency of wrecks is shown by the duty incumbent upon the coastguard-chaplain of Reculver. On that cliff was a chapel "ordeyned for the sepulture of suche persons as by casualty of storms or other incident fate or mysaventures were perished". When the hermitage was founded is not known ; but it was becoming ruinous in 1486, when Thomas Hamond, "hermyte of the chapell of St. Peter, St. James, and St. Anthony being at our lady of Rekcolver," was granted a commission to collect alms for the rebuilding of the roof which had fallen down.⁴ Perhaps he was not successful in his quest for alms, or it may be that another fifty years of exposure to the winds had reduced it gain to a state of disrepair, for Leland notes : "Ther is a neglect chapel, owt of the church-yard". The sea was rapidly encroaching, and eventually the cliff was swept away at that point.

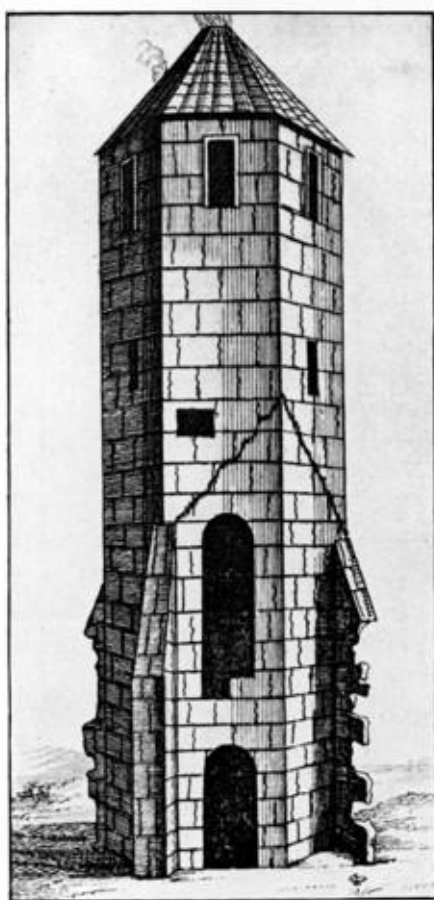
A hermit kept watch at St. Margaret's-at-cliffe on the South

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Foreland. In 1367 Brother Nicholas de Legh dwelt in this hermitage of "St. Margaret atte Staire" : the "Stair" was probably (like "St. Margaret's Gate") a passage from the Bay to the cliff. Local tradition declares that the cell was cut in the chalk cliff, near the modern lighthouses, and that a lantern was hung up there to guide ships at sea. Possibly the hermitage on the Sussex cliff at Seaford was used for a similar purpose.

Upon Chale Down, in the Isle of Wight, there was in 1312 a hermitage and chapel in honour of St. Catherine. Two years later a shipwreck occurred, which led to the foundation of a lantern tower at St. Catherine's. A French ship belonging to a religious house was wrecked, and the mariners, who sold the cargo to certain men of the island, were afterwards charged with sacrilege for having appropriated Church property. It is said that papal bull was issued threatening the chief offender, Walter de Godeton, with excommunication. In expiation he was charged to build a lighthouse on the Down near Nyton, above the scene of the disaster. A letter of Bishop Stratford proves that the tower had already been erected in 1328. A chantry priest was to keep up a bright light to warm mariners sailing by night on that dangerous coast. A survey of 1566 shows the building as they then existed, with little stacks of wood ready piled for the beacon. The octagonal tower with its conical roof is about 35 feet high (Plate XXI). It is in good preservation, having been strengthened during the eighteenth century as an important sea-mark. It stands 750 feet above sea level. Into the walls of the old lighthouse a piscina is built, which probably came from the oratory, now demolished.

There stands on the Dorset coast another mediaeval lighthouse from which an idea may be gained of the kind of provision formerly made upon our shores. The chapel on St. Aldhelm's Head (in the Isle of Purbeck) is 440 feet above the sea. Within this oratory, which was in existence in 1291,⁵ prayers were offered on behalf of mariners, whilst without, a beacon blazed for their benefit. There is no actual record that St. Aldhelm's was served by a hermit, but the fact



A LIGHTHOUSE HERMITAGE

Plate XXI : A lighthouse Hermitage.

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that no institutions occur in the Sarum registers suggests that this lonely chantry was held by some semi-independent person.

Plymouth Hoe had a hermitage beside which stood a cross for a sea-mark. The chapel is described as an old one in 1413. Indulgences were frequently offered by the bishop to those who should give alms for its preservation. In 1511 there was a "hermyt of Seynt Kateryn". Leland writes : "Ther is a righte goodly walke on a hille without the toun by south caullid *the How*, and a fair chapel of S. Catarine on it". Several other seacoast cells were standing in his day. Describing Branksea (or Brownsea) Island in Poole Haven, he observes : "Ther is yet a chappelle for a heremite". An earlier traveller, William Worcester, mentions one dedicated to St. Anthony, in the midst of "the island of Camber," near Winchelsea. This chapel was destroyed by Flemish pirates in 1536. "The men of

Rye say that these men burnt the hermitage of Camber in despite and hewed an image of St. Anthony with their swords, bidding it call upon St. George for help.”

There was also a hermit's cell in the cliff⁶ at Dover, sometimes called the Chapel of Our Lady in the Rock. A reference to this place is found in the disbursements of John, King of France, before embarking for Calais in July, 1360 : “Un home de Dourve appellé *le rampeur*, qui rampa devant le Roy contremont la roche, devant l'ermitage de Douvre, pour don fait à li par le Roy, 5 nobles, valent 33s. 4d.”⁷ One David Welkes was hermit of Dover in 1399 when Henry IV continued to him a life-annuity of 40s. granted by Richard II. When Henry VIII returned from France in 1532, he visited the oratory and gave alms : “Item paied to the kings owne hands for his offering to our lady in the Rocke at Dover iiijs. viijd.”

The hermitage had recently been rebuilt (1530) by Joachim de Vaux, the French ambassador, who afterwards declared that the little chapel in the cliff had been restored by himself “in honour of Our Lady and of that holy peace of which their majesties made him the instrument”. Discord, however,

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arose in connexion with the chapel, because it was served by a French chaplain, Jean de Ponte, who was always in trouble with the comptroller of the king's works at Dover, or with the mayor and townsmen. The arms of England and France were impaled over the door. A letter written to Thomas Cromwell in 1535 set forth that “certain naughty persons have razed out the French king's arms from a table that stands upon the altar”. Henceforth there was constant trouble about the chaplain.⁸ On one occasion he was arrested by the mayor and put in prison. He was released, but not long afterwards he was attacked one evening by some labourers working at the new fortifications. By the friar's own account he was much ill-used. “One,” says he, “knelt on my breast, and with a stone knocked me on the mould of the head till I was as dead.” Froude, indeed, paints the man as a martyr :—

While the harbours, piers, and fortresses were rising at Dover, an ancient hermit tottered night after night from his cell to a chapel on the cliff, and the tapers on the altar, before which he knelt in his lonely orisons, made a familiar beacon far over the rolling waters. The men of the rising world cared little for the sentiment of the past. The anchorite was told sternly by the workmen that his light was a signal to the king's enemies, and must burn no more. And when it was next seen, three of them waylaid the old man on his way home, threw him down, and beat him cruelly.”⁹

By the men of his own day, however, the friar was regarded as a “false French knave”. The comptroller of the works himself begged Cromwell to command the mayor to expel him, because he advertised strangers of all that was done in those parts. It is of interest to notice that it was partly the light shown in the hermitage which provoked ill-feeling. “These persons,” complained Jean de

Ponte, "because I have a light in my chapel at night when I go to bed or to my book, say I have a light for the king's enemies, which is not true." But the light was soon to be extinguished. At this opportune moment (1537), the authorities determined to extend the harbour works to Arcliff, nor is it surprising that the Sieur de Vaux sought in vain to turn from their purpose those who

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intended to destroy the chapel by the construction of a bulwark. For some years, indeed, a fisherman peacefully occupied the cell ; but the place having been undermined by Arcliff fort, it was eventually swept away by a tempestuous sea.

The great sea-mark on the cliffs of Dover was the ancient Roman watch-tower which still stands by the church of Dover Castle. It is always known as the Parohs,¹⁰ although there is no record of its use as a lighthouse. There was formerly a second tower, but this was already ruinous when Leland visited Dover. He describes it as "a ruine of a towr, the which has bene as a pharos or a mark to shyppes on the se".

During the sixteenth century many of the old beacons were destroyed or fell into disrepair owing, doubtless, in many cases, to the suppression of religious houses. It was, however, a happy circumstance that the Fraternity of the Blessed Trinity had recently been founded at Deptford. This religious guild was instituted in 1514 for the benefit of mariners. In 1536 a similar guild of the Holy Trinity was founded at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and was empowered to erect stone towers at the mouth of the Tyne for "signals, metes, and bounds," and the two towers were to be "perpetually lighted at night".¹¹ By an Act of Parliament the erection of sea-marks for the guidance of navigators was afterwards committed to the sole charge of the Trinity House, Deptford. This Act (1566) contains a tribute to the work done by way of charity in bygone days :—

Forasmuch as by the dystroyeng and taking awaye of certaine Steeples Woods and other Markes standing upon the mayne Shores . . . being as Beakons and Markes of aunycent tyme accustomed for seafaring Men to save and kepe them and the Shippes in their Charge from sundry Daungers thereto incident, divers Shyppes . . . have by the lacke of suche Markes of late yeres ben myscaried perished and lost in the Sea, to the great Detryment and Hurte of the Comon Weale, and the perysheng of no smale number of People,"¹² etc.

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Henceforth the story of the watchers of our coasts must be sought in the annals of the Trinity House. The scientifically-equipped lighthouses on Coquet Island, Spurn Head, St. Edmund's Point, and St. Catherine's, form, it is true, a striking contrast to the ancient cells upon those headlands, but it is well to remember that, in the day of small things, even the simple signal was to the

seafarer a “bright beacon of God,” and that the hermit helped to lay the foundations of the present elaborate system for the distribution of maritime lights.

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REDSTONE HERMITAGE

Plate XXII : Redstone Hermitage.

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Footnotes~

1. G. B. Hodgson, *S. Shields*, 287 ; Pat. 31 Hen. III, m. 6.

2. Oliver, *Monast. Exon.* 29 n.

[1]. It was common for certain people (landowners, families, or communities) to gain the right to salvage, sell, and/or keep whatever washed ashore on their patch of shoreline. This, obviously, could cause trouble, and occasionally unscrupulous owners of salvage rights were accused of purposely setting lures in order to cause shipwrecks, in order to profiting from the wreckage. Though I've never heard of a hermit or monastic institution accused of that. In this case, the rights to salvage were important for the care and maintenance of the hermitage.

3. P.R.O. Anc. Petitions, No. 1232 : *Rot. Parl.*, IV., 364-5.
4. B. M. Harl., 433 f. 216.
5. Hutchins, *Dorset*, ed. 1774, I. 228.
6. Arclif, cf. hermit of Occlive near Dover (Pat. 1308).
7. *Comptes de l'Argenterie* (Soc. de l'Hist. de France), p. 274.
8. *L. and P. Hen.* VIII, Vols. IX-XII.
9. *Hist.* ed. 1858, III. 256-7 n.
10. So called from the Island of Pharos, whereon Ptolemy Philadelphus built his famous lighthouse tower, one of the seven wonders of the world. It was of white marble, and could be seen at a distance of 100 miles. On the top fires were kept burning to direct sailors into the Bay of Alexandria (Lemprière, *Classical Dict.*)
11. *L. and P. Hen.* VIII, XI. 376.
12. Statute, 8 Eliz., c. 13.

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