

"Let your Light so shine before men...."

Centuries before Saint Matthew wrote these words the dangers and difficulties facing "they that go down to the sea in ships, who do business in great waters" were recognised by shore-dwellers who, in many cases, depended upon seafarers to keep them provided with many of their daily needs, and nowhere were these dangers more prevalent than in the Mediterranean Sea whose treacherous currents and offshore winds often carried the small boats far out to sea and out of sight of land.

Thus it was that about 280 BC, the Egyptian Ptolemy I instructed the famous engineer and architect Sostratos to construct a huge tower at the approaches to the Port of Alexandria to serve as a landmark for trading vessels and fishermen. The huge structure was built in three stages, all sloping inward, the top cylindrical, the middle octagonal and the bottom square. A wide spiral ramp ran from top to bottom, thus allowing the world's first "lighthouse keepers" to use one of the two ovens at the top of the 500 feet structure for fires whose light could be seen far out to sea. Today, the structure still stands, is classed as one of the Seven Wonders of the World and at its base bears the legend " Sostratos of Cnidus, son of Dixiphanus, to the Gods protecting those upon the Sea"



The Lighthouse at Alexandria
Drawing by archaeologist Herman Thiersch (1909)

Many years later, the Romans in their conquest recognised the need for safe entry to the seaports of Europe and the remains of their light towers are visible in Dover and across the Channel in Boulogne but as that great Empire declined so did the construction of navigational aids until, that is, the Christian church realised that the construction and location of their churches and dwellings would make ideal landmarks and lighthouses.

Prevalent among these were the monks resident on the Island of Jersey and about 1300 they maintained a routine of fire-lighting from dusk to dawn on the roof of the their Abbey.

Across the Channel, in Cornwall, the tower of The Church of St. Michael's Mount displayed its warning light for some 500 years and further up-Channel the monks worshipping in the chapel on Chade Down on The Isle of Wight maintained a warning beacon for centuries. Today, the statuesque lighthouse on St. Catherine's Point fulfils that duty.

The priests serving the Chapel of St. Nicholas overlooking Ilfracombe Harbour maintained a nightly beacon as did many of their brethren in ports adjoining the North Sea.

Later, a buoyage system was introduced and, again, the Church seems to have played a major role in the provision and maintenance of these. Many of us recall the poem that related:

The good old Abbot of Aberbrothock
had placed the bell on the Inchcape Rock,
on a buoy, in a storm, it floated and swung,
and over the waves its warning rung.

Later, in 1810, the 2000 feet long reef marked by the bell was served by the Bell Rock Lighthouse.

In Ireland, the prior of The Order of St. John of Jerusalem recognised the danger posed by a huge reef off the coast of Co. Down and was instrumental in siting a large bell buoy on the seaward side of the reef. This bell was unique insofar as it was fitted with a sail which caused the bell to toll when the wind blew. Years later the bell was replaced by a shoreside granite structure with a light tower - but the name St. John's Point was retained.

Thus, the provision and maintenance of many marine lights and warning devices in medieval times appears to have been willingly adopted by the officers and followers of Christian churches adjoining seaports and harbours but, with the dissolution of the monasteries and the resulting confiscation of lands those who saw the tending and provision of these as their Christian duty disappeared, but, before this came about, some of the major trading ports like London and Newcastle-upon-Tyne had developed a semi-religious society (A Fraternity of Seamen) and they elected to look after the lights and navigational aids in their harbours.

In January 1447 the London Fraternity became a Company of Mariners located at the College of Deptford and they were granted powers to prosecute anyone found destroying or interfering with aids to navigation. In 1547 the title changed to incorporate the name "Trinity" and it became an Honourable Corporation and during the reign of William IV all interests, private and otherwise, in marine lighting and marks, were compulsory acquired by "Trinity House".

Henry VIII established The Trinity House of Newcastle and they were charged with the responsibility to build two fortification towers and fit each with " a good and steady light by night". Across the Irish Sea the Guild of St. Nicholas was given responsibility for the sea marks and lights in the approaches to Dublin, They later built six lighthouses and thus became the fore bearers of the Commissioners of Irish Lights in 1867.

In 1635, in Scotland, a Patent was granted to two Scottish engineers to build a lighthouse on the Isle of May but there is little further information on hand to indicate the formation of a Corporation or Guild similar to those instituted further South.