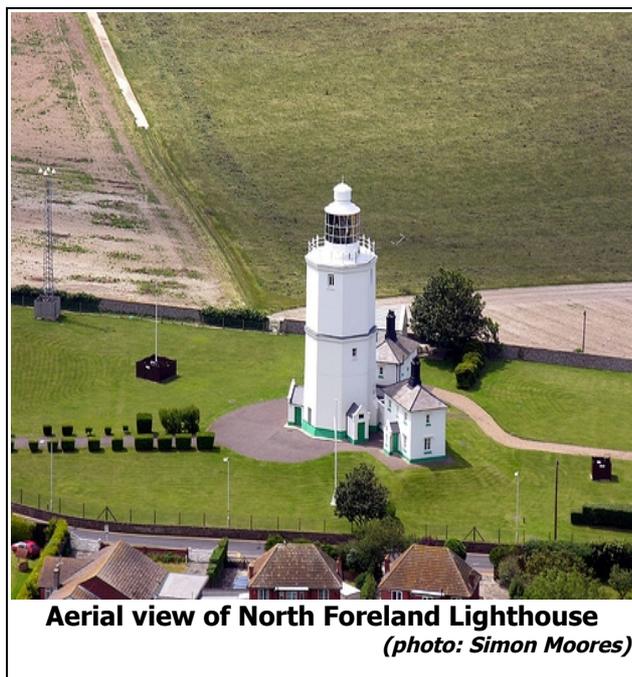




NORTH FORELAND LIGHTHOUSE & NORTH FORELAND RADIO

Most local people and many visitors to the Isle of Thanet will have seen North Foreland lighthouse, an impressive landmark on a beautiful stretch of our coastline just north of Broadstairs. North Foreland Radio is less famous but, in its day, played an equally important part in safety of life at sea. This article gives a brief history of these two "North Foreland" maritime facilities.

NORTH FORELAND LIGHTHOUSE



Aerial view of North Foreland Lighthouse
(photo: Simon Moores)

There has been a light at North Foreland since 1499, to mark the headland which forms the corner between the English Channel, the North Sea and the River Thames. The notorious Goodwin Sands are only a few miles southeast of North Foreland, and the dangerous sandbanks in the mouth of the Thames estuary are just north of it.

The original light, in 1499, was simply a fire basket on a pole, rather like the beacons which are seen locally. The first lighthouse building was constructed in 1637; this was a two-storey octagonal tower made of timber, lath and plaster, with an iron

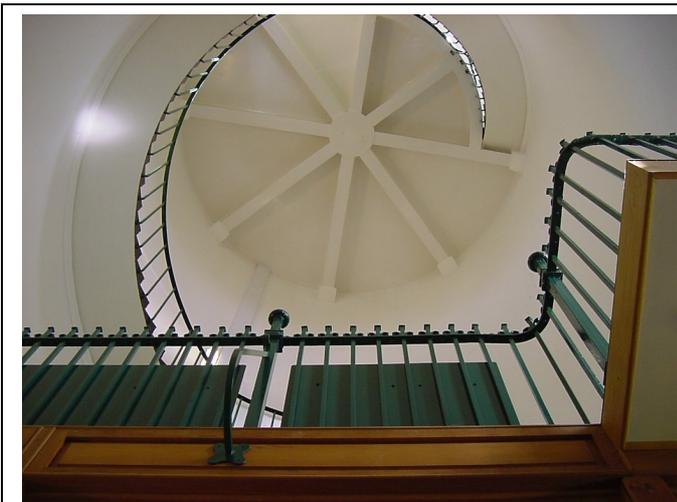
grate on top in which coal was burnt. Unfortunately, the tower was destroyed by fire in 1683.

The present lighthouse was built in 1691 from brick, stone and flint. It was originally 40 feet (12 metres) high and, like its predecessor, coal burning. In 1719, the lighthouse was handed from private ownership to the Trustees of Greenwich Hospital, the surplus from the light fees charged to ships being used

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towards the upkeep of the hospital. In the same year, the fire was enclosed in a glass lantern but this was removed in 1730 after complaints that the glass became sooty and dimmed the light. In 1793, two additional storeys were added to the tower and the coal fire was replaced by 18 oil lamps.

Trinity House, the authority responsible for lighthouses in England and Wales, purchased the lighthouse in 1832. In 1860, the two cottages adjacent to the tower were built to house the keepers, who had previously lived within the tower. There had previously been five floors in the tower, but the lower floors were removed when the cottages were built. A lantern house was built on top of the tower in 1890, bringing it to its present height of 85 feet (26 metres). The height of the light above sea level is 187 feet (57 metres).



View from the ground floor looking upwards

of the tower in 1890, bringing it to its present height of 85 feet (26 metres). The height of the light above sea level is 187 feet (57 metres).

North Foreland Lighthouse is the oldest operational lighthouse in England, and was also the last lighthouse operated by Trinity House to be automated. On 26th November 1998, the keepers left the lighthouse following a ceremony attended by HRH Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, who is

the Master of Trinity House. The lighthouse is now monitored and controlled from the Trinity House Operations Centre in Harwich.

The lighthouse was, until three years ago, visits by the public but is now closed to The tower is hollow inside, with a spiral staircase climbing around the wall. At the the stairs is a gallery, with stairs leading up another floor. The electronic equipment controlling the light is located on this floor. this level is a hatchway to the external A short ladder leads to the lantern room. actual light comprises four 500-watt lamps which operate around the clock. flash five times every twenty seconds; the characteristic of this lighthouse, which mariners to identify it and distinguish it other lights. Prior to automation in 1998, a single 3kW tungsten bulb (similar to a domestic light) was used. Four identical halogen lamps automatically rotate into place if one of the main lamps fails, and there is a second back-up



The four halogen lamps

open to visitors.

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Also at balcony. The halogen They

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of an emergency lamp mounted on the rail of the gallery. The lighthouse is powered by mains electricity, with backup from batteries and an emergency generator.

To ensure that the light can be seen from its published range of 19 miles, a huge lens surrounds the lamps. This is a 1st order catadioptric lens, and was invented by the French physicist Augustin Fresnel in 1822. The theory behind the lens is that the light from the lamps is condensed into a parallel beam, concentrating the light and enabling it to be seen from a great distance. To warn ships of treacherous Margate Sands, to the north of the lighthouse, the light passes through a red screen so that a ship in the vicinity of the Sands sees a red, rather than white, flashing light.

As might be expected, the view from the top of the lighthouse is magnificent, extending to the French coast on a clear day.



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NORTH FORELAND RADIO

North Foreland Radio (also known in the world by its radio callsign of GNF) was one of 11 medium-range coast radio stations operated by BT. These radio stations, which were situated from Wick in the north of Scotland to Land's End in Cornwall, provided radiotelephone, radiotelex and wireless telegraphy connections between ships at sea and the shore.

maritime

North Foreland Radio was built by Lloyds on land near North Foreland Lighthouse in 1901. On 31st December 1909, all coast stations were taken over by the Post Office, having previously been owned and operated by Lloyds, as in the case of North Foreland, or Marconi. By the mid-1920s, the site near the lighthouse was no longer big enough for the Post Office to improve the service by installing more powerful equipment, so the decision was taken to look for alternative sites. That selected was in Rumfields Road, Broadstairs, where the new station was opened on 8th October 1929.

The station's main purpose was to maintain a watch for ships in distress, initially using Morse code. During WW2, the station handled many distress cases – 30 during the Dunkirk evacuation in 1940 – and there was a certain amount of unofficial co-operation with the station's German equivalent, Norddeich Radio. During the course of the station's history, many lives were saved as a result of the station picking up distress calls from ships and alerting

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the authorities, so that lifeboats, helicopters or ships in the area could be sent to rescue the crews of the ship in distress.

The station also served seafarers by acting as the vital link between ship and shore, handling business and private telegrams and telephone calls. However, maritime satellite services came into operation in the 1970s, and these, along with the introduction of mobile telephones in the 1980s, sounded the death-knell for the coast radio station service. Radio operating staff left North Foreland Radio in 1991, leaving the station remotely-controlled from other stations, and the station closed altogether a few years later. There is now no trace of North Foreland Radio – the site where the station operated for almost 70 years is now an Asda supermarket.

This article is based on material in Margate Museum Research Archive where further detail and photographs may be seen on request.