

SKERRYVORE LIGHTHOUSE FIRE

1954

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AT LIGHTHOUSE

Men Tell Of Night Of Terror

'Officials of the Northern Lighthouse Board were in Oban today, conducting an inquiry into a fire and explosions which burned out Skerryvore, the world's largest lighthouse, on Tuesday night. Skerryvore, which stands on rock ten miles south-west of Tiree in the Inner Hebrides, is to-day a burned-out hulk. The three keepers were rescued yesterday after they had clung to a rock in the Atlantic for nearly 12 hours, Principal keeper John Mowatt and his two assistants, Malcolm MacKinnon and James Jaffray, all married men, were found by the lighthouse tender *Hesperus* when it arrived on a routine trip with their reliefs. In a night of terror, with the Atlantic breaking over them, the three men crouched on a narrow ledge of rock in fear that the 158-foot tower, weakened by fire and shaken by explosions from rocket and other signal charges, would fall on top of them.' (*Edinburgh Evening News*, 18 March 1954, p. 5)

CLEARING THE DEBRIS

'It is hard for a landsman to realise the difficulty of even clearing out the debris from the burnt-out tower. Skerryvore ... is exposed to the full fetch of the Atlantic. Without men on the rock to operate the derrick at the landing stage, conditions were the same as those which faced Alan Stevenson and his men before the tower was built over a century ago. Rough weather made landing quite impossible for three weeks on end in April, and time and again since then, attempts to land have been baulked. The officers and crew of the lighthouse tender *Hesperus* from Oban did magnificent work in seizing every chance to land men on the rock, and, when this was possible, worked as long as 11 hours at a stretch without a "square meal". Two rooms and the kitchen have now been made habitable, and bunks have been rigged up for the five men living in the tower. A cooking stove, paraffin radiators, and an oil-burning refrigerator are in use. Wireless communication with Oban has been re-established, and there is a special watch on shore to receive calls from Skerryvore. Investigations into the cause of the fire have not yet been completed. With the glass of the lantern shattered and the entrance door open, the tower formed a funnel, through which the fire raged. Oil stored in the huge tanks sunk in the solid base caught fire, but it is remarkable that no one in Tiree appears to have seen the blaze, and it was not reported by any passing ship.' (*The Scotsman*, 8 June 1954, p. 3)

LIVERPOOL MEN ON SKERRYVORE

Visited by Lord Mayor

'Five Liverpool men working on the repair of Skerryvore Lighthouse off the West Highland coast were visited by their Lord Mayor on Tuesday. Some of the men have been on the Rock for the past three months, their only contact with the outside world being by radiotelephone, or routine visits from the Northern Lighthouse ship *Hesperus*, and a small fishing boat, the *Monsoon*, from the Island of Tiree. Lord Mayor of Liverpool, Alderman Reginald R. Bailey, at present spending a few days' holiday in the West Highland coastal resort of Oban, heard that Liverpool men were employed on the rock and expressed the desire to visit them. The Northern Lighthouse Board was contacted, and permission was given by the Board for the Mayor to join the *Hesperus* on Tuesday when it was taking supplies to the lighthouse. After a four-and-a-half hour voyage from Oban, the *Hesperus*, under the command of Captain Galbraith, dropped anchor off Skerryvore at 11 o'clock and the Mayor was taken ashore by motorboat.

'As he clambered ashore, he was welcomed by the men, who were delighted to see someone from the mainland and especially someone from their home town. The Lord Mayor spent nearly four hours on the rock inspecting the lighthouse and talking to the men. He was also shown a two-foot saithe caught the night before by one of the men who, when they are not working, spend their time reading, fishing from the reef or bathing. They also play darts and listen to the wireless. All of them seem to have enjoyed their stay on the rock and have not been bored. Said F. Webster, just back from a few days' leave at home: "I am glad to get back to the Rock. Life on the mainland was too hectic."

'Before leaving Skerryvore, the Lord Mayor had a cup of tea prepared by Lighthouse Keeper Fisher in the men's kitchen 100 feet above the rock. It will be recalled that in March of last year the Skerryvore lighthouse was severely damaged by fire, as a result of which it was impossible to maintain it as a manned light. A lightship was then moored near the reef to warn shipping of the dangerous rocks and temporary repairs were carried out to the lighthouse so that it could eventually be used as an unmanned light. More extensive repairs have now been carried out. The interior has been completely restored. It is expected that the grouting and filling in of cracks on the exterior of the 150-foot tower will be completed before the end of this month. Preliminary work for the restoration of the lighthouse was carried out in the spring by the Oban contracting firm of D. and J. MacDougall, and sealing of all cracks and damage to the stone work as a result of the fire has been completed by Whitley Moran and Company Ltd. of Liverpool.' (*Oban Times and Argyllshire Advertiser*, 13 August 1955)

LIGHTHOUSE RESTORED

'The restoration of Skerryvore lighthouse 60 miles from the Argyll coast which was destroyed by fire in March 1954 has just been completed. Later this month, the six men who have been completing the repairs, started in 1956, will return to the mainland, and the lighthouse will again become a permanent manned station.' (*The Scotsman*, 3 September 1958, p. 5)

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