

The last lighthouse may have been automated in 1998, but these steadfast structures still need maintaining. We meet the new breed of men and women who spend their time looking after some of the UK's iconic towers

**T**he ship went down in April 1813, painfully close to the shore. Struck by snowy squalls, whaling vessel the Oscar was swept onto the rocks near Aberdeen. In desperation her crew chopped down the main mast, hoping to use it as a bridge, but it collapsed into the sea. Only two of the reported 44 men on board survived. Families grieved, and the community clamoured for a lighthouse to illuminate the harbour. Twenty years later, the tower at Girdle Ness was built – a tall, tapering cylinder, painted white, that served as a comfort to seamen.

It has shone ever since, just like the hundreds of other lighthouses dotted around our coastline – from the soaring tower at Flamborough Head in the East to the rather squat Lundy South in the Bristol Channel.

At Girdle Ness – just like at all lighthouses – a series of keepers dedicated their lives to ensuring the light stayed on, working with sperm oil burners and paraffin lamps, through to electrification. In 1991, the light was automated, and the last keepers moved out. But it still has a dedicated warden who visits quietly every month. Retired NHS therapist Pamela Cornwallis, 57, works part-time to keep the lighthouse in order.

She is one of 71 retained lighthouse keepers in the UK and Ireland. The Northern Lighthouse Board, responsible for towers across Scotland and the Isle of Man, currently employs 18, while Trinity House, the lighthouse authority for England, Wales and the Channel Islands, has 20 attendants on its books, of which 16 are over the age of 50. In Ireland, 33 man its towers.

'I've been out sailing on a foggy night,' says Pamela. 'I know how it feels when you see that light where it's meant to be.'

Navigational systems tell you where they think you are, but the lighthouse confirms it. Plus, this technology isn't infallible. 'When it breaks, a paper chart, a compass and a lighthouse will get you a long way,' she adds.

Since January, Pamela has visited Girdle Ness to perform meter readings and battery checks, clean windows ('who knew how much fun that would be with a view of rugged coastline, crashing waves, ships coming and going'), and scrub the vast spiral staircase. 'You can see where the steps are slightly worn,' she

says. 'It makes me think of the folk that climbed up and down them before me.'

If she identifies a problem, she reports it to the board, who will summon a technician. Otherwise, she keeps the tower tidy, soaks up its history (wondering about the Egyptian motifs carved into the walls), and waves to passing ships, keeping an eye out for dolphins and minke whales. She also looks after two other lighthouses in Aberdeenshire.

While these roles attract retirees looking for something different, like Pamela, others come from the last generation of full-time keepers, unable to shake a lifelong love affair with these curious buildings. They remember what Pamela can only imagine: swaying towers on blustery nights, long shifts on watch, diverse hobbies pursued to pass the time on remote posts (kite fishing, bookbinding, rugmaking). Whether seduced by the solitude or the engineering – a design inspired by the bough of an oak tree after earlier efforts toppled – they were reluctant to leave lighthouses behind.

Among them is Mark Sythes, 60, who was born at a lighthouse in Cumbria where his father, Desmond, was keeper. 'Lighthouses are in my blood,' he says. Mark spent much of his childhood at Whitby Lighthouse in North Yorkshire, scouring the cliffs for fossils and watching passersby sprint to escape the wail of the foghorn, fingers stuffed in their ears, chased by cows. His mother would feed the seagulls; his father, in need of a pastime, was a skilled painter.

Desmond nearly missed his own wedding in the mid-1950s. He had been stationed at the notorious Wolf Rock near Land's End, named after the howling noise it makes when whipped by wind. Built on a rock out to sea, this was ultimate isolation. Keepers would spend a month on these 'rock' towers, then a month back on land. But before helicopters came into play, this was a schedule ruled by the weather – the sea had to be calm enough for a boat

**Looking out**  
Pamela  
checks in at  
Girdle Ness  
lighthouse in  
Aberdeenshire



JOANNE CRAWFORD, ALAMY

# Keeping watch

by  
REBECCA  
NORRIS



**On the rocks**  
The tower at  
Flamborough  
Head in North  
Yorkshire



☛ to come and fetch them. A bemused London vicar had been briefed for the possibility that the happy couple might arrive a week, even a fortnight, after their proposed wedding date. In the end, Desmond got off the rock just in time.

This isolated lifestyle demanded more than a flexible calendar. Partners were left on shore – Mark's parents would communicate using flag semaphore (families were more likely to be assigned to cushier stations on land). Three men would occupy the tower together, taking turns to cook and clean, sleeping in bunk beds built into the circular shape of the wall – it was said that keepers must have curved spines. Back then, toilets weren't guaranteed out on the rocks. Instead, the men would climb to the top of the tower to perform a manoeuvre known as the 'bucket and chuck it'. 'You always had to check which way the wind was blowing,' says Mark.

It wasn't for everyone, but Mark wanted to be a keeper too. It was a disappointment when he left school a month after Trinity House stopped hiring trainee keepers in 1980, but a wonderful surprise when he received a call out of the blue, five years later, offering him a lighthouse keeper job. He travelled around the country, providing holiday and sickness cover for keepers across 19 towers. Then, for three years, he was stationed



at Trevoze Head in Cornwall, where he played a lot of Scrabble, and on one stormy night, his bedroom window blew in at 2am.

That light was automated in 1995, and Mark was made redundant. Since then, he has worked as a part-time attendant back at Whitby, taking care of the lighthouse where he grew up. Fifteen years ago, he took on another Yorkshire tower, Flamborough Head.

'Lighthouses are my tranquil place,' says Mark, who also works at the Co-op. 'I like



'We're custodians of the country's history. It's important to pass them on to whoever comes next'



**Still shining**  
As a keeper, Mark must ensure his lighthouses are clean, tidy and in good working order

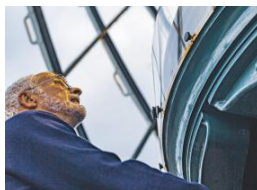


doing my best to keep them how I remember them, back when everything was top notch.'

While lighthouse keeping is no longer a livelihood, it remains an adventure. Geoff Badland, 80, is a former customs officer who became a lighthouse attendant in

retirement; he has looked after Strumble Head Lighthouse in Pembrokeshire for 25 years. He leads tours for the public and visits at least six times a year for maintenance and caretaking. He is also on call 24/7 for any emergencies, such as intruder alarms, though rodents are the usual culprits. Too fond of going home at night, he says he wouldn't have fancied the live-in lifestyle.

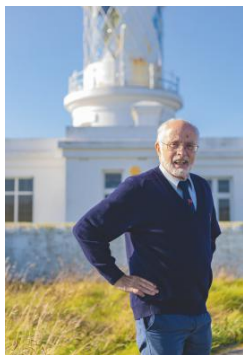
This lighthouse stands on a rocky island, accessible via a locked iron bridge. Below, the



sea rolls. 'If it's a lovely day, it's beautiful out there,' says Geoff. 'There's seals, rare birds like peregrines and choughs – and you see the occasional dolphin.'

But the weather is not always so kind. Geoff recalls one windy day, a few years ago, when the spray from the waves reached the lantern room at the top of the tower. Deciding to head home early, he struggled to close the door behind him. Unable to stand, he sheltered behind a wall for half an hour, before crossing the bridge on his hands and knees. 'That was a bit hairy,' he says.

There is also the odd mystery. Once, about a decade ago, Geoff locked the bridge behind him as usual and scaled the many stairs to the doorstep, where he found a copy of the Yellow



**Ray of light**  
Geoff, 80, has looked after Strumble Head – situated on a rocky island in Pembrokeshire (top) – for over 25 years

## ROOMS WITH A VIEW Holiday at a lighthouse

**Girdle Ness, Aberdeenshire**  
The lighthouse cottages at Girdle Ness are available to hire – you may even meet Pamela on one of her visits. [northernlightsapartmentsaberdeen.co.uk](http://northernlightsapartmentsaberdeen.co.uk)

**Belle Tout, East Sussex**  
Decommissioned in 1902, this lighthouse at Beachy Head is now a B&B, after being rebuilt in the 1950s. The lantern room is a lounge with panoramic sea views. [belletout.co.uk](http://belletout.co.uk)

**Corsewall Lighthouse Hotel, Dumfries and Galloway**  
Constructed in 1816, this has been converted into a hotel and restaurant, with a menu showcasing local produce. [lighthousehotel.co.uk](http://lighthousehotel.co.uk)

**West Usk, Newport**  
Next to a 200-year-old lighthouse, this cabin comes with a private hot tub and terrace overlooking the Severn Estuary. [westusklighthouse.co.uk](http://westusklighthouse.co.uk)



Pages. 'I thought I was seeing things,' he says. At low water, he explains, it's a dry walk to the lighthouse underneath the bridge. 'Still, you have to scramble down the rocks, pick your way across the seaweed, and shoot up the rocks on the other side.'

It's a mission the unidentified postman must have taken on – for a laugh, perhaps, or in case the mice ever needed to source a plumber. 'I've kept the copy out there for posterity,' adds Geoff.

Lighthouses continue to guide ships to safety, while serving as monuments to the generations of keepers who once lived within their walls. Attendants look after them – in exchange, these modern keepers become part of their story, too. 'We're custodians of the country's history,' says Pamela. 'It's important to pass them on to whoever comes next.' ☛