

The Great Light



Donegal Lighthouse Keeper Sean Doherty

The last lighthouse keeper attending Tory Island lighthouse was Sean Doherty. He retired in December 2014 after serving Irish Lights for 41 years.

Sean is from Inishowen, Donegal. His family had a farm and shop and supplied the lighthouse keepers at the Inishowen lighthouse. It was suggested to him that he might apply to Irish Lights to be a lighthouse keeper. In the 1960s, Irish Lights would take on 20 new recruits each year.

The application included an interview, a written English test, a swimming test and a medical. He was successful in 1963. His uniform was a navy jacket with brass buttons, navy trousers, white shirt, navy tie and a white cap.

The new recruits were sent to the Baily Lighthouse to learn what they were supposed to do. While learning the practical side he also had to learn facts about all the lighthouses around Ireland. He would be periodically tested on his knowledge. Sean was taught how to light the burners, dismantle and clean them, pump up the paraffin from the oil store to the lantern and ensure everything was prepared for the night. After a year's probation Sean became a Supernumerary Assistant Keeper - and referred to as a 'new trainee keeper on probation'. During that first year he had just three weeks leave. After one year he went through a practical examination on all he had learnt and passed. He was then made permanent.

He was then dispatched to lighthouses around Ireland as a Relief Assistant Keeper. It was a practice to deliberately move the young SAKs around the lighthouses on a frequent basis to gain experience. He did this for a further four years before being made Assistant Keeper at Tory Lighthouse in 1968. During this period, he worked four weeks on and two weeks off. On his weeks off he went back to the farm on Inishowen as there was always much to do.



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There were three men on each lighthouse and often one relief who was a trainee. A relief came out every two weeks, weather permitting. They all stayed in the keeper's accommodation, and made their own meals etc. There was separate accommodation for any workmen who came to the lighthouse. Initially there was family accommodation, with a school for children, but in the 1960s Irish Lights decided that only the lighthouse keepers would be stationed on the off-shore island.

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The men sometimes walked into the village, but there were no hotels or pubs on the island. At that time there were about 300 people living there and they had cows, grew oats, potatoes, caught lobsters and fish – which they salted for the winter.

The men were taken to the island by a half deck 10m (33ft) boat from Bunbeg but often had to wait for calm seas. The journey took several hours. On arriving at the southern harbour they were met by a man with a pony and cart. He loaded up their personal belongings, and any supplies, and took those to the lighthouse. The men walked.

Life as a lighthouse keeper was busy. They had to clean all the burners and take them apart and clean them every week. They cleaned the lenses, checked the oil and ensured that there was enough paraffin oil and prepare for lighting the light at dusk.

During the day, they were also responsible for receiving messages from the Baily radio telephone and then phone them through to Irish Lights.

They also acted as a relay station, sending messages to Mew Island. Each station relayed messages around the coast. The messages may have related to supplies, repairs etc. The radio was operated at the hours of 8, 11, 2 and 4. Their shift was four hours on and eight hours off.

- 6am-10am
- 10am-2pm
- 2pm-6pm
- 6pm-10pm

Sean remembers the old fog horn which was removed in the 1970s. It worked off compressed gas produced in the engine room and the lighthouse. The air was released into the diaphone which has three outlets facing SW, N and NW.

When the light was lit by paraffin oil it only rotated at night. The lamps were lit at dusk. The mantle was lit using a methylated spirit lamp which had to be warmed before lighting. The light was rotated by a drop weight

clockwork mechanism. This meant that it had to be wound every half an hour to return the weights to the top. So, the keeper on duty climbed the steps every half an hour whilst on duty. They could stay in the watch room, just down from the lantern room, so the climb was not as long. Lighthouse keepers were sacked if the light went out. Sometimes they would linger at the top of the lighthouse to save one journey, but not often.

At dawn the light was extinguished, and the optic was stopped rotating. As the optic was a large magnifying glass, it could magnify the sun's ray and start a fire inside the optic at the focal point. The linen drapes were therefore drawn or dropped down at dawn to prevent this. The keepers would use the same material for the windows in their accommodation, so they could sleep during the day if they had been on night duty.

Sean left Tory after three years. Over the years he was stationed in many of the lighthouses around Ireland. He particularly liked Island Magee. His daughter remembers visiting one Christmas and being terrified Santa would not come as the accommodation had no chimneys.

In 1996, after 25 years, Sean returned to Tory Island. While he was away the light source was converted to electricity in 1972. At the same time the intensity of the light was increased giving a range of 30 nautical miles. The duration of the flash was increased to 0.2 seconds. The electricity was generated on site. Once the light was converted to electric power, the motor could turn the optic all day. As the new lamps were more powerful than paraffin light, only the upper tier was lit with the lower tier used for emergencies. There were also two emergency lanterns on the balconies powered by batteries.

In 1990 the lighthouse was automated and controlled from Dun Laoghaire. There was no need for lighthouse keepers. The lighthouse was then cared for by attendants and Irish Light's staff.

Sean bought the Harbour Hotel on Tory Island, and his family now runs it.