THE UNMANNED LIGHT VESSEL ON STATION

The South Goodwin Light Vessel

JOHN OWEN

As the twenty-first century looms ahead a major change off the Port of Dover has occurred almost imperceptively. In line with all Trinity House Lightships[1] the SOUTH GOODWIN LIGHT VESSEL is now fully automatic. Since 1985 she has been bereft of all human attention except for the periodic maintenance team. Viewed from afar there there appears to be no change as the original manned vessel is to remain, albeit modified, at least for the present. That special breed of men who gave service to seafarers by manning these essential lightships for well over a hundred years have gone ashore for the last time. Their special kind of service is well understood in the Dover area, many of us having also served at sea. The reliability of these navigational beacons in all conditions of weather, reflects the high degree of professionalism of the crewmen.

From the beginning it was envisaged that unmanned beacons should act as seamarks to warn seafarers of the dangers particular to this stretch of coast.

THE MANNED LIGHT VESSEL OFF-STATION FOR RE-FIT

96 Many ideas were put forward to reduce the tremendous loss of vessels, both sail and steam, on or about the Goodwin Sands and these are well-documented in Richard Larn's *'Goodwin Sands Shipwrecks"*.

It so happened that manned wooden vessels anchored in the vicinity of the hazard, with a rudimentary light beacon installed, were considered the best expedient at the time and remained so with gradual improvements until quite recently.

Imagine the special circumstances their crews had to endure. In the early days living conditions were poor. Communication with the shore was limited to visual signals. When problems occurred in poor visibility the firing of cannon (it was hoped) would alert those ashore. Assistance in those days would arrive by oar or by sail and many feats of heroism are chronicled in Stanley-Treanor's books *'Heroes of the Goodwin Sands'*, *'The Cry of the Sea'* and *'The Log of a Sky Pilot'*.[2]

The NORE LIGHT VESSEL was the first of its kind in this country, being put into position as early as 1732. The Goodwin Sands followed with a number of such vessels in strategic positions, the SOUTH GOODWIN LIGHT VESSEL (South Head Light) of 184 tons commencing duty in 1832.

One of the last 'Christmas Cheer' missions to the South Goodwin L.V. with gifts from Dover well-wishers.

Dover Express photo

Lightships have no means of propulsion, relying on the strong bridle chain and mushroom anchor to maintain position and safety of the crew. Steel vessels, better living conditions and improved equipment were constantly being introduced for the crew, but in the end, foul weather could rule out assistance either by sea or air and often the men had only their sheer professionalism and courage to see them through.

Generally the crew of seven worked four weeks afloat followed by two weeks shore leave. Former crewman George Goldsmith-Carter, in his books *'The Goodwin Sands'* and *'Looming Lights'*, gives a vivid insight into the lightship service, especially during hostilities when they had to endure the additional hazard of enemy action. But what of more normal times? Melancholy, it seems, was the worst malady, sitting offshore, as they were, within a 'stone's throw' of habitation, night after night, day after day, taking all that the elements could throw at them. Can one even begin to imagine the feelings of the crew, perhaps long overdue for relief due to bad weather? The foghorn, which could kill an alighting bird stone dead on the first blast we are told and which we know is bad enough heard from ashore, must have been a disturbing experience in itself, amidst the gloom and eeriness of the conditions. Only a cynic would say that they 'got used to it'. Then there was the very real danger of collision, which was ever present, if not in fog then from vessels out of control due to gear failure of one sort or another, as the incidents of November 1904, March 1929 and March 1969 show; just three of the occasions when the SOUTH GOODWIN was run down with great danger to the crew.

Being the closest lightship to Dover, the SOUTH GOODWIN might reasonably be considered by us to be special. Crewmen, however, hailed from far and wide, the common denominator being that they had sound sea-going experience behind them. They were men 'with the sea in their veins'. Who else would do the job !

Such a man was Harry Lynn, former Petty Officer, Royal Navy, one of the few survivors of H.M.S. GLORIOUS, sunk by enemy action in 1940, whom the sea ultimately claimed, when all the crew of the SOUTH GOODWIN were lost in the foul weather of 27/28 November 1954. A special breed of men indeed! Dover's traditional regard for the work of the SOUTH GOODWIN LIGHT VESSEL crew was shared by many, but few had the privilege of meeting them. Visible as she is, a bare five miles off the harbour her friendly double wink (Gp Fl (2) 30sec) especially greets one at the point dead centre of the harbour's eastern entrance as one steps over the threshold of the Prince of Wales Pier, perhaps on a summer evening's stroll. 'All's Well', seemingly, is the message.

The annual Christmas comforts and good wishes from a caring community ashore, delivered by lifeboat coxswain Tony Hawkins and by his father and others before him, blessed by a sky pilot with prayers and carols, have now all passed into history.

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1 Hilary Mead, *Trinity House*

2 'Sky Pilot,' once a sailor's term for padres of the Mission to Seamen and clergymen in general.