

The Varne Lightvessel...

...out of sight but not forgotten

— by A.R.Lane —

Moored some eight miles offshore from Dover, alone but for the many passing ships that it guides, lies the *Varne* lightship. A Channel sentinel for more than 140 years, this red-painted vessel, which formerly carried its name emblazoned in large white letters along its sides, has long remained out of mind and almost out of sight of those ashore. Many were those who formed its crew during the considerably more than a century that it was manned and numerous were the storms they endured. The following is a tribute to those who served at the *Varne* during peace and a brief period of war. They were an unusual breed of men who came from far and wide, who had often forsaken a life of deep water roving for a more secure, but stationary career almost within sight of home.

The *Varne* was a relatively late addition to offshore seamarks, being placed at the western end of the shoal of the same name in 1860. At that time the 100-foot wooden vessel showed, unusually, a red light to approaching mariners and carried a globe at her masthead as a topmark recognizable in daylight at a great distance.

In the late-Victorian years lifeboats and lightships held a great fascination for people judging by the number of periodical articles and books published on these subjects at that time. Numerous stories appeared describing the lives of the crews and the working of the

lightships around the Goodwin Sands. Although these tended to diminish in the twentieth century, due perhaps to the recording of more dramatic events from two World Wars, occasional stories continued until very wide publicity was given to the loss of the *South Goodwin* vessel and all her crew in November 1954.



Lightvessel No.65 was typical in design of those stationed at the *Varne* in earlier years. This picture taken in 1958 shows her acting as relief vessel very shortly before the end of her career. It illustrates also the sea conditions that are only too frequently experienced at the eastern end of the Channel.

Photo credit - John G. Callis

The *Varne*, however, escaped coverage in nearly all of these accounts. The station was, in fact, the least popular of those on the Kent coast. It experienced the worst weather and was the last to be relieved by the Trinity House tender - any delays experienced in changing the crews at the *Tongue* and four *Goodwins* vessels, for example, would delay the departure of those returning home from the *Varne*.

Additionally, while the *Goodwin* (later *North Goodwin*) station received regularly

the most modern type of vessel and various other locations the first of any new development, such as a revolving light, the first compressed air driven foghorn, or the first electric light, the *Varne* received no such distinction, remaining totally manual in operation until about 1930. Trinity House wooden vessel No. 35 was dedicated to the *Varne* for more than fifty years from about 1876, being removed only for periodical repairing and refitting. Obviously, the improvements earlier described eventually arrived but the ships stationed there remained oil lit until the Second World War.

The crew of vessel No. 35 had to hand crank the pump-action windlass, wind the clock about every half-hour at night to rotate the lamps, work the foot pedal for the fog horn, do their own cooking, maintain the ship, clean and trim the lamps, all for the two months that they were aboard on each turn of duty. This same vessel, equally, had very basic accommodation for the six crew in the forecabin and a separate cabin for the master close to the stern. It has to be said that life was hard for seafarers everywhere in those early years, and particularly at the time of the Great Depression.

The arrival of the wooden vessel No. 56 in the early thirties, while basically of a similar design to No. 35, brought with it the improvements of a power-driven windlass and siren foghorn. Installed aboard were a pair of 14 HP Hornsby, hot bulb, semi-diesel engines which could compress air to a pressure of 90 psi. A major part of the manual work was thus removed and a much louder fog signal could be produced. The crew received 2d. an hour as extra payment for enduring the noise.



A victim of the dramatic collision of January 1971, only the stern of the Panamanian tanker *Texaco Caribbean* remained for a while above water. This multiple wreck near the *Varne* sandbank claimed the life of her master, Captain Giurini who had only just returned to sea after a long period ashore.

Photo credit - John G. Callis

By the Christmas of 1938 vessel No. 48 was allocated to the station, but further progress finally arrived in the form of steel ship No. 75 just prior to the war. This luxury was short lived, however, for between 25th September and 23rd October 1939, a minefield was laid between Folkestone and Cap Gris Nez, and the *Varne* lightvessel, becoming redundant, was moved to mark the *South Folkestone Gate* of this barrage, three-and-a-half miles southeast of the town. As the Germans approached closer to the French coast the vessel must have seemed a tempting target, particularly as she still carried a tall Marconi wireless mast right aft. On 15th August 1940 vessel No. 75 suffered a sustained attack from the air and was sunk with the loss of two crew members and the other five wounded. All exposed south-eastern lightvessels were withdrawn shortly afterwards and the *Varne* was not marked again until after the war.

On the credit side, the *Varne* suffered far fewer collisions in peacetime than the vessels surrounding the Goodwins, but those that occurred were traumatic enough. In January 1971, a tremendous

explosion resulted from contact between the Panamanian tanker *Texaco Caribbean* and the Peruvian freighter *Paracas* near the mid-Varne buoy. The blast, which blew the tanker apart, broke windows in Folkestone, so those aboard the lightvessel, while not directly involved, must have received a severe shock. Worse still, two other ships ran over the sunken wreckage of the tanker, joining it on the bottom of the Straits, so that, in total, some fifty sailors lost their lives, including the Italian captain of the *Texaco Caribbean*. He had only recently returned to sea, it being his first voyage after a long period ashore. After this event the masters of both the *Varne* and the *South Goodwin* vessels were asked to monitor the number of vessels passing through the Straits in consideration of a plan for future organized routing of ships through separate channels.

Just over ten years later, on 28th June 1981, the lightship was a victim of an unusual collision when a tug, the *Suzanne*,

was towing the 18,000-gross ton ore carrier *Ore Meteor* to Yugoslavia for demolition. Misjudging the wind and tide, the tug passed one side of the lightvessel while the tow passed the other, the ore carrier inflicting considerable damage on the forward part of new vessel No. 21 on station at the time. The lantern and foremast were smashed completely and the crew, including master John Rudd, was lucky to escape without injury.

An unusual event of a different nature occurred when the master of the *Varne* reported a foreign trawler for fishing within British territorial limits. Sometime later the vessel concerned dumped the fisheries protection party aboard the lightship and then escaped.

Except for these occasional adventures, life on the lightvessel was inevitably one of routine in terms of set duties for the lamplighters, fog-signal drivers and seamen. Sometimes there was an alarm when a ship sailed too close to them or the sandbank for its safety and the crew rushed to fire their carronades, or later, their flash, sound and trace rockets.

After the Second World War a variety of modern, steel lightvessels were moored at the *Varne* over different periods. These offered much improved accommodation over the earlier wooden ones and the station no longer lagged behind others. Aboard vessels Nos. 20 and 21 all of the crew had individual cabins. Now serving only one month afloat at a time, they afterwards enjoyed two weeks leave ashore following relief. While the changeover of crews by helicopter instead of tender commenced in



On 28th June 1981 the modern lightvessel No.21 was struck by the ore carrier *Ore Meteor* in tow of a tug. The foremast was flattened and the lantern shattered causing early withdrawal of the lightship for repairs. Her master said the crew were very lucky to escape without injury.

Photo credit - Maritime and Coastguard Agency

about 1975, the end of the era of manning was not far off. Early in 1986 vessel No. 20 was removed with her full crew for the last time and automated vessel No. 7 was installed in her place. Except for the period of the two wars the vessel had been continuously manned since 1860.

There was a parallel intention at that time by

Trinity House to replace lightships, which were more expensive to build and maintain, by large automatic navigation buoys, known in short as Lanbys and the *Varne* was one of the ten stations to receive one (Lanby No. 309) at the end of 1987. In the event, these did not prove as successful as anticipated as they were very difficult to work on in exposed waters. Therefore by July 1995 vessel No. 20 was back at the *Varne*, now in automated form with a continuously running diesel engine to provide power for the light and electric fog signal.

In the early seventies, owing to the creation of a traffic separation zone in the Straits of Dover the mooring position of the *Varne* was altered from the western to the eastern end of the sandbank, the new position being: 51° 01.2N; 1° 24.0E., the vessel at that time giving a red flash every 20 seconds and one diaphone blast every 30 seconds in fog.

After automation the operation of the vessel was monitored from North Foreland lighthouse but by 1996/7, when that station was in turn being prepared for



Between 1987 and 1995 the *Varne* lightvessel was replaced by a large automatic navigation buoy. The Trinity House buoy tender *Lodesman* is here seen working at the *Varne* during this period. In the end these buoys proved too uncomfortable and difficult to work on in any kind of sea and they were nearly all withdrawn and scrapped.

Source of photo unknown

automatic working, supervision was passed to a central location for monitoring of all lights at the Harwich Depot of Trinity House.

After its relatively insignificant beginnings the *Varne* is one of the few lightships which now remain. While stations more famous in earlier literature like the *Nore*, the *Gull* and the *North Goodwin* have been replaced by buoys, the *Varne* remains now among the most important, marking as it does, with the *Channel*, *Sandettie* and *F-3* vessels major points of navigational significance to the enormous numbers of ships which thus pass safely through the Straits of Dover.

Crises can still occur, however, for on the 25th October 1998, the *Varne* broke adrift in strong south-westerly winds and drifted along the south-west shipping lane towards the north-east until sighted by the coastguards at Dover. A Trinity House tender was dispatched to recover the vessel and it was soon re-moored in its correct place. It may be assumed, therefore, that after some years of neglect the history of the *Varne* lightship is not yet complete.