

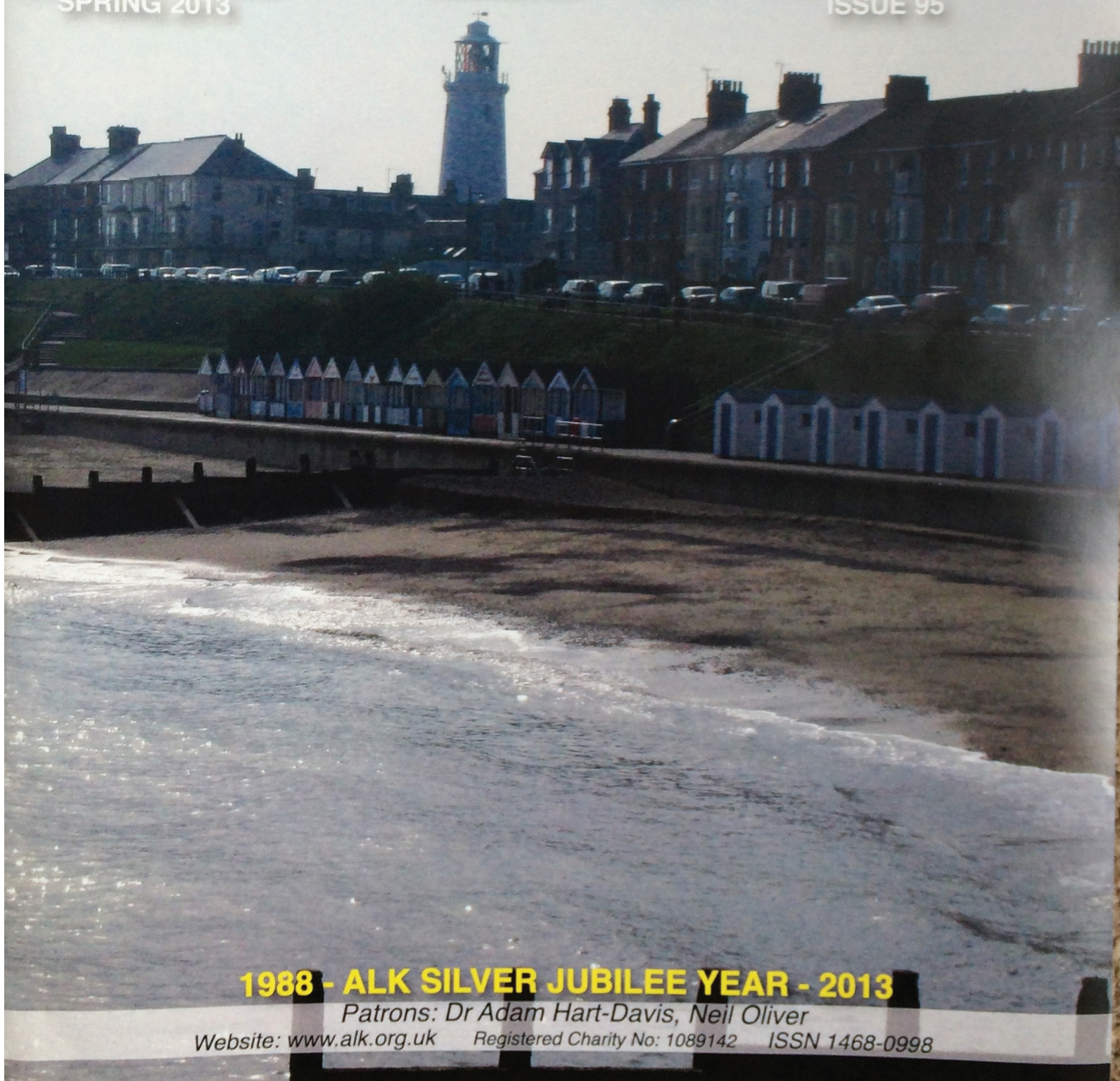
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THE LIGHTHOUSE

Links with the past are both random and fragile, and the farther back into history they penetrate, the slighter they become. It often appears that archaeologists spend their lives studying what comedian Eddie Izzard once called, "a series of small walls." From such remains and small fragments of broken pots, they seem able to reconstruct deep knowledge about previous generations. In the case of lighthouse keepers, however, there are plenty of walls to study, but few hard facts about the people who lived and worked around them, especially in times before the first censuses were carried out. The upper classes were

always named in official documents; the working classes almost never. So, to discover information about our working class ancestors, we need a lot of luck as well as hard work. Church records are one of the most fertile areas of research, but are limited to the essential facts of birth, marriage and death. So the publication of an article in a little-known Christian publication called *The Lightkeeper* proved to be a rare golden nugget in the story of lighthouse-keeping. [1]

My mother was Helen Knott, a descendant of the Knott family of lighthouse keepers. Although a verbal message had been passed from parent to child

over the years, by the time I received it, there was little substance other than that my ancestors had been lighthouse keepers. It was enough to spark my interest and a lifelong desire to find out more about lighthouses and the people who made them work.

The article in *The Lightkeeper* was a great start. Thankfully, one of my great uncles had kept a copy of the original. (He later gave it to me.) It presented the story of five generations of continuous service in lighthouses by the Knotts of southeast Kent, and it even

printed photographs of three of them! This publication remains one of the earliest pieces of hard data about a vital occupation in social history.

Thanks to this article in a low-circulation magazine, the lighthouse historian, David Stevenson, then reported in his definitive book that, during the period from 1730 to 1910, Knotts had been (probably) the longest continuously serving family of keepers in lighthouse history.

[2]. A member from each of five generations had, he said, served at South Foreland.

Thanks to research by Betty Roberts, it later turned out that there were no less than eight family members who had served as keepers. [3]

Geographically, South Foreland is at the narrowest point of the English Channel, on the



Henry Knott - 1819 - 1880

SE FAMILY KNOTT

by Ken Trethewey

English side, of course. Through history it has been a strategic site very close to the entrance to Dover harbour where the mad Roman emperor Caligula, in a rare moment of clarity, ordered a lighthouse to be built in what are now the grounds of Dover Castle.

It was at South Foreland, a mile or two east of Dover, atop the world-renowned white cliffs, that Sir John Meldrum constructed two lights for the first time in 1634. (Another light was built at North Foreland under the same licence from the King.) They were not much like the lighthouses we recognise today. At first they were merely huts constructed of timber and plaster; they didn't need much height because of their cliff-top altitude. Above the basic living accommodation was an open platform where a coal fire was kept burning in a cast iron grate. In return for the relatively small outlay and a £20 per annum rental, Sir John was entitled to charge a halfpenny per ton of ship cargo carried past the light. It made him rich. Soon he was making no less than £1,900 per annum and the Brethren of Trinity House, smarting with the knowledge that it might have been the Corporation that was making the profits, sourly complained to the King about profiteering. The King must have been amused for he did nothing.

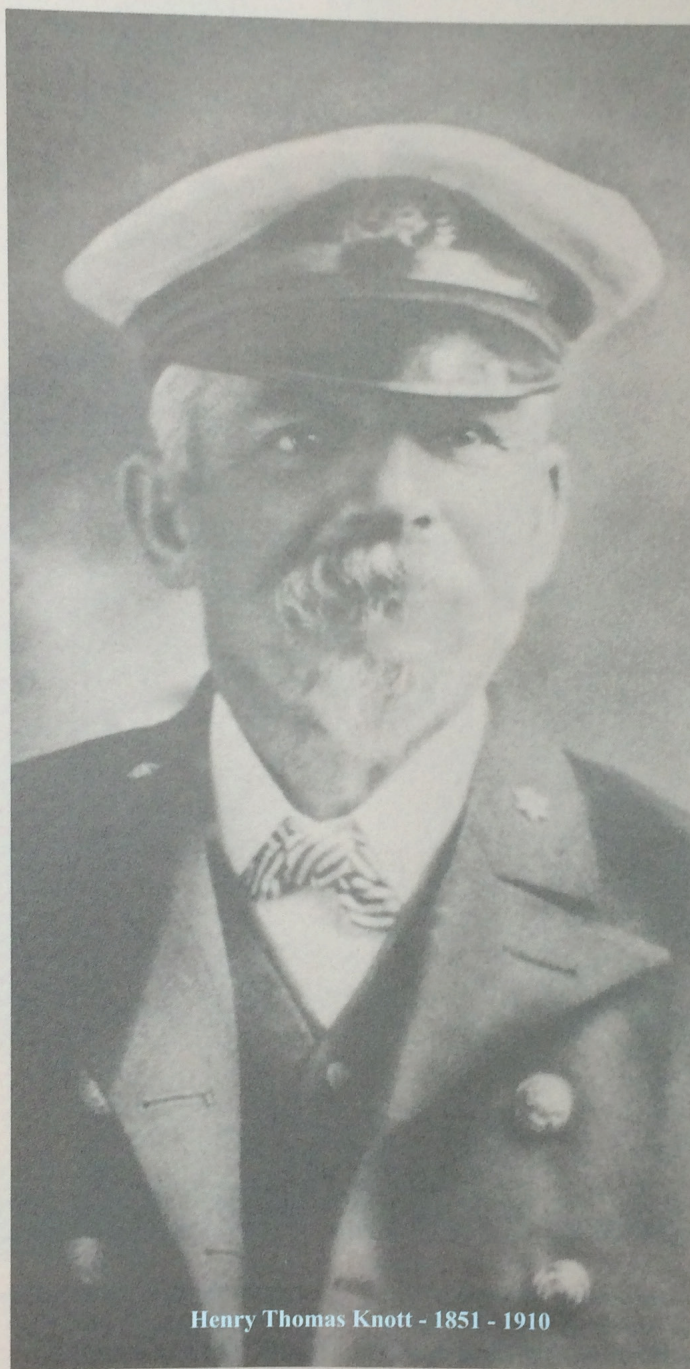
Sir John employed an agent in Deal whose job was to manage the three North and South Foreland lights, and to

whom the light dues were finally paid after collection in Dover and other ports by the respective harbourmaster. The original lease granted to Sir

ran out in 1690, he obtained a renewal for a further thirty years. Osbolston was far more conscientious in his stewardship of the lights than

Around 1690, the keepers experienced some difficulty with the Press Gangs and came close to being conscripted on several occasions. They wrote to their employer to seek his help but Osbolston merely pointed out that if they attended to their duties at the lighthouse instead of going fishing during the day, they would have no cause to fear the Press gangs. He was genuinely worried by the matter, however, and wondered how it was possible for the men to keep good lights throughout the night if they had spent the previous day out in a fishing boat. The men were consequently forbidden to engage in any activity other than that for which they were paid and accommodated. Osbolston even wrote to the parish priest and asked him to peep out sometimes as he went to bed, and, if he saw that the lights were dim, to reproach the men on his behalf.

In 1719, as the lease was about to run out once more, the ownership of the North and South Forelands lighthouses passed into the hands of the Trustees of the Greenwich Hospital. The Admiralty, acting on behalf of the Hospital, rebuilt the two towers using brick and flint. To save costs on consumption of coal, the open fires were enclosed behind glass. This move was not without its difficulties for the keepers found it necessary to use bellows in order to create sufficient draught for a good fire. It was hard work, and in 1730, after many complaints about the poor quality of the light, a



Henry Thomas Knott - 1851 - 1910

John was for fifty years from 1640 onwards, but during this time it was taken over by Robert Osbolston. When that

Meldrum had been, and did his best to ensure that his keepers always performed their duty to the full.

keeper was sacked. In the same year, a man called Knott was appointed keeper at South Foreland, it would seem, to replace the dismissed employee.

Sadly, most records of appointment do not distinguish between the higher and the lower lighthouses. We could say that there is no reason to believe that one man was responsible for both lights – it would have been quite impractical in the days of coal fires for one man to shuttle between the two lights, separated by a distance of 300 m (1000 ft). Family records show that the Knott family were appointed to the lower of the two lights at South Foreland at least from the time of the rebuilding of the lighthouses in 1842. They also record that the 1730 appointee was William, not Henry, as Stevenson had written. We can forgive him the mistake for Henry was a common name and records were scarce. We know little of William's service, except that it would have been working with an open coal fire. In October 1759, William would surely have watched as Admiral Hawke's fleet sailed past on its way from Chatham to Plymouth, and hence to battle with the French in the famous Battle of Quiberon Bay. [4]

William's son, Henry, had started work at a young age in Chatham dockyard where he was a labourer helping on the building of HMS Victory sometime during the years 1759-65. Later, he returned to the lighthouse to assist his ageing father. It had become an unwritten rule that sons assumed their fathers' duties when they became too old to carry them out. Roberts wrote that Henry dipped the lighthouse flag in respect to HMS Victory when she first sailed past the lighthouse in 1778. [5]

In 1793, during Henry's time, the Greenwich Hospital executive ordered a second rebuilding of the lighthouses. A

new upper tower of three storeys was completed that year, and a smaller two-storey building finished in 1795 at the lower site. Coal was finally abandoned, as the lights were now sperm oil-fuelled Argand lamps.

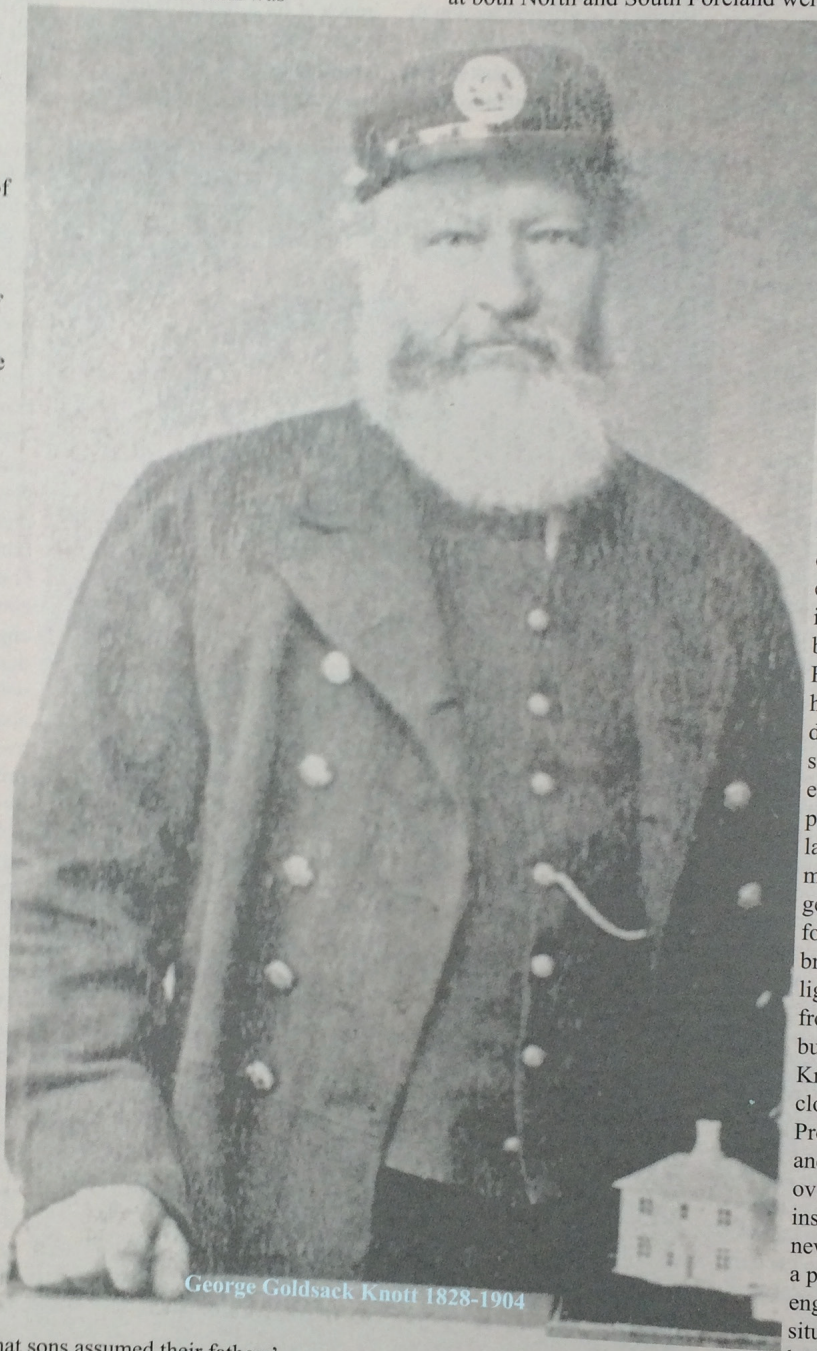
According to an Act of Parliament in 1836, the lighthouses at both North and South Foreland were transferred into the

ownership of Trinity House. This took place under the stewardship of Henry's son, Henry Thomas Knott, and it was now that the occupation of lighthouse keeper began to be formalised.

Dealing with new technology was a major issue. For example, Michael Faraday had discovered electromagnetic induction in 1831, but by the 1850s, Frederick Holmes had finally developed the science into useful engineering products. Now large electrical machines could generate the power for a new range of brilliant electric lights to take over from those that burned oil. The Knott family was close at hand as Professors Holmes and Faraday oversaw the installation of the new equipment in a purpose-built engine house situated midway between the two

towers. At first, the electricity powered a light only in the upper tower.

Then, by the 1870s, it was so important that South Foreland became the training station for all Supernumerary Keepers in the lighthouse service. In 1874, Elliot wrote, "Electric lights, being considered more important than others, receive the preference in appointment of keepers,



George Goldsack Knott 1828-1904

and the most competent are appointed for these stations, their salaries exceeding others of keepers of their grade at other lights (by) 10 per cent. Each electric light station is in the immediate charge of a principal keeper, who is called an engineer. At South Foreland, where there are two lights, six assistants are allowed; at Dungeness, five, and at Souter Point, four." [6] (Souter Point was the first new lighthouse to be built specifically to house an electric light.)

Besides the developments in technology that began to occur, and with which the keepers had to become expert, the men found themselves part of a large organisation in which they needed training and were given uniforms. Remarkably, the first photograph of Henry Thomas in *The Lightkeeper* shows him wearing uniform, one of the earliest such photos in existence. Henry is wearing a form of tailored wool serge uniform that does not change much over the period covered by these photographs. Henry died in 1870, so the photograph must have been taken a few years before then, since photography was still in the early stages of development. His three-quarter-length jacket has broad lapels and two vertical lines of five brass buttons. (Although we can only see four, the fifth must be obscured because the photos of George and HT Knott clearly show five.) Beneath the jacket is a waistcoat with seven-button fastening, suitable for adornment by a traditional Victorian pocket watch. In line with the changing fashion, the style of shirt appears to have changed, with Henry wearing a wing collar

usually attached to a collarless shirt with rear and front studs. The exact style of the ties worn is not clear, but they look to be traditional bow ties, often tucked under the folded shirt collar.

of employment became a part of history, for sons were no longer restrained by their fathers' lifespan. Three of Henry Thomas's sons obtained employment as lighthouse keepers, and two

Henry and John were in charge at the South Foreland lighthouses during the 1840s when the two towers and associated accommodation were once again rebuilt in the form we see them today.

Henry Thomas's youngest son was George, who was lucky enough to be the first to move into the brand new buildings at the low lighthouse and thence to carry his new wife, Catherine, over the threshold soon afterwards. Seven of their thirteen children were born and raised here.

In 1861, the family was moved to Plymouth where Catherine set up home, whilst George served as Principal Keeper at Smeaton's Eddystone until 1865. Then followed another move to North Devon where George served first at Bideford Bar lighthouse and then in the newly built Bull Point light station. A curious cycle was completed when George was finally posted to North

Foreland before his retirement in 1904. It allowed him to retire in Dover, a town he regarded as home, even as his younger children were putting down roots in North Devon.

George became well known for making models of



Edmund Horton Knott 1872-1943

The takeover of lighthouses by Trinity House had many consequences for the keepers. Of much more significance to families was that their menfolk could now be transferred around the country. Furthermore, the "dead man's shoes" principle

were moved away from South Foreland for the first time in 120 years. The eldest son (Henry) was moved to Flamborough Head, where he settled and lived for the rest of his life. The middle son (John) died young whilst still at South Foreland. Both

lighthouses in which he served. As far as we know, George did not make a model of South Foreland lighthouse. It seems unlikely, in view of the fact that he began with a model of the Smeaton Eddystone that is so wonderful, accurate in every detail, both inside and out. It came apart in sections to show the internal details. Details passed down through the family said that the model was made from wood washed up on the reef from an earlier wreck. Since the tower had recently been painted with its familiar red bands, George reproduced this in his model by making the outside stones from alternate bands of both hard and soft woods. The model was passed down through the family, arriving in the home of my great uncle. Upon his death in the late 1970s, the model moved along a chequered path of ownership, through the Maritime Museum at Greenwich before arriving at its current destination in the Historic Ships Museum at Chatham (*opposite bottom left*). Remarkably, George made two such models. The other was displayed in the foyer of Trinity House until its destruction in the Blitz of 1940.

George went on to build further models. One was of Bull Point lighthouse (*opposite bottom right*), which passed through my line of the family and is now in store in Plymouth City Museum. A third model is of North Foreland; I was fortunate to photograph it once in 1977, but it has now disappeared. I'm sure it will turn up again one day.

Of George's thirteen children, two became lighthouse keepers: Henry Thomas and Edmund. In 1877, marriage of

Henry Thomas Knott to Ellen Hall joined the Knotts and the Halls, whilst marriage of Ellen Hall's brother to Grace Horsley Darling (the famous Grace's niece) formally linked these three famous lighthouse families. [3] Henry Thomas went on to complete 35 years service at a number of stations that included a most unusual period at Minicoy lighthouse, a site on a small island that is now part of the Lakshadweep Islands of the Indian Ocean. Little is known about this aspect of overseas service for Trinity House, although Roberts retells some interesting details, not least of which is that Henry was in charge of two local assistants and almost died from a bug to which he, as a European, had no immunity. Edmund's service included a short period at South Foreland when it became famous for the experiments in radio transmission carried out by Marconi.

As I pass on the stories of lighthouse keeping to my own grandchildren, it is with the hope that my membership of the Knott family has ensured that the lives of lighthouse keepers will continue to be investigated in depth. The evidence, scarce as it might seem at first, can be found. What is needed is perseverance and a big helping of luck in finding those rare documents. Just as with that 1911 article, publications such as this help greatly too. As a result I have restarted a project to document the lives and careers of lighthouse keepers in more detail. The plan is to draw together the excellent work of others, including Stan Waight and Gerry Douglas-Sherwood, into a new database. Anyone with ideas or information to add is invited to contact me. [7]

Details of the Knott family service

Generation 1

William Knott (1706-1780)

South Foreland lower. Served from 1730-1780 (50 years)

Generation 2 (Son of William Knott b1706)

Henry Knott (1748-1828)

South Foreland lower. Assisted his father from 1777-1780; then served until 1828 (41 years)

Generation 3 (Son of Henry Knott b1748)

Henry Thomas Knott (1797-1870)

South Foreland lower. Served 1825-1870 (45 years)

Generation 4 (Sons of Henry Thomas Knott b1797)

Henry Knott (1819-1880)

South Foreland (1841-1851)

Flamborough Head (1851-80). Served 1841-1880 (39 years)

John Knott (1820-1851)

South Foreland. Served 1841-1851 (10 years) Died in service.

George Goldsack Knott (1828-1904)

South Foreland lower. (1848-1861)

Eddystone (Smeaton) (Principal Keeper, 1861-1865)

Bideford (PK, 1865-1879)

Bull Point (PK, 1879-1888)

North Foreland (PK, 1888-1891). Served 43 years.

Generation 5 (Sons of George Knott b1828)

Henry Thomas Knott (1851-1910)

Entered Lighthouse Service 1883

Skerries (1885-1886)

South Foreland (1886-1887)

Minicoy, Lakshadweep, India (1887-1890)

St. Ann's Head (1890-1894)

South Stack (1898-1899)

Skerries (1901)

Start Point (1901-1905) Retired 1908. Served 35 years.

Edmund Horton Knott (1872-1943)

1892 Entered Lighthouse Service

1894 Smalls

1899-1901 South Foreland

Left the lighthouse service in early 1900s. Served for about 10 years. Became a greengrocer in Watford, Hertfordshire. ♦

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All photographs
used in this article
are from the
Ken Trethewey
Collection



▲ George and Catherine Knott at Bull Point.

◄ Eddystone model at Chatham.

▼ Bull Point model; present whereabouts unknown.

