

Ards Historical Society
Lighthouses of the Irish Coast

The talk and presentation was given by Mr Gordon Millington OBE, a passionate yachtsman from a very early age. During a lifetime of extensive travels, he has developed a keen interest in lighthouses and whilst the subject was titled 'Lighthouses of the Irish Coast' those present were treated to many fascinating stories, facts and examples of these beacons of the sea that safeguard shipping around the world. Perhaps the earliest recorded construction was the Lighthouse of Alexandria dating back to 300BC and considered to be one of the seven wonders of the world whilst the first lighthouse in the British Isles was built by the Romans in the walls Dover Castle, both were nothing more than a big fire that was maintained to warn of danger, much of the Roman structure remains today.

During the 5th century Dubhan, a Welsh missionary began lighting beacons at Hook Head, Co. Wexford, in 1172 the Normans erected a tower on top of which monks retained a fire. The tower still exists and today forms part of Hook Head Lighthouse, the second oldest operational lighthouse in the world. Closer to home, South Rock off the coast near Cloughey was completed in 1797, the 2nd Marquis of Downshire had campaigned vigorously for the lighthouse and his family crest is still clearly visible carved into the keystone above the doorway. The light remained operational for 80 years when it was replaced by the South Rock lightship. At Donaghadee, construction did not commence until 1836, however the lighthouse at Donaghadee was the first in all Ireland to be converted to electricity in 1934. The first permanent Copeland Island light was sited at Lighthouse Island in 1813, the stump remains but Mew Island became the location of a new lighthouse in 1884. St John's Point Lighthouse entered service in 1844, by the end of the century it had been extended to a height 40 metres and to become the tallest onshore lighthouse in Ireland. The modes of construction, operation of the light, lenses, manning, maintenance, automation and funding were explained in much detail.

On two occasions Mr Millington has rounded Cape Horn and was extremely fortunate that on both voyages the weather was uncharacteristically calm. He deviated from the main topic to speak about the second voyage of the 'Beagle' that was commanded by Robert Fitzroy whose mother Lady Francis Stewart was a daughter of the first Marquess of Londonderry. Being aware of the loneliness of a 5-year expedition, Fitzroy sought a companion of similar intellect that could contribute to the expedition's purpose of surveying and researching the natural science and geography of the southern seas. Charles Darwin was approved and accepted the position.

Tierra del Fuego, the archipelago at the southern tip of Chile is a complex mix of channels and islands, the legacy of the expedition remains by the existence today of Beagle Channel and Darwin Sound, Cape Castlereagh, Londonderry and Stewart islands.

Ards Historical Society meets at the Town Hall, Newtownards. The next meeting will be at 8.00pm on Wednesday 11th December, the subject being 'Helen's Bay and Crawfordsburn' an illustrated talk by Robin Masefield. Visitors are always welcome.

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