LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS: A HISTORY OF LIGHTSHIPS AND THE PEOPLE WHO SERVED ON THEM

By Liam Clarke


This 160 page paperback examines the origins of the lightship services of Great Britain and Ireland, the obstacles and prejudices that faced originators of the idea and the subsequent development of the vessels and working practices over the years. Dr Clarke has certainly been dedicated in his extensive research and uses in many places his own illustrations.

Since Hamblin’s lightship of 1731 the dangerous occupation of lightsman has claimed the lives of a number of crews and those who tried to save them in peace and in war. The lives and working conditions of the brave men who put their lives at risk guiding ships safely to their ports without peril, has been almost forgotten although some of the ships in which they fared continue to serve the mariner in an automated state monitored from shore. Indeed, some have hulls half a century old, testament surely, to sound materials and good ship husbandry.

Dr Liam Clarke introduces local lightship disasters of the past and provides interviews with some of those who once served. He was born into a family with a long history of lightship service, has a deep understanding of the dangerous working conditions and the pressures that this lifestyle had on the men and their families. He uses this to portray a lonely and hazardous life which few now remember, and which has rarely been written about. He dedicates the work to his father, Arthur Clarke (1907-1977), a former lightship man who served in light ships of the Irish service.

Around the coasts of England and Wales Trinity House, incorporated in 1514, is a charity dedicated to safeguarding shipping and seafarers, providing education, support and welfare to the seafaring community. It also has a statutory duty as a General Lighthouse Authority to deliver a reliable, efficient and cost-effective aids to navigation service for the benefit and safety of all mariners. As part of this service Trinity House operates nine lightships on station from the Seven Stones, near Land’s End at the western end of the English Channel eastwards with two at the Sunk stations on the entrance to the port Harwich on the East Coast and with others elsewhere in the Channel and the Dover Strait.
At one time, before the Second World War the Trinity House lightship fleet totalled in the region of sixty hulls on station with other as spares. Each was manned and needed to be serviced by district tenders on a monthly rota and received coal, fresh water and oil as well as seeing the transfer of lightsmen and their food and chattels from shore. At the same time the district tender checked the lightship’s moorings, anchor, light and fog signal characters as well its assigned position. Each lightship is secured to a 60cwt* anchor and more than 200 fathoms** of chain cable. An amazing evolution in logistics took place month in, month out. This reviewer had the privilege of being part of Trinity House lightship fleet management in the 1970 and 1980s.

Similar lightship services were operated in the United States (by the US Coast Guard) and by the Commissioners of Irish Lights in Ireland as well as those on the continent of Europe.

Many books have been written about lighthouses, their keepers and conditions in which they lived and worked. It is refreshing to see a sister service, that of the lightships so chronicled and it is to be hoped that they will not be forgotten. It is also praiseworthy that the Irish lightsmen, otherwise known as the Wexford Navy have been recognised.

Finally, the author’s royalties from the sale of the book will be donated to the RNLI.

*3048kg
**366ft