

# The Keeper of Skerryvore

The days before automated lighthouses are vividly recalled for Sandi Grieve by one local resident.

Meeting Daniel ('Danny') Sutherland, as he sits quietly at the window of his flat in Bridge of Allan, you could hardly imagine the life he has led. For many of his 97 years he serviced some of the remotest lighthouses in Scotland, from Sanda in the south to Bressay on Shetland in the north and from his favourite, Skerryvore, in the west to Inchkeith on the Forth in the east.

A Shetlander by birth, Danny spent ten years in the Merchant Navy and at the outbreak of the Second World War was on the Dundee-Hamburg run. He started with the Lighthouse Commission in 1939, moving from Granton in Edinburgh to be supernumerary in the stores at Cape Wrath and Dunnet Head, then taking his first job as a keeper at McArthur's Head on Islay.

You really had to have special inner resources to cope with such a lonely life as there were only two lighthouse keepers on at a time. Danny had to learn to cook and find ways to occupy himself - quiet ways so as not to disturb the sleeping night shift. So he would bake bread, embroider, knit and make rag rugs. In better weather he would beachcomb or take a wee boat out to catch fish or even go hunting.

The life may have been difficult at times but Danny describes the Lighthouse Authority as the 'nicest company anyone could work for', as they used to look after the men and their families well. On Islay in 1940 he married Betty and describes many happy summer days rowing around the rocky islands and catching fish. (You hear less of the vicious winter days!) Soon their first child, Moira, was born. She has spent much of her adult life in the USA but now she too lives in Bridge of Allan. This wee family then moved to Copinsay in Orkney in 1946 to Turnberry, to the lighthouse we all saw at the Open Golf Championship this year, where Irene was born. They spent two years there before Danny moved on west to his beloved Skerryvore.

Skerryvore Light, 12 miles south west of Tiree, is on a rock, often completely submerged and unreachable in stormy weather. It is one of a number of lighthouses designed by Alan Stevenson, whose nephew Robert Louis (a regular visitor to Bridge of Allan) once described it as "the noblest of all extant deep-sea lights".

The Lighthouse Commission had three boats which sailed between the various lights bringing supplies once a month. In difficult weather people would have to be winched off the small boat straight up 15 feet by a crude block and tackle arrangement -



Danny Sutherland

something like a T-bar on the ski slopes - to bring flour for baking bread, lentils, semolina and lovely home-made sultana cake from Betty. In better weather the boat could land and the men could climb up the 15 slippery steps, then go fishing, swim in the tidal pool amongst the rocks, or watch basking sharks or whales passing by. But they certainly couldn't have a little garden there like some of the mainland lighthouses had.

What of the families? They lived with eight other lighthouse families on the island of Erraid off Mull, four for Skerryvore and four for Dubh Artach. Erraid is the other Bridge of Allan connection. This is the island featured in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* in the chapter 'The Islet', where David Balfour recalls: 'With my stepping ashore I began the most unhappy part of my adventures' (largely because, not realising the islet was tidal, he had to spend four days living off shellfish, being laughed at by passing fishermen). RLS knew the island from times spent with his family surveying and building the many lighthouses in the area and used this knowledge of the coastline and its perils in his book. However, the Sutherland family's memories are very different. Moira and Irene, like their father, recall happy days there: 'We just had such fun'. The girls remember the teacher arriving by boat and having to round up

pupils hiding all over the island. So life was a little less interesting when they all moved to live and go to school in Oban.

After these five memorable years in Skerryvore, Danny moved on to Inchkeith on the Firth of Forth for another five years. By then there were three keepers on duty at every lighthouse and one off duty. There was a garden there and visitors arriving, both wanted and unwanted. They subsequently went to Noss Head, Wick, for four years, where Danny was principal lighthouse keeper, to Sanda off Kintyre for another five years, and then to Bressay in Shetland, 'a lovely place', he says.

There Danny sailed again the 18-foot Shetland Square Sail he had won many competitions with, in all weathers. The family describe sunny picnics on Balta Island, sailing from mainland Shetland. On one such adventure his boat was caught in an unexpected wind and sank almost at once. The rescue party was sent out when they were six hours overdue, but they had been lucky as two oars had surfaced, one for each of the crew, and they had managed to hang on to them until they got to shore and were rescued.

After almost 39 years polishing brasses, changing mantles, cleaning the soot off lamps and manning foghorns, Danny retired at 65. His last job was five years spent at Hoborn Head, Scrabster. but he and Betty continued to live in the north at Keiss in Caithness before moving to Bridge of Allan in 1995 to be near their daughter Irene. Sadly, Betty died three years later.

Danny Sutherland certainly has many fascinating tales to tell but probably the nicest part of our meeting was to hear someone say: 'I've had a very happy life'. There's something in that for all of us.

## Skerryvore Statistics

- Location - 12 miles south west of Tiree  
Latitude 56° 19.4'N  
Longitude 07° 06.9'W
- Building started - 1838
- Building completed - 1844
- Height - 48m, tallest in UK
- Project Engineer - Alan Stevenson  
nephew of R. L. Stevenson
- Fatalities during build - 0
- Total cost - £86,977
- Light - flashing white every 10 secs
- Range - 23 miles
- Automated - 1994