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## Fastnet Rock: The End Of An Era

Among sailors, the Fastnet is one of the best known lighthouses in the world. It is the turning mark for the biennial Fastnet Race, which leaped to media notoriety after the catastrophic gale of 1979 that destroyed half the fleet and claimed the lives of 15 sailors. Among cruising folk, the Fastnet could be considered the Northern Hemisphere's answer to Cape Horn.

During the 32 Fastnet Races that have been sailed since the first in 1925, the lighthouse keepers have watched each and every yacht as it has rounded the rock. Any cruising boats passing by can be assured of getting a wave or, if so equipped, a friendly call on the VHF. This will not be the case much longer. As part of the modernization and cost-cutting program of the Commissioners of Irish Lights, the Fastnet Light is soon to become automatic.

Already, new automatic equipment is being installed and the last keeper is expected to leave the rock in March 1989. When this happens, the functions of the lighthouse will be monitored by way of a radio link with the lighthouse on Mizzen Head. When that lighthouse too becomes automatic, all the information will be transmitted to Dublin, Ireland, by a data

link, a fancy way of saying "by telephone."

The rock has been continuously manned since 1854, when the first light was established. This light was on top of a cast-iron tower, the remains of which can still be seen near the base of the present tower. Designed by George Halpin, it was made of cast-iron plates, each one more than an inch thick. This outer iron shell was lined with bricks and a cast-iron spiral staircase allowed the keepers to get to the top, to tend the oil burning lamp.

The tower itself was 91 feet high. Since its base is 84 feet above the low-water mark, that gave it a total height of 175 feet. When heavy seas swept the rock in westerly gales, the tower shook and trembled, and one suspects the keepers probably did, too. In 1865 the rock itself began to suffer, and large pieces close to the tower were eroded and swept away.

During a severe gale on November 26, 1881, the seas were so high that they broke the windows and the lantern at the top of the tower. A stronger, taller tower had to be built. Work began in 1896.

The new tower was constructed from granite, built in sections in Cornwall, then dismantled and shipped, block by block, to Ireland. A total of 2,074 blocks of stone were used, altogether weighing 4,633 tons. It is hard to imagine how all these blocks of stones were lifted ashore and then subsequently up onto the tower. Some of the blocks weigh more than three tons and the area is not renowned for long



The Fastnet lighthouse is soon to be made automatic. No longer will lighthouse keepers man the famous beacon.

periods of calm weather.

The foundations for the new tower were built much closer to the water than the old tower, where the rock was found to be stronger and more stable. Because it was so close to the water, the area must have been swept by waves as soon as the weather got at all bad. Despite the difficulties, the stonework was completed in the summer of 1903. The new lantern mechanism had already been landed on the rock, but before it could be installed, an untimely gale washed it into the sea.

The lantern from the old tower was transferred to the new one as an interim measure and the first light was shown from the new tower on June 27, 1904. The work had cost \$70,000 sterling.

The temporary light was replaced by another oil-burning light in 1906 and this stayed in use until 1969, when the first electric light was installed. This light has flashed every five seconds, every night ever since.

In the early 1970s, a helicopter landing pad was built and the keepers began changing shifts by helicopter. In the past, when they had to be landed or taken off by boat, bad weather often intervened and their normal four-week tour of duty would often be extended.

There are generally three keepers on duty at any one time, although they are sometimes joined by an apprentice. They stand four-hour watches,

day and night, with eight hours off between them. Ships still take out heavy supplies that cannot be handled by helicopters. Water must be brought in, because there is not a big enough catchment area for the collection of rainwater. The freshwater tank holds 3,500 gallons, which usually lasts four to five months.

During the days of the famine, the Fastnet became known as Ireland's Teardrop, because it was the last bit of their land that the departing emigrants saw and many knew they would never return. Once the keepers leave, perhaps we should revert to using the Gaelic name for the Fastnet, *Carrig Aonar*, which means Lonely Rock. It will be a lonely place indeed.

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