

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LUNDY LLOYDS SIGNAL STATION AND THE COASTGUARDS: 1883-1928

by

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ABSTRACT

A Signal Station was established on Lundy by Lloyds in 1884 together with an undersea cable linking Lundy to the mainland at Hartland. Accommodation built for the signallers and their families and their way of life in the late 1800s and early 1900s is described. Cable breakdown was a recurring problem. Eventually in 1910 the Signal Station was taken over by the Admiralty and staffed with navy coastguards. This continued until the island was owned by Martin Coles Harman in 1925 who closed the Signal Station in 1928 and established a radio telephone link with the mainland.

Keywords: Signal Station, undersea cable, Lloyds, G.P.O., coastguards

INTRODUCTION

In the nineteenth century with the development of steam-driven vessels and the expansion of trade, sea traffic to and from industrial South Wales via the Bristol Channel was greatly increased. Consequently Lloyds Register of Shipping organisation decided to establish a Signal Station on Lundy.

Lloyds Register of Shipping historically was specifically a maritime organisation. In 1760 the Register Society was formed by Edward Lloyd in London and they assembled the Lloyds Register of Shipping, the first known register of this type. The Register has information on all commercial ships over 100 tonnes and is published annually today. Accordingly sources of accurate information are of prime importance.

At first glance, the small island of Lundy, which lies north-south across the mouth of the Bristol Channel, may have seemed insignificant with very small communications dependent on local small craft and the weather conditions. Lundy itself was a hazard to shipping although there is shelter for small vessels in the landing bay in the south-east corner of the island. The rest of the island's coasts are rocky and dangerous and this prompted the erection of a tall lighthouse on the island's highest point in 1820 and the installation of a rocket-firing gun battery on the west coast in 1862. Despite these measures there were over 50 wrecks and shipping accidents around the island between 1862 and 1883 (Ternstrom, 1999, 2007).

1883-1893

A signal station on Lundy would supply information on shipping movements in the Bristol Channel. The first move in 1883 was to make a ten-year contract with the Lundy

Cable Company (a company established for this purpose) for a cable to be laid to connect Hartland Post Office with Lundy.

In November 1883 a Lloyds representative travelled to Lundy for a few days to negotiate for the establishment of a signal station on the island. Lundy was privately owned by the resident Heaven family, who had no better communication with the mainland than was afforded by small ships that were wholly subject to the weather and the dispositions of their skippers, so the proposal for a signal station served by an undersea cable was welcomed. The Revd Hudson Heaven agreed to the lease of the area chosen for the signal station at the south-east corner of the island, near the castle and above the area where the cable would be raised. A few days later the telegraph engineers crossed to the island with their contractor and a 99-year lease was agreed and signed on 17 January 1884. This provided for a site of one acre at a yearly rental of £20 with a right to erect a signal hut and flagstaff on the castle parade and a site nearby for two cottages, with provision for a building store and rights of way. Lloyds was to have exclusive use of the cable and to undertake the construction of the buildings. The total cost of these was £939. 7s. to which was added £44. 7s. for the telegraph instruments on the island.

The site was well chosen to give the signallers excellent views of the Bay and the shipping lanes to the east and the south. With the signal station connected by cable to Hartland Post Office, reports of shipping movements could be rapidly relayed to Lloyds in London. The personnel in the tall lighthouse would also report on shipping movements as would the personnel at the gun battery on the west side of the island.

It was agreed that the Company would pay half of the Post Office charges for clerks' services at the Hartland telegraph office, while Lloyds would provide the telegraph instrument and other equipment needed for the Lundy Signal Station. The charges to ship owners for reports from Lundy were set at 4s. 6d. for every message of 20 words or less with a further charge of 6d. for every five additional words. There would be a further 'boating charge' if the station had needed to contact a ship by use of the station's boat. Of the charges, the Post Office received payment for the telegram, Lloyds 1s. 6d. for signalling, with the residue to be paid to the Cable Company for royalties. Lloyds undertook to subsidise the Cable Company by £100 per annum.

One end of the cable was laid from Hartland, and the other from Lundy, to be joined mid-channel. There were comings and goings by the engineers, until the cables were finally connected on 5 April. The connection was spasmodic at first as on 10 April it declined to work but it was restored to life on 16 April. The telegraph office was open from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. although no messages were sent after dark.

The first Lloyds man appointed to the signal station was Mr Wood, who arrived on the island on 26 February 1884, and who proved to be a very popular addition to the small island community where there were few entertainments as he was an expert on the banjo (Plate 1).

Wood was joined on 12 April by Mr Melhuish, who was accompanied by his wife, and they brought all their furniture with them. A place had to be found for this to be stored as the Signal Cottages were not ready, and they were lodged in the old labourers cottages that had been built within the castle.

A mast was erected on the east face of the castle to fly Lloyds large pennant, and on 22 April signalling began – with occasional hiccups. In May the signal flagstaff, a towering 68 feet, topped by an immense weathercock, was erected on the castle parade.



Plate 1: Mr. Wood (centre) and his signallers. The man on the left is probably a lighthouse keeper. (M. Ternstrom collection)

On 11 May the Revd Mr Heaven sent his first telegram – not joyful or celebratory, as might have been expected, but prosaically about some limestone. This may have been due to his being in mourning for the death of his father who died in 1883 or because the need for limestone was very urgent. Messages could be received or sent for the islanders or the lighthouse keepers who paid the costs for the service. With the station now functioning, Mrs Wood and the family arrived with their furniture, but there was again difficulty in finding a place to store it all, as the cottages were still not ready for occupation.

An innovation at the Signal Station was the arrival of Morse apparatus in November, and an instructor was sent across to train Lloyds men in its use. Work at the Signal Station was evidently slow, and accommodation limited, as in December the Melhuishes left the island. The means of signalling were now by telephone, by Morse, and by flags. The flags and some other equipment were kept in the Signal Hut on the Castle parade (Plate 2, Figure 1).

It would be difficult to exaggerate the advantages to the island of this means of communication. In emergencies the islanders had either to attempt the crossing to the mainland in a small boat if the weather allowed, or to light a fire beacon. The effectiveness of the beacon would depend on the weather, and it being noticed on the mainland and acted upon. Information relating to wrecks or ships in difficulty could be considerably delayed. Either way, it would have been some considerable length of time until help arrived. Telegrams, however urgent, were delivered or taken by the next available ship, and could have been weeks old on delivery.



Plate 2: The Signal Hut, the flagstaff and personnel (from the west). In the foreground are the remains of a house thought to date from 1630.
(Heaven archive)

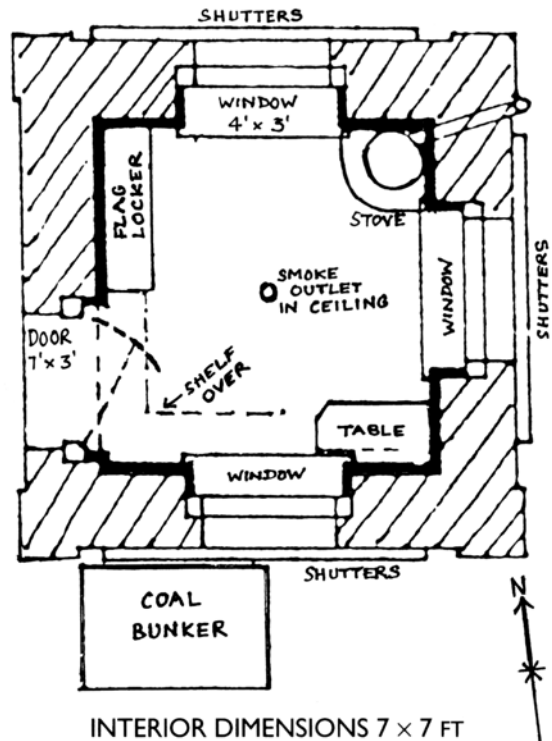


Figure 1: Plan of Lloyds Signal Hut 1905.
(Public Record Office, Admiralty 116/957)

From time to time the station had to report on wrecks; there were six during 1884, and two in 1885, one of which, the *Peer of the Realm*, struck below the Templar rock on 12 February 1885 and discharged the crew on to the island (Ternstrom, 2007). Unfortunately the telegraph cable was broken and communications were not restored until 7 March.

Gardens for the signallers were marked out to the west of the cottages (where the outlines of the plots can still be seen) that enabled the signallers to grow some produce for themselves. The cottages were designed with corrugated iron roofs to catch rainwater for general purposes, but the signallers were entitled to take drinking water from St John's Well, and were provided with water filters (now to be seen as relics in the island tavern). For provisions there was a Store and Refreshment Room in the north wing of the farmhouse, a social centre then as now. In 1885 Lundy's own small pre-fabricated iron church was built at the head of Millcombe Valley, with a separate Sunday School nearby that was also used for occasional concerts (now the Blue Bungalow or the Old School House).

In 1886 the then lessee, Mr Wright, arranged with the G.P.O. to set up postal services, with a sub-post office that was established at the Stores. Postal business was transacted, and postal orders sold, although they could not be cashed there.

In 1886 600 reports were telegraphed from Lundy, and in 1887 the number rose to 830, but in 1888 the cable broke down when the number of reports already sent was 550, giving an average for each of the three years of c.700. The cable could not be repaired, and the Cable Company was wound up in May of 1889, so that there was then no communication with the mainland. Mr Wood and his family departed to much regret at the end of October. George Thomas, a long-time employee of the Heaven family, fisherman and general handyman, was appointed to look after the Signal Station *pro tem*. The 1891 census shows that he was living in the two semi-detached Signal Cottages with his wife and four children; the front room of the south cottage was the telegraph office, complete with the Morse apparatus, a service counter and a letterbox, with the telephone in the room behind. The sign pointing the way to the telegraph office is now on the wall of the tavern (Plate 3 and Figure 2).

Plate 3: Lloyds Signal Cottages in the 1920s.
(M. Ternstrom collection)

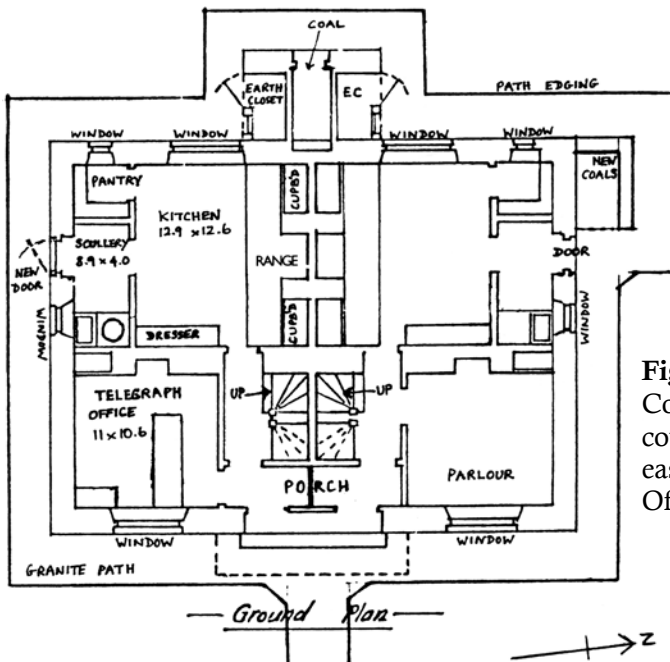


Figure 2: Plan of Lloyds Signal Cottages 1905. The post office counter is shown in the south-east room. (Public Record Office, Admiralty 116/957)

1893-1918

After five years, the Royal Commission on Telegraphic Communication with Lighthouses recommended that Lundy should again be connected to the mainland by cable. The G.P.O. was swift to install cable communication on 23 June 1893, and shortly afterwards the cable was protected by a cement covering where it ran across the south end of the beach (the cement was still there in the early 1950s). The cable provided a telephone connection between Croyde and the Lundy Signal Station. Later, communication was removed from Croyde to Barnstaple in daytime and Appledore at night. The night telephone was only used in emergencies when prompt assistance to shipping was needed. The receiving end of the Lundy cable was housed in a new-built Cable Hut against the north wall of the castle, constructed for the G.P.O. by the then lessee, Acland (now converted to Castle Cottage) (Plates 4 and 5, and Figure 3).



Plate 4: The Castle Parade looking west. The Cable Hut is seen behind the low wall to the right, with the Signal Cottages far right. (M. Ternstrom collection)

Plate 5: The Cable Hut with the wooden shutters closed. The telegraph pole carried the wires for the telephone to the Villa (Millcombe), the Stores and the Bungalow (Brambles) and the Old Light connected in 1893. (Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings 1928)

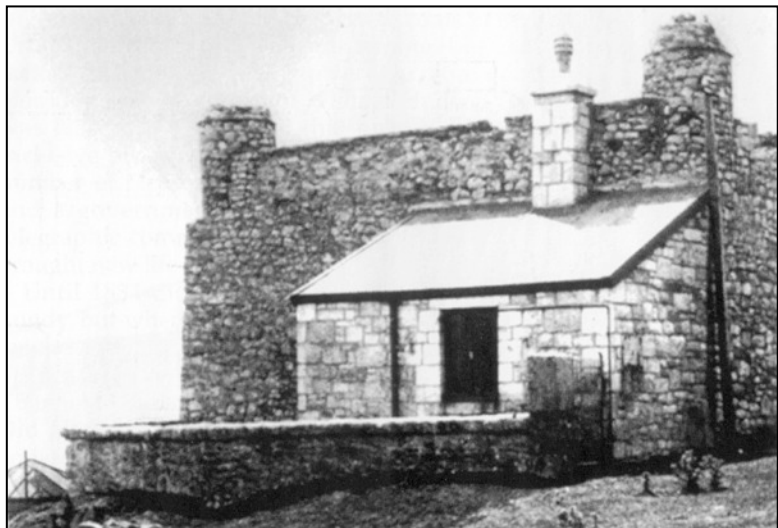
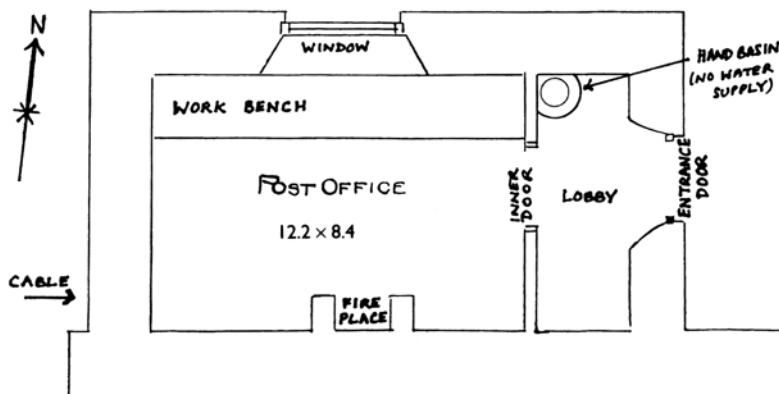


Figure 3: Plan of the G.P.O. Cable Hut 1918. (Lundy Museum Archive)



Cable breakdowns were a recurring problem; for example, a break in services occurred in 1880, 1893 and again in 1903 when there was a break in the cable some eight miles out from Croyde.

George Thomas was required to report to Lloyds three times per day, and he was offered the post of signaller on trial but as he was a valued employee of the Heaven family who would have lost his services, the offer was not taken up. In the event Mr Wood returned *pro tem.* in July until the new appointee, Mr Dear, arrived in August of 1893 with his wife and daughter. In the following month the semaphore apparatus was installed, and workmen carried out necessary repairs to the buildings. All was in place, until three boys amused themselves by disconnecting the cable, but fortunately that inconvenience lasted only a few hours. 1893 saw the installation of telephones on the island (the Signal Station, the Villa, the Stores and the Lighthouse) which had the advantage of alternatives if one apparatus should fail.

On 1 October 1896 Frederick Allday arrived, with his wife and daughter, to replace Mr Dear as Lloyds signaller (Plate 6). The new church was under construction, as well as the North and South lighthouses, so that the island was unusually busy. In 1898 he became postmaster (1898-1926). The post

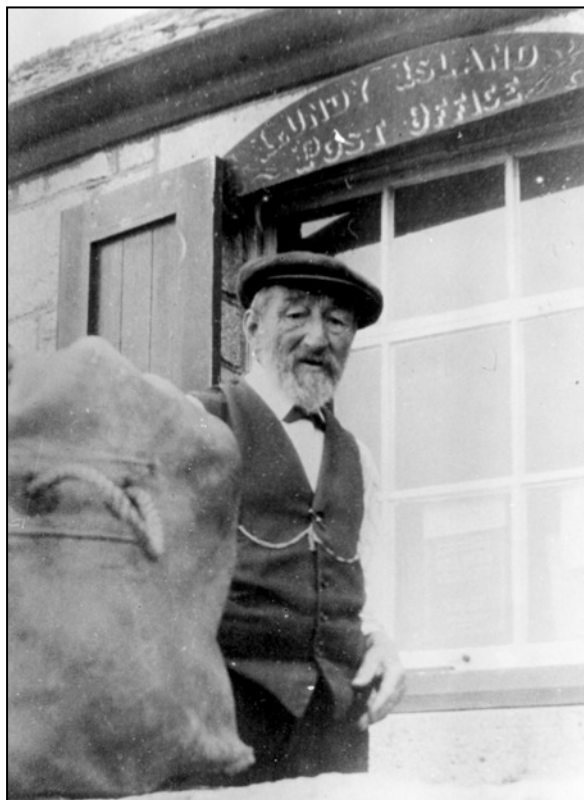


Plate 6: Fred Allday at the Post Office at the castle c.1925 (M. Ternstrom collection)

office was then moved from the Store to the Signal Station. He also became closely involved with the church. Their daughter, Mildred, went to school on the mainland and returned to the island for her holidays, but Allday did not leave the island for any purpose until he went to consult a doctor in 1921. He sold postcards at the post office – views of the castle and greetings cards – at 6d. each. The letters and cards that he handled, bearing the G.P.O. stamps with a Lundy cancellation, are now much sought after by collectors (Plates 7 and 8).

Plate 7: Coastguard and Signal Station cachets.
(Copied with permission from the Catalogue *Stamps and Postal History of Lundy Island*, 5th edition, published by Jon Aitchison)



Plate 8: Lundy stamps with G.P.O. cancellations. 1907 (Type Ab) and 1919 (Type Ac).
(Reproduced with permission of James Thomas)

There were occasions, such as in June 1899, when 52 ships were sheltering in the bay during bad weather, and the signal work was overwhelming. Once the new North and South lighthouses were brought into use (1897), it was necessary to connect them into the telephone system, and in 1899 telegraph poles were installed along the island to link the two lighthouses with the Signal Station and Post Office. They provided useful waymarkers to the North End until they were removed in 1977.

The south room of the Signals Cottages was now the post and telegraph office, and the Cable Hut was a G.P.O. sorting office for the mail, where there was a fireplace, a hand basin without water supply, and a row of pigeonholes for sorting. The G.P.O. refused to rent this to Lloyds when requested and once again George Thomas was pressed into service as postmaster to dispatch and distribute the incoming and outgoing mail. A telegraph received by the Revd Heaven in 1899 concerning a prospective tenant for the island is shown in Plate 9.

Operations continued uneventfully until the flagstaff was struck by lightning and broke into splinters (June 1900) but it was soon restored, though there was another break in service between August and November. There were occasional visits by engineers to attend to the telephones, but in May of 1901 another repair to the cable was necessary, which this time was to be connected at Westward Ho! Unfortunately the cable broke again in August of 1903 and was not repaired until 19 November. In the meantime shipping information was given by flag signals to whichever ships or boats put in to the bay, and messages taken by those that could land or be reached by small boat from the island.

Plate 9:

Telegraph sent
to the Revd
Heaven in 1899
(Heaven archive)

POST OFFICE TELEGRAPHS.		No. of Telegram
<small>If the accuracy of an Island Telegram be doubted, the telegram will be repeated on payment of half the amount originally paid for its transmission, any fraction of 1d. less than 4d. being reckoned as 4d.; and if it be found that there was any inaccuracy the amount paid for repetition will be refunded. Special conditions are applicable to the repetition of Foreign Telegrams.</small>		1278
Charges to pay	£ s. d.	Received here at
Handed in at <i>Barnotaple</i>	at 2.42 ^h	2.51 ^h
TO { <i>Heaven Lundy Island</i> <i>Have excellent prospective tenant for</i> <i>The Island please let no</i> <i>part of it until you</i> <i>see or hear from me</i> <i>Coming over with Barrett</i> <i>Opportunity</i>		

N.B.—This Form must accompany any inquiry made respecting this Telegram.

In 1903 (when there was general apprehension about a future war) the Admiralty made an agreement with Lloyds to staff the Signal Station with coastguards who were serving in the Navy. This meant that Lloyds staff of signallers were no longer needed and regretfully they left the island. By this agreement the number of personnel was to be increased to four to reinforce the watch. Accordingly two more cottages were built near the Signal Cottages and were completed by 1906 at a cost of £1573, and for which a further lease agreement was made for a yearly rent of £6. However the work was so seriously deficient that the Admiralty refused to accept them; the contractors had to make reparations and forego a sum of £400 for five years against the need for further work. The cottages were not ready for use until October of 1908, and by 1910 the final reckoning was £2431 (Plate 10 and Figure 4). In 1909 the G.P.O. granted Lloyds free intelligence (exchange of information without charge) from all British Post Offices coast wireless stations.



Plate 10: Coastguard cottages in 1951. They were finally completed in 1909. The watch room at the east end was added in 1925 by the Admiralty as a work place for the watch. (M. Ternstrom collection)

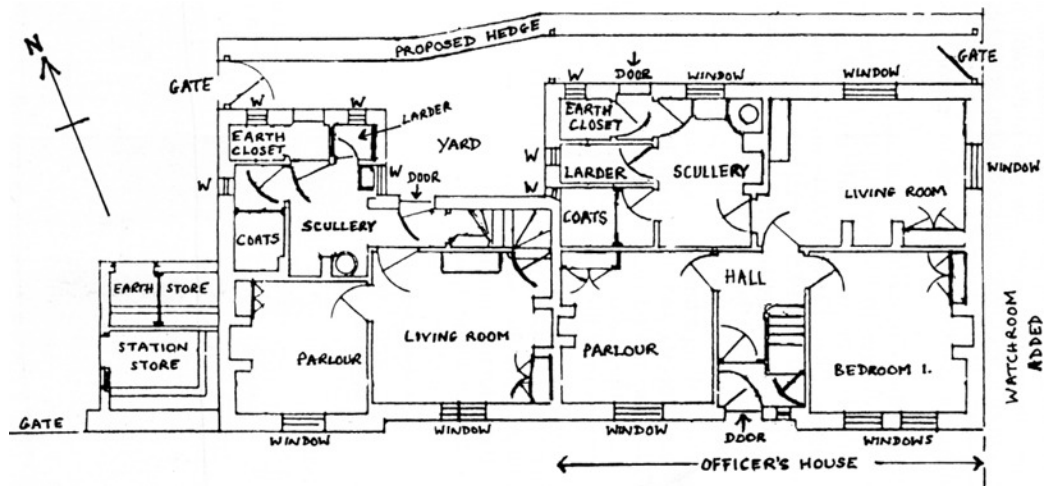


Figure 4: Plan of Coastguard Cottages 1905.
(Public Record Office Admiralty 116/957)

Another lease agreement with the Admiralty provided for a 'War Signal Station' at Tibbetts (with telegraph poles carried across from the west side) and an 'Auxiliary Look Out Station' at the North End beyond the North Light (Plate 11). The lease cost for both was £6 per annum.

On 1 June 1910 the Coastguard personnel took over the station from Lloyds. All four cottages were required for them and their families. Allday continued as postmaster but moved his accommodation to one of the Quarry cottages (Belle Vue), where he stayed until 1911, when he moved to Cliff Bungalow (now Hanmers). This was vacant as George Thomas left the island in 1911 when the Revd Heaven moved to Torrington. Four families were a welcomed addition to Lundy's population. Apart from the six lighthouse men at the North and South lighthouses, their number was sparse. Terms and employment conditions of the coastguard personnel are given in the Appendix.

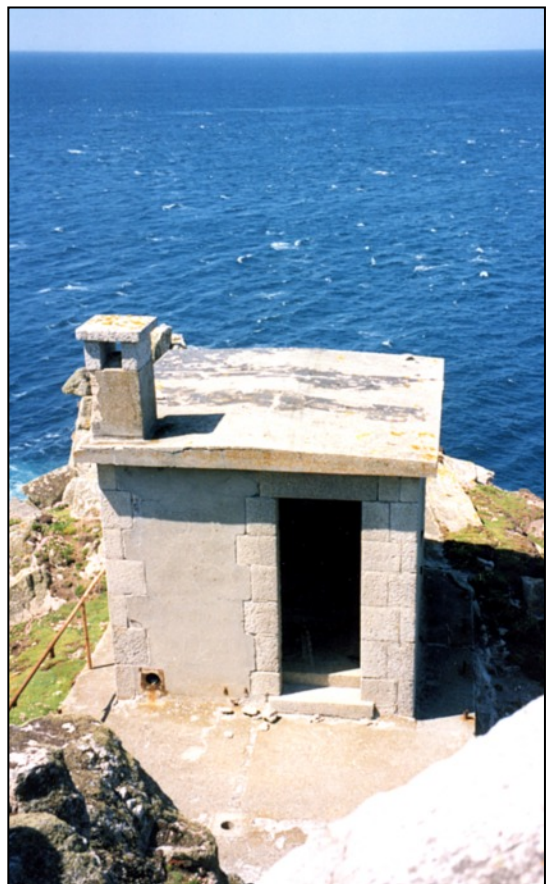


Plate 11: Admiralty Hut at the North End beyond the North Light
(© M. Ternstrom)

The Census return of 1911 (Rowland, 2011) shows that there were four coastguards installed, of whom two were accompanied by their wives and children: James Somerville (chief officer), George Clout, William Lloyd, and Stephen Jones. George Clout was an artist and writer (Plate 12). He had a daughter, Muriel, who was born on Lundy in 1910 – the first island birth in living memory. In May of 1914 there was great sorrow at the death of Mr Clout in hospital at Ilfracombe after a long illness, and after a son had been born.



Plate 12: Picture of George Clout (Coastguard) painting at his easel.
(M. Ternstrom collection)

1911 marked the end of the long service of the *Gannet*. Capt. Dark was outbid for the G.P.O. contract, and the service was taken over by the *Devonia* of the Bideford & Bristol Steamship Company. After the Revd Heaven retired to Torrington, the island was administered by his nephew and heir, Walter. The island was at a very low ebb that Walter was totally unable to remedy, and he had no money to employ the regular services of the *Gannet*, except on the occasion of the burial of the Revd Heaven in 1916. This sad event marked the end of the Heaven family fortunes, and the enforced sale of the island in December of 1917 left Walter bankrupt.

The Coastguards were vigilant during the 1914-18 war. Tibbetts was converted into a 'war-watching' station when it was made habitable for four personnel. Civilian sailings were ended and supplies and communications between Lundy and the mainland were maintained by the Admiralty from Ilfracombe with the trawler, *Robert Davidson*.

In 1917, during the war, the cable was damaged and was not repaired until June of 1919, so that during that time no messages could be sent if the weather did not allow for use of the semaphore and flags. In times of bad weather there could be 200 ships anchored in the Roads.

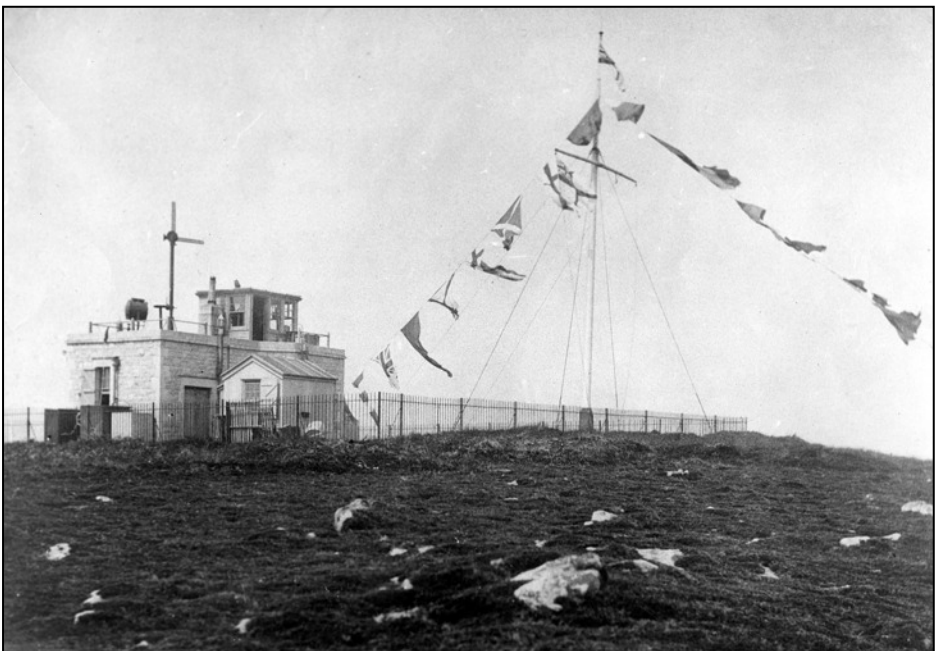
1918-present day

In 1918 the island was sold to A.L. Christie of Tapely, Instow. During the ownership of the Christie family (1918-25) the buildings were repaired and the island was restored to a working farm and the Manor Farm Hotel received guests. With a restored population the Coastguards were no longer thrown on their own resources, but were able to join in and contribute to a lively social life, which has been recorded in the issues of the *Hartland Chronicle*.

One Coastguard, H. Jukes, (Plate 13) was a keen photographer, and he wrote an account by hand of Lundy illustrated with his own photographs. A photograph of Tibbetts in full rig in 1920 taken by Coastguard Jukes is shown in Plate 14. His written account of Lundy was presented to the Lundy Field Society some years ago and is now deposited on loan to the West Country Studies Library.

Plate 13 (right): Coastguard H. Jukes by the flagpole at the Castle probably in 1920. (M. Ternstrom collection)

Plate 14 (below): Photo of Tibbetts from the S.E. in 1920 by Coastguard Jukes. The small detached building provided a kitchen. Some of the internal fittings to the main room are still in place. (M. Ternstrom collection)



Changes were made after Mr Martin Coles Harman bought the island from Mr A.L. Christie in 1925. He took great pride in Lundy as an independent island, governed and provided for by the owner, and not – in his view – subject to mainland authorities. Consequently he did not wish to have outposts of national organisations stationed there. Trinity House rights to maintain their establishments could not be challenged, and in fact proved to be of considerable help and service during later difficulties of transport etc. But Mr Harman reviewed the postal arrangements and proposed a solution that would avoid the necessity of having a G.P.O. presence on the island. His proposals were not acceptable to the G.P.O., but the island postmaster had left, the mail-carrying contract had expired, and, to use his own words, Harman ‘dismissed the Post Office’ at the end of 1927. He undertook to report shipping movements and to transmit messages, and consequently the Coastguard and Signal Stations were closed in 1928, and the personnel left the island – to their own and the islanders’ strong regrets, and the disappointment of shipping owners. The Signal Station’s leases were terminated, and a sum of £99. 1s. 10d. was paid to Lundy for outstanding repairs to the buildings. Lloyds facilitated Mr Harman’s undertaking to continue to transmit messages. The badly decayed mast was replaced in 1927 by a new one, and in 1928 £7. 8s. 1d. was paid towards the maintenance of the Beach Road (according to the original lease agreement).

Closure of the Signal Station prompted protest from the Board of Trade and ship owners who were concerned that there remained no rapid communication in case of a wreck or a ship in distress. An agreement was reached whereby the island would be responsible for maintaining life-saving apparatus and the vulnerable cable would be replaced by a radio-telephone in order to facilitate communications. Mr Felix Gade, the island Agent for Mr Harman, was to be the radio operator, and a concession was obtained that exempted him from submitting to the complicated examination that was usually required. A corresponding radio station was installed at Hartland Point Coastguard Station so that messages could be transmitted between Lundy and Trinity House.

The Lundy radio station was established in the Old Light and a very efficient and friendly liaison with Hartland was made. In practice the new system proved excellent with an attentive watch being kept around the coasts by the lighthouse keepers and islanders. The radio-telephone was appreciated by the islanders which kept them in touch with the mainland. An account of life-saving operations is given in Gade, 1978.

The cottages were used for staff and/or visitors, but the two Coastguard cottages fell into decay during the war (1939-45) when repairs and upkeep were not possible, and eventually they were dismantled. The Signal Cottages were also used for staff or visitors until the Landmark Trust restored the Castle and the surrounding area, and they were demolished in 1989, by which time they were much decayed.

Some of the present islanders now form a Coastguard team to assist at wrecks and with wreck survivors, and regular practices are carried out under the authority of the mainland Coastguards, who also supply the necessary equipment and the hut in which to store it. Happily, with modern vessels and communications, the number of wrecks is few.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank James Thomas for his help with the Lundy postal cancellations and Jon Aitchison for permission to reproduce illustrations from his catalogue, *Stamps and Postal History of Lundy Island*.

APPENDIX

The Coastguards terms and conditions of employment

Wages: £52 per annum

Special allowance for remote station: £10 per annum

£2-£5 allowed where fuel and lights were not provided

Making and repairing flags: £1. 10s. per annum

Repairing only: 15s. per annum

Uniform provided:

Every two years: 1 overcoat and oilskins

Annual provision: 1 reefer, 1 vest, and 1 cap

Every 6 months: 1 pair of trousers

Black ties to be worn on duty, self-provided

14 days annual leave.