

The Branton Lighthouse

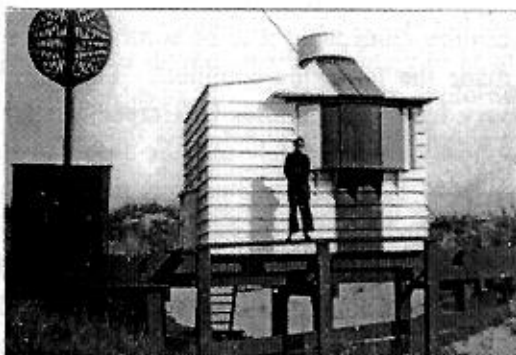
'A tract of sandhills and lines of breakers, a tiny white lighthouse in the remote distance, beside a narrow estuary gleaming azure as it widened into the sea. All that dark length of land ended at Hartland Point, and beyond, under the westering sun, the sea stretched without landfall until the coast of America.'

The foregoing extract, taken from *Life in a Devon Village*, refers to the first time Henry Williamson saw, from the high ground in May 1914, the lighthouse standing beside the Taw and Torridge Estuary, at the seaward edge of the Branton Burrows. The Branton Lighthouse plays a prominent role in Henry's North Devon writings, *The Pathway* (1928) containing numerous references. Built in 1822, the lighthouse was designed by architect Joseph Nelson, who was also responsible for the design and construction of fifteen other lighthouses along the Bristol Channel coast. It was built primarily to assist vessels in navigating the Taw and Torridge estuary bar, known as the Bideford Bar. The crossing of this bar with its narrow channel, through which vessels had to manoeuvre, was an extremely hazardous waterway to traverse. In the days when ships relied solely on sail power many ships foundered and were lost as they attempted to make the crossing during times of severe stormy weather.

The lighthouse consisted of two lights, the High Light and the Low Light. The High Light, its beam visible at 14 miles, occulted once every 30 seconds. It stood 87 feet above the level of the sands, protruding from what appeared to be an early Georgian or Regency style house. The main timbers of the tower were of durable pitch-pine, covered with oak shingles painted white with a wide painted red section to seaward running vertically from the base of the tower to the actual light.

The Low Light, situated about 300 yards along the shore to the north, also had painted to seaward a red painted vertical section. During daylight hours, in order for a vessel to know where the bar channel was situated, the red section of the High Light and that of the Low Light was required to be vertically aligned; once this was achieved a ship could cross the bar in relative safety provided there was fifteen feet of water in the channel. At night the two lights, of the High Light and Low Light, were aligned vertically.

The Low Light showed a fixed white light from half-flood to half-ebb tide and a fixed red light if there was less than fifteen feet of water over the bar. This small structure, about eight feet long and six feet wide, was fitted with wheels sitting on iron rails; supported on a sturdy elm and pitch-pine framework. It was raised about thirty feet above the level of the beach. At times the shifting sandbanks of the bar necessitated the need for the low Light to be moved to a new position along its rails. Mariners were informed of this through notices that appeared in the local press. This realignment enabled ships to cross the bar, in most cases, without mishap. At half-ebb to half-flood this light would show a red occulting light; at half-flood to half-ebb a white occulting light would be shown. Adjacent to the Low Light was yet another aid in assisting safe passage of the bar; this was the tide-ball a movable round latticed sphere attached to a tall poll and during daylight hours it would be hoisted when there was a minimum of fifteen feet of water covering the bar.



Low Light and Tide Ball

It is said that not everyone living around the estuary was in favour of a lighthouse being built. It was feared that the rich harvest from the sea, in the way of goods that made up the ships cargoes, timber and fittings from stricken sailing vessels that were wrecked on the bar and along the Saunton sands and those of Westward Ho! would cease; the sea would no longer provide the local inhabitants with an often needed source of food, clothing, valuable timber for construction purposes, and at times coal for heating and cooking. "One would think that the idea of a lighthouse, when first suggested, would be welcomed by all men. But it wasn't." She [Lucy] looked puzzled. "To many land-dwellers on this coast a wrecked ship meant a lot of loot." (*It Was the Nightingale* 1962) Henry Williamson describes how, before the Bristol Channel lighthouses were built, 'wreckers' would attempt to lure vessels onto the treacherous rocks of Morte Point by means of swinging lanterns tied to the horns of cattle to give the impression of a safe haven for vessels in trouble.

Writers who travelled to North Devon during the early years of the last century considered it to be something of an oddity. The writer W. L. Page made the following comment: 'They are both [the High and Low Light] very ugly.' But Charles G. Harper was less scathing: 'The lighthouse that guides mariners safely into the Taw – or Barnstaple River, as sailors prefer to call – is an odd structure; not so ferociously ugly as every writer who has mentioned it would leave the stranger to believe. It has character. No one, for instance, would be in the least likely to confuse it with any other lighthouse; and that is a great point.' Henry's friend S P B Mais who was familiar with the area wrote: 'At the junction of the Taw and Torridge we come to a sandy promontory covered with long green marram grass, where we may picnic and bathe with no human beings nearer than the fishermen of Appledore and Instow across the water. We may watch the fishing smacks beating their way over the bar, the white breakers of which seem to form an impassable ridge for the fully rigged barques and tugs that seek the high seas. There is a lighthouse here, and an iron skeleton tower a little further on.' The writer Charles Kingsley, famed for his books *WestwardHo!* and *The Water Babies* refers to the lighthouse and the bar in a poem entitled *The Three Fishers*. The second verse reads:

*Three wives sat up in the lighthouse tower,
And they trimmed the lamps as the sun went down;
They looked at the squall, and they looked at the shower,
And the night-rack came rolling up ragged and brown.
But men must work and women must weep,
Though storms be sudden, and waters deep,
And the harbour bar be moaning.*

Henry Williamson makes mention of the lighthouse and tide-ball in a number of his books, for example:

The Pathway 1928: 'They passed the lighthouse and the wooden groynes, and piles and tarred concrete breakwaters before it. Further down the brown iron ball was low on its post, a signal to ships in Bideford Bay that the bar was unavigable. Below the lighthouse three fishermen with baskets were gathering shell-fish on the rocky flats left by the tide.'

Devon Holiday 1935: 'Our party so different without the scribe, came to the lighthouse, with its tarred wooden groynes driven into the shingle to keep the spring tides from scouring its base. Almost automatically we explored the lighthouse, going up the spiral wooden staircase of pitch-pine so taut and strong, our footfalls ringing on the steps. The keeper explained to us the regulation numbers of the winds, and their corresponding speeds in miles per hour.'

Tarka the Otter 1927: 'The beams of the lighthouse spread like the wings of a star-fly above the level and sombre sands.'

It Was the Nightingale 1962: 'Their feet crunched on wet shingle, past the black iron tide-ball at the top of its post; past the white wooden lighthouse rising out of the dunes.'

The Linhay on the Downs 1934: 'Northwards, across the half-mile of uneasy grey water the lighthouse stood small and white. Near it the brown ball was raised on its stalk; signal that the water was high enough for the passage of ketches, colliers, tugs, and other small coasting craft which used the ports of Bideford, Fremington, and Barnstaple.'

Tales of Moorland and Estuary 1953: 'A mile and more seawards, waves were breaking on the tails of the bar with a dull and ceaseless roar. Beyond in the bay a tramp steamer was lying at anchor, awaiting the iron ball on the post by the lighthouse in the sandhills to arise, a sign that the bar was navigable. The ship would have to wait several hours for high water.'

Salar 1935: 'The day darkened out long before nightfall. As the tide began to move back the wind dropped, and rain fell straight and black. The clouds burst over the hills and the estuary...The lighthouse beam was invisible across the estuary. As the tide pressure ceased, the fairway became a mighty rushing river.'

The Power of the Dead 1963: 'He left Lucy at a valley leading to the lighthouse. The sun was over the mainland, and in the eastern light the village buildings across the water looked to be sharper, greyer.'

Another navigational aid along the sands towards Saunton also assisted mariners to negotiate the dangerous shoals and banks of the bar. According to Trinity House records, its correct name was the Bideford Bar Light, but mariners named it 'Blinking Billy' (HW preferred to call it the Blinker!) due to the occulting red and white light atop the small girder tower. Built in 1908 and painted red, it was withdrawn from service with the onset of the Second World War in 1939, and finally abandoned in 1946. Remains can still be seen in the sand-dunes close to the shore about one mile to the north of the High Light. 'We passed a little red tower standing at the edge of the sandhills, called by sailors the Blinker, because at night the oil lamp in its



*Blinking Billy, known to HW
as the Blinker*

lantern winks towards the dangerous sandbars at the mouth of the estuary, to give them a bearing. It was obvious that the Blinker had been needed on that coast, for after another half-mile we came across a third wreck bedded in the sand, with seaweed hanging on its timbers from which the iron nails had long since rusted.' *Goodbye Westcountry* 1937:

In summertime boatmen from Appledore and Instow ferried local people and visitors across the estuary to the sands below the lighthouse where they would bathe and enjoy a picnic.

During the Second World War the light that had for so many years guided vessels over the Bideford Bar was extinguished; being a conspicuous landmark and due to its close proximity to RAF Chivenor, it was camouflaged by being painted green and brown.

When I first saw the lighthouse in the summer of 1947 it had been repainted white and was once again guiding vessels over the bar. But sadly modern technology, the advent of radar, heralded the beginning of the end of the Braunton Lighthouse; in 1957 being deemed to be in a dangerous state of repair by Trinity House it was demolished. The massive foundations of brick and concrete are all that remain to show where this unusual, perhaps unique, lighthouse had once stood. A less attractive girder tower replaced it, but this too has been taken down and replaced by less attractive lights across the estuary above Instow.



*The Braunton Lighthouse
The keeper explained to us the
regulation numbers of the winds*



*The foundations
all that remains today of the
Braunton Lighthouse*



*Richard Williamson
and HWS members at the remains
of the lighthouse 1997*

Tony Evans