

Smalls Lighthouse

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The Smalls is not an island but a part of a wave-cut platform – appearing above low water (in quiet seas) but remain covered under normal conditions. Lying just beneath the waves these rocks have been a major threat to shipping ... the oldest artefact discovered being the sword clasp of a weapon once owned by the captain of a Viking Longboat from the C9th! As trade increased the number and variety of vessels passing through these coastal waters increased – ships from Glasgow, Dublin, Liverpool, Spain and the Mediterranean were plying their trade - but as the number and size of ships increased so did the number of wrecks being caught foul of the Smalls Rock. **John Phillips** was wrecked on the Smalls and was eventually rescued but determined to build a light-house to help warn and save other mariners from a similar fate for “*the great and holy good to serve humanity*”. In 1770 he placed an advertisement for a competition to design his lighthouse and this was won by **Henry Whiteside** (originally a violin-maker by profession!) and **Thomas Williams** was appointed his ‘clerk of works. Williams was born near Whitesands and learnt the valuable lessons associated with the weather and tides around the Pembrokeshire coast. Williams also appreciated the difficulties of getting materials out to the Smalls Rock and attempting to erect a structure on a rock that was regularly swept by large waves and covered by water – when for days the weather meant boats could not leave Solva Harbour, or had to turn back unable to land, when the weather changed. To minimise the time spent on the exposed and treacherous rocks the entire structure was assembled and built in sections on the quayside of Solva Harbour (an early example of the ‘Flat-pack’!) and the parts (8 x 50 ft. long oak posts) loaded onto 30ft sailing vessels! The first job on the Smalls was to drill holes to secure iron hoops from which tethers could be attached to the ankles of the men working on the rock ... to prevent them being washed into the sea! Then iron legs had to be embedded in the rock to protect the oak beams that supported the platform with the living accommodation, and above that the upper structure that housed (originally) four reflectors – to warn shipping in all points of the compass. The base of the structure was of an open design to allow for the sea to flow freely between the beams – to minimise the risk of the lighthouse being brought down by the power of the sea. The living platform – to accommodate 2 men for a month at a time (providing the weather would allow a boat to reach them with supplies and relief) - was 50 ft above the rocks and was accessed by a rope-ladder, through a trap-door. The first oil-powered light was lit 1st September 1776. After just 4 months it became obvious that the structure needed alterations to the design so Henry Whiteside himself stayed to decide the changes needed to face the Atlantic storms ... but had to resort to sending a message in a bottle(!) asking for help when supplies ran short in bad weather. The most harrowing tale linked to the Smalls was that of keepers Thomas Howells and Thomas Griffiths – when Howells died, a few days into their tour of duty, Griffiths made a coffin and placed it outside the light but went mad before the relief could get to the lighthouse because he thought Howells was haunting him ... as the weather caused the coffin to bang the side of the living accommodation and Howells’ arm waved in the wind! After that Trinity House declared that all lighthouses should always be manned by three keepers not two!

The New Smalls Lighthouse, designed in 1855 by James Walker and built 1855-61 under directions of James Douglas, reaches 142 feet tall(43 metres), a granite tower modelled on Bishop Rock Light, Cornwall. Granite blocks were shipped in to Solva Harbour from Bodmin, where they were then cut and shaped on the quayside before being loaded onto barges and transported to the Smalls Rock – again to reduce the time spent at risk of the rocks. The base of the lighthouse is tapered and stepped – to break up the force of the waves and dissipate the wave energy constantly pounding the structure. Owned by Trinity House the lighthouse is now not manned by lighthouse keepers but fully automated and even solar powered, but the helicopter pad on the very top allows access for the maintenance of the light rather than risking the difficult access by boat from the sea.

