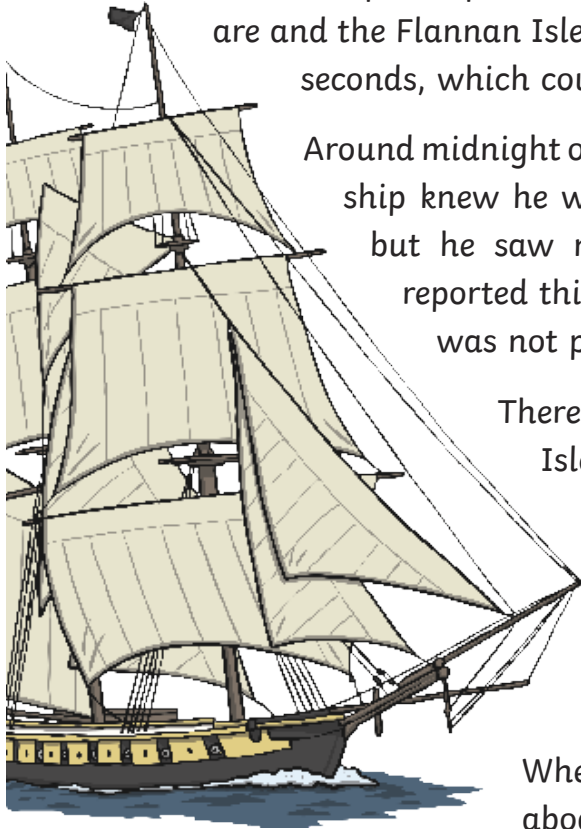


The Mystery of Flannan Isle

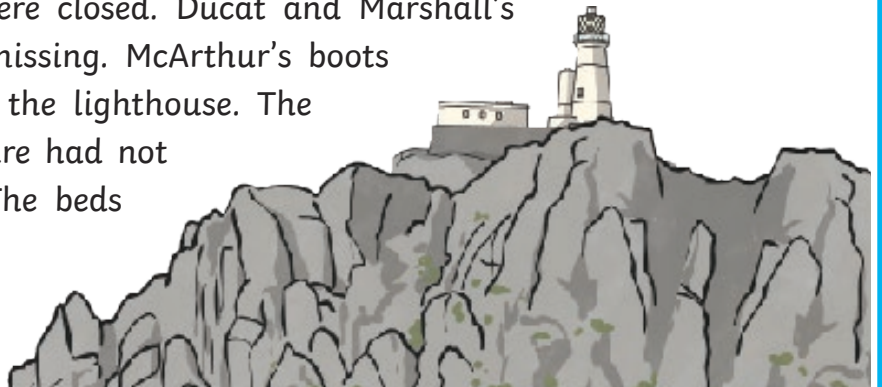
The Flannan Isles Lighthouse is found on Eilean Mor (one of the larger of the seven Flannan islands, eighteen miles north-west of the Scottish island of Lewis). These islands are also known as the Seven Hunters. The lighthouse was first lit to help keep passing ships safe on 7th December, 1899. All lighthouses have their own special pattern of light so that ships can identify where they are and the Flannan Isle light was two brilliant short flashes every 30 seconds, which could be seen 24 miles away in clear weather.

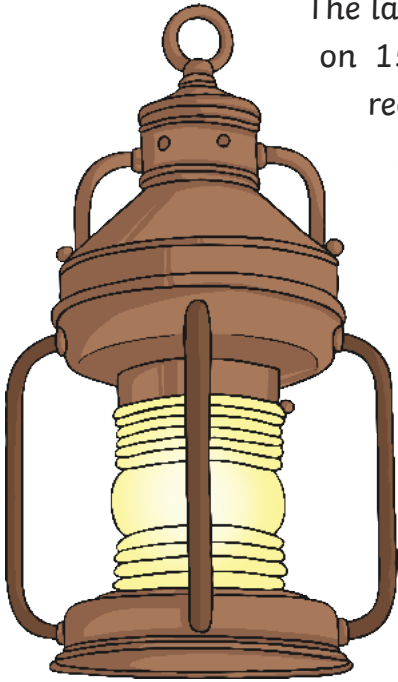


Around midnight on 15th December, 1900, a captain on a passing ship knew he was approaching the Flannan Isle Lighthouse, but he saw nothing. He thought this was strange and reported this when he arrived in port, however, his report was not passed on to the Northern Lighthouse Board.

There were always three keepers stationed at Flannan Isle and a new crew were put on to the island every fortnight. The three keepers stationed at the lighthouse on 15th December, 1900, were James Ducat (the Head Keeper), Thomas Marshall (Second Assistant Keeper) and Donald McArthur (Occasional Keeper).

When the relief crew arrived on Flannan Isle aboard the ship the Hesperus on Boxing Day 1900, eleven days had passed since the missing light was reported. The crew of the Hesperus could not see the lighthouse flags flying and thought the keepers had not seen them coming. The Hesperus sounded its horn and then fired a rocket but no one replied. The relief crew landed on the island, and they climbed the 160 steps up the cliffs to the lighthouse, calling the names of the keepers James, Thomas and Donald but they received no reply. The keepers had simply disappeared. The entrance gate and door to the lighthouse were closed. Ducat and Marshall's oilskins and boots were missing. McArthur's boots and oilskins were still in the lighthouse. The clocks had stopped. The fire had not been lit for some days. The beds were empty.





The last entries in the log book at the lighthouse were made on 15th December, 1900. James Ducat had made notes ready for transferring to his log book on the morning of 15th December and the lamp was ready to be lit. This suggested that the men disappeared on the afternoon of Saturday 15th December.

What happened on that afternoon? The three lighthouse keepers could not have left by boat, they did not have one. There was evidence of very bad weather on the west side of the island where railings had been damaged or washed away. Perhaps the men had left the lighthouse to check on some of their equipment and been swept away by a huge wave.

A poem called Flannan Isle was written by Wilfrid Wilson Gibson in 1912, twelve years after the discovery of the keepers' disappearance. It is, however, mostly written from the imagination.

Whatever happened to the three lighthouse keepers on Flannan Isle sadly remains a mystery to their families to this day. The Flannan Isles light still shines out to warn ships at sea, however, the light is lit automatically and no keepers live there.



Questions

Now answer the questions in sentences:

1. When was the lighthouse first lit and what was its purpose?

2. Why do you think lighthouses have their own special, signature pattern of lights? What was the signature pattern of the Flannan Isle light?

3. What is the significance of the captain's report of the missing light not being passed on?

4. From this excerpt of text, what conclusions can you draw about the movements and actions of the missing men and the circumstances of their disappearance?

The entrance gate and door to the lighthouse were closed. Ducat and Marshall's oilskins and boots were missing. McArthur's boots and oilskins were still in the lighthouse. The clocks had stopped. The fire had not been lit for some days.

Questions

Now answer the questions in sentences:

5. Why would a log book be kept at the lighthouse?

6. What evidence points to the men's disappearance on the afternoon of Saturday 15th December, 1900?

7. What conclusion could be drawn from evidence of bad weather at the west of the island?

8. What two reasons mean that Gibson's poem about Flannan Isle is not an accurate account?

9. Why are there no lighthouses in the Northern Lighthouse Board area manned by keepers today?



Answers

1. When was the lighthouse first lit and what was its purpose?
The lighthouse was first lit to help keep passing ships safe on 7th December, 1899.
2. Why do you think lighthouses have their own special, signature pattern of lights? What was the signature pattern of the Flannan Isle light?
Lighthouses have their own special pattern of light so that ships can identify where they are and the Flannan Isle light was two brilliant short flashes every 30 seconds.
3. What is the significance of the captain's report of the missing light not being passed on?
Answers will vary. This is significant because had it been passed on help could have been sent to the lighthouse sooner and perhaps some trace of the men could have been found.
4. From this excerpt of text, what conclusions can you draw about the movements and actions of the missing men and the circumstances of their disappearance?
OPEN – The men had left the lighthouse and closed the gates and door behind them which perhaps suggests they were not in a hurry. Ducat and Marshall wore outdoor clothing but McArthur did not. Had he gone out with no coat? Why would he have done this? The clocks had not been attended to for some days. They had been gone for some time because the fires were out.
5. Why would a log book be kept at the lighthouse?
Varied Answers– A logbook would be kept to pass on information to the different keepers and to act as a record of what happened at the lighthouse.
6. What evidence points to the men's disappearance on the afternoon of Saturday 15th December, 1900?
The logbook had notes ready for the morning of the 15th December and the lamp was ready to be lit, suggesting the morning's work to prepare the light had been done.
7. What conclusion could be drawn from evidence of bad weather at the west of the island?
The damage caused at the west of the island suggests there had been some very bad weather which means the men could have been caught by a large wave and swept away.
8. What two reasons mean that Gibson's poem about Flannan Isle is not an accurate account?
It was written 12 years later and mostly from the poet's imagination.
9. Why are there no lighthouses in the Northern Lighthouse Board area manned by keepers today?
No lighthouses are manned because all the lights are automatically lit.