

THE LIFE OF

GRACE DARLING

1815–42



The Darling family



Grace Horsley Darling was born on 24 November 1815 in her grandfather's cottage in Bamburgh, Northumberland. She was the seventh child of nine, and the fourth daughter of William and Thomasin Darling. Horsley was her grandmother's name.



When Grace was 3 weeks old, she was taken to Brownsman Island, where her father was the lighthouse keeper. The family had a small cottage attached to the island's lighthouse and were the only people who lived on the island. Their cottage had no running water, but it had a pond and a walled garden where the family kept chickens and grew their own vegetables and flowers. They also caught fish and collected sea birds' eggs.



Unfortunately, the lighthouse at Brownsman Island was not in a good position for guiding ships past the dangerous rocks. So a new lighthouse was built at Longstone in the Farne Islands. In 1826, when Grace was 10 years old, the Darling family moved to the new lighthouse.

Grace's home

The lighthouse was their home. It was built on bare rock just over 1m above water at high tide and exposed to the full fury of the North Sea. It was a bleak and wild environment where nothing would grow and no birds lived.



Grace and her family spent most of their time on the ground floor of the lighthouse. This large room, heated by a wood stove, was their kitchen and dining room as well as their living room. Above that, a spiral staircase led to three circular bedrooms, one above the other. Grace's bedroom was on the third floor. The top level had the lantern, which warned ships of the dangerous rocks all around. The lantern was 25m above the sea.

Outside, there was a boathouse for their coble (boat) and an oil store. Although barrels of drinking water were shipped in from the mainland, rainwater was collected in tanks underground. A pump brought water from the tanks into the kitchen.

William Darling taught all his children to read, write and do arithmetic. He also taught them geography and history. Grace and her sisters learned to knit, spin, sew and cook and, like all lighthouse keepers' children, they helped to look after the lighthouse.



Grace at work



The work was hard. Every day William had to polish the brass reflectors and clean the lamps and windows of the lighthouse lantern. He had to check the wicks and make sure there was enough oil in the lamps. Other duties included making detailed recordings of the tides and making sure the lighthouse was kept in good repair.

Grace was kept busy all day with her studies, needlework and keeping the house clean and tidy. Sometimes, when her brothers were not around, she would help her father when he went out in the boat. Grace also took her turn at the top of the lighthouse keeping watch, day and night, for ships in trouble at sea.

From her lookout post at the top of the lighthouse, Grace saw many ships passing by. She loved to watch the great sailing ships on a fine day. As she grew older, she saw a different type of ship. These new boats had short masts and funnels, which let out clouds of black smoke. They were paddle steamers, run by steam engines.



By the time Grace was 19 years old, all but one of her brothers and sisters had left home to marry or to work on the mainland. Only she and her 16-year-old brother William Brooks stayed.

The rescue

On 5 September 1838 the steamship *Forfarshire* set off from Hull to Dundee. Her cargo included cloths, soap, hardware, boiler plate and spinning gear. She also carried about 60 crew and passengers.



The next day, the ship's boiler began to leak and by the morning of 7 September the engine stopped. The *Forfarshire* began to drift. Suddenly, at about 4am, there was a great crash as the steamship hit Big Harcar rock. There was no time to call the passengers from their cabins and get them into the boats.

Within 15 minutes the ship had broken in two. The back half was swept away and sank, with more than 48 people onboard.

That night, only Grace and her parents were in the lighthouse. A fierce storm was blowing, with huge waves battering the lighthouse walls.



At 4.45am Grace saw the wreck, but it was not until 7am that it was bright enough to see survivors moving on Big Harcar rock. William Darling thought that conditions would prevent the launching of the North Sunderland lifeboat so he would have to go himself. The only one who could help him was Grace.

Grace took blankets with her to warm the survivors. The tide and wind were so strong that they had to row for nearly a mile to avoid the jagged rocks and reach the survivors safely.

There were nine people still alive on the rocks but the coble could only take five in the first rescue. William leapt out of the boat and on to the rocks, which left Grace to handle the boat alone. To keep it in one place, she had to take both oars and row backwards and forwards, trying to keep it from being smashed on the reef.

On the rocks, William found eight men, including one who was badly injured. There was also a woman holding two children, both of whom had died. Grace's father and three of the men rowed the boat back to the lighthouse, taking with them Grace, the injured man and the woman.

Grace stayed at the lighthouse and looked after the survivors with her mother. Her father and two of the *Forfarshire* crew returned for the other four men.

Nine other people had survived. When the stern of the ship was swept away, eight of the crew and one passenger managed to scramble into the ship's lifeboat. They were rescued by a sloop from Montrose and taken to Shields that same night.



Heroes

Soon the story of the wreck and the daring rescue was on the front pages of all the newspapers. Grace Darling became a heroine. Everyone wanted to know all about her, especially what she looked like. Since there were no cameras in those days, many artists visited the lighthouse to paint Grace's portrait. For years after the rescue, the lighthouse was busy with visitors who wanted to see the famous Darling father and daughter. Grace was sent hundreds of letters and presents. She was often asked for a lock of her hair.

However, Grace did not enjoy all this attention. She found that writing thank-you letters and sitting for portraits left her little time to get on with her life.

In April 1842, only 4 years after the famous rescue, Grace became ill with tuberculosis. This serious disease was very common in the 19th century and killed many people. Grace realised she did not have long to live so, with her family gathered around her, she gave them each something from her collection of medals and presents. On 20 October, Grace died. The funeral in Bamburgh was very grand. Hundreds of people, rich and poor, crowded the little Northumberland village to say goodbye. Two years later, a memorial to Grace was put up in St Aidan's churchyard in Bamburgh.

Both Grace and her father were awarded gold medals from the Royal Humane Society, and Silver Medals for Gallantry from the National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck (now the Royal National Lifeboat Institution). Even Queen Victoria sent her £50.



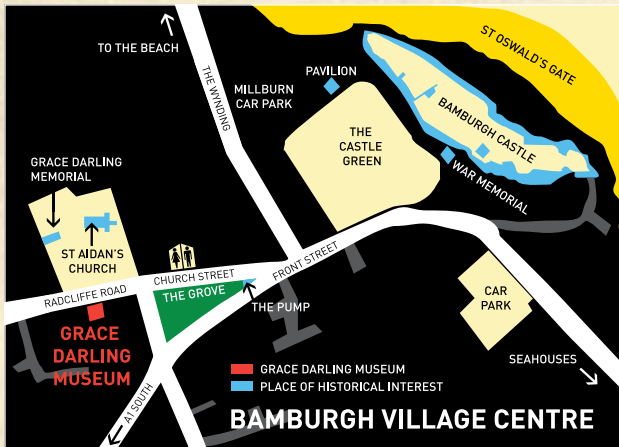
LAMENTABLE OCCURRENCE.
LOSS OF THE FORFARSHIRE STEAM-VESSEL, & THIRTY-FIVE LIVES.
It has seldom, we may say never, been our duty to report the occurrence of an accident in our neighbourhood so serious in its extent as the one we are about to narrate, which befel the Forfarshire steamer of Dundee, at Fern Islands on Friday morning last. When we contemplate the immense traffic now on our coast by steam, and the innumerable passengers that have recently by that medium gone between Scotland and England, passing within a short distance of the very spot which has proved so fatal in this instance, we are led to wonder at the providential care which seems to have been extended and delayed any serious occurrence. Having scrutinized into the cause of the present loss, ultimately attaching to the decay or otherwise to the defect of the boilers, it appears to us that by the establishment of a...



Grace H. Darling.



The RNLI Grace Darling Museum



The RNLI Grace Darling Museum in Bamburgh relives the life and times of the fearless girl who became a reluctant celebrity. A stylish new building was opened in 2007 to house the collection, which includes the famous coble and Grace's personal belongings.

The museum is near the centre of the village, opposite St Aidan's church and a short walk from the castle.

Opening times

Tuesdays–Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays
Easter–October 10am–5pm
November–Easter 10am–4pm
School and group bookings are welcome by appointment.
Our resource room is available for research and private hire.

RNLI Grace Darling Museum, 1 Radcliffe Road, Bamburgh,
Northumberland, NE69 7AE
Tel: 01668 214910 Fax: 01668 214912
Website: rnli.org.uk/gracedarling

The RNLI

Grace Darling and her father showed the same qualities that night in 1838 as lifeboat crews do today. They risked their lives to save others in the face of great danger.

The RNLI is the charity that saves lives at sea. It provides, on call, a 24-hour search and rescue service to 100 nautical miles out from the coasts of the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland. Since its formation in 1824 its volunteer crews have saved more than 137,000 lives.

rnli.org.uk



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Registered charity in England,
Scotland and Republic of Ireland



Lifeboats