

Meeting report 11/12/24

Fascinating talk about Happisburgh Lighthouse STALHAM FARMERS' CLUB Wednesday, December 11, 2024 A total of 17 members and two guests joined the chairman, Jon Pye, for supper at Wroxham Barns before the meeting. The chicken, ham and leek pie following by bread-and-butter pudding was much appreciated.

Welcome - The chairman welcomed one of the club's most senior members, Murray Ferguson, in his 95th year, and his son Robert. He extended a special welcome to the evening's speaker, Geoff Turner, and his wife, Jenny, of the Friends of Happisburgh Lighthouse. Members appreciated that it was the first time they'd jointly presented to a formal group.

There were about 40 members present including several guests and North Walsham YFC was also represented.

The late Colin Ross. Mr Pye asked members to stand in memory of one of the club's more colourful and enthusiastic members, Colin Ross, who had died aged 83. The youngest member of the well-known north Norfolk farming family, he had been a keen supporter of the club for many years and his death was recorded on the club's website.

Apologies – Anne Coller, Jason Cantrill, Ken Leggett, Tim Papworth, John Grier, Christopher Deane, Guy Willetts, Sarah Ellero.

Minutes – As the minutes of the November meeting had been on the club's website for almost a month, the chairman asked if he could sign them as a true and correct record. Agreed.

Secretary's report – Michael Pollitt asked for final entries for the grain competitions – samples of wheat and barley must be brought at the latest to the January 15 meeting or delivered to Chris Borrett, of Adams & Howling. He said that members, Nick Coller and Hannah Deane, were featured on the BBC news Norfolk website. It has been a very poor year for holly berries this year on his Broadland farm after the exceptional crop in 2023. Mrs Deane was talking about flower arranging and using alternative materials given the shortage of holly berries for making floral decorations.

The guest speakers, Geoff and Jenny Turner, of the Friends of Happisburgh Lighthouse, were introduced. Mr and Mrs Turner, who had moved to Norfolk from Sussex in 2012, firstly explained about the maritime disasters and loss of life over the centuries. The Haisboro sands, eight or nine miles off the coast, were especially treacherous.

It has claimed hundreds of lives. In 1692, some 200 colliers returning to Newcastle from London were caught in a fierce north-easterly storm off Winterton Ness and 140 vessels sank while a south-bound fleet, including craft from Wells and King's Lynn, saw the loss of at least 1,000 seafarers.

There were many other tragedies including the 74-gun HMS Invincible on March 13, 1801 which saw the loss of 400 of the 590 crew, including the captain John Rennie. She was sailing from Great Yarmouth for Copenhagen to join the fleet under Admiral Hyde Parker and Admiral Lord Nelson when it struck the sands. In that battle against the Danish fleet on April 2, the Royal Navy lost a total of 250 officers and men.

Losses at sea, notably off the Norfolk coast continued over the centuries. However, when Trinity House was granted a royal charter on March 19, 1513, by King Henry VIII, it set standards of piloting for vessels and laid the foundations of what became the lighthouse service.

Today, Trinity House looks after 65 lighthouses in England, Wales, the Channel Islands and Gibraltar but not Happisburgh, which gained its independence in 1990. The Northern Lights Board, responsible for about 200 lights, covers Scotland and the Isle of Man.

Today, Trinity House is responsible for light vessels, buoys and maritime communication systems and is the official deep sea pilotage authority for northern European waters. It is a maritime charity. With new powers granted by Queen Elizabeth – the Seamarks Act 1566 –

light beacons could be erected around the coast. However, in those early days, some private lighthouses were established while Trinity House erected the Lowestoft lighthouse in 1609 – a pair of wooden towers with candles.

Some remained until 1836 when private lighthouses were ended, and Trinity House bought Winterton light in 1840 for £57,000!

Almost 200 years ago after another nautical tragedy when 600 lives were lost off the Norfolk coast, Trinity House acted. As there was only one light between Cromer (a beacon) and Winterton (candlelit), it was decided to build two lighthouses at Happisburgh. One, the lowlight was built on the cliff but since lost, and the other, the high light, which survives today with its distinctive alternative red and white bands.

They started operating on January 1, 1791 lit by oil lamps. As more efficient lighting was invented by a Swiss Aimie Argand in 1782, and then a revolutionary lens by Frenchman Augustin Fresnel in 1821, it made it possible to transmit a 10ft beam or pencil of light for mariners.

In 1868, a new light was installed – still in use today, which can project a beam 17 miles out to sea. The low light with a 15-mile range was taken down in 1873. The remaining light was altered from constant to show for 25 seconds then a five-second eclipse.

While initially, the light was produced from oil, later acetylene gas was used and then much more recently, LED has been introduced. The lighthouse didn't have electricity until 1947 although it has arrived in the village 13 years earlier. The light sequence changed to flash three times every 30 seconds.

After almost 200 years of operation, Trinity House reviewed its lighthouses in 1988 and Happisburgh was scheduled for closure. A high-profile local campaign was successful and it was granted its

independence- the only one in the country – in 1990.

Mr Turner said that the Friends of Happisburgh Light were delighted when the Princess Royal agreed to become the charity's patron in 1993. And most recently last year, she visited the lighthouse, climbed the 112 steps to the top. And, just a few days ago, HRH Princess Anne agreed to continue as patron for another three years, he added.

They were thanked by Michael Pollitt, who expressed a wish that there would be an opportunity to visit the lighthouse in the spring. It had been a fascinating presentation covering more than 500 years of history dating back to 1513 when King Henry VIII had approved the foundation of Trinity House.

The loss of life on the coast off Norfolk, especially on the Happisburgh sands, over the centuries was horrendous but was described by Mrs Turner. He thanked the speakers and looked forward to meeting them at the Lighthouse in the spring.

Next meeting – Wednesday, January 15, 2025 when Adam Curtis, lately of the National Trust and now of the Tree Council, who will be talking about trees, bats and other matters of interest when we also invite members of North Walsham YFC to supper as our guests.

The meeting closed at 9.05pm