

The Captain, The Needles and the lighthouses

Captain Barrie



Robert Barrie 1774-1841 was born in Florida, USA on 5 May 1774. He was the son of Dr Robert Barrie, a Scottish surgeon's mate. His father died when Barrie was an infant. His mother was Dorothea 'Dolly' Gardner, the sister of Admiral Lord Gardner.

Barrie first saw active service aged 14 on board *HMS Goliath* in 1788. In 1795 Barrie was made Lieutenant and he joined *HMS Queen* in the Channel fleet. He was promoted to captain in 1802 and was appointed to *HMS Pomone* on 10 May 1806.

In December 1806 *Pomone* was sailing from Portsmouth harbour as a terrible storm broke out. The men were on deck and in the rigging, trying to keep the ship stable in the rough conditions. Suddenly a freak bolt of lightning hit the ship.

Barrie describes the accident in a letter to his step-brother: - "*the Pomone was obliged to return to Spithead having sprung her Bowsprit off Portland - we were struck by lightning and twenty-two men were knocked down by it. However, they will all I trust recover except two which are very doubtful cases - the weather was extremely bad and we had one of our best men washed overboard*".



Portsmouth Harbour, with the Haslar Hospital in the distance. 1791

Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827)
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Portsmouth Point with Gosport in the distance. 1791

Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827)
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The members of Barrie's crew were mostly new recruits, and this incident did not help him in the task of maintaining discipline on-board. When they got back into Spithead five of his men stole a boat; they reached the shore but were promptly captured. Barrie records the outcome of their desperate attempt, which resulted in a Court Martial: - "*They are sentenced to 200 lashes each. The punishment will take place tomorrow.*" The Navy had no sympathy with deserters, especially in wartime.

Serving in the Channel from 21 April to 7 June 1807 *Barrie* took or destroyed upwards of twenty enemy vessels.

A very clean ship

The *Pomone* had always been a very clean ship. *Captain Barrie* believed in everything being kept in the best condition. Whenever possible he had the men washing their clothes and hammocks. The bread room and the spirit room were cleaned whenever the ship was in port.



Two brass uniform buttons with an anchor motif. IWCMS:20001.6.133

Barrie was also meticulous when it came to provisioning the *Pomone*. The food consisted of salt-beef, pork, peas, water, beer and wine. He would take on supplies of fresh vegetables and he also kept animals on-board to provide fresh meat.



The Spanish dollar, also known as the piece of eight. (Charles IV 8 Reales from Lima 1803-8, Peru mint). IWCMS:20001.7.154

On matters of welfare *Barrie* and his first lieutenant *Gabriel* both strove to support the crew. In port, when sailors' wives had to leave the ship, *Barrie* often asked his steward to give them a guinea each. When the rate of exchange in port was poor, he instructed crew to come to his cabin where he distributed a bagful of dollars for their use.

Barrie and *Gabriel* often granted generous shore leave to the crew, confident that this would not result in the usual desertions.

Barrie and Canada

The *War of 1812* was a conflict fought between the United States and the United Kingdom, (June 1812 to February 1815).

In October 1812 *Barrie* was commissioned Captain of the *Dragon*, taking a leading part in the blockade of Chesapeake Bay on the American east coast. For some months he was Commodore in charge of the British squadron, which during his command seized over 85 vessels. He was selected as Commander of a joint expedition to capture the settlement of Hampden (Maine, USA). *Barrie* destroyed the American frigate *Adams* and two other armed vessels. The British force also burned about 20 more vessels and took every town on the five mile stretch of river from Hampden to Bangor.

Following the peace in 1815, Barrie was placed on half pay; he then married and went to live in France. In January 1819, after months of negotiations, he accepted the post of Commissioner of the dockyard at Kingston (Upper Canada), an appointment which made him the senior naval officer in the Canadas.

He is remembered in Canada in a number of place-names, which include Barrie Island in Lake Huron, and the Ontario city of Barrie.

Barrie died in June 1841 at Swarthdale near Lancaster and was buried at Ripley. A stained-glass window was dedicated to his memory in Ripley Church.

The Needles



The iconic Island landmark, '*The Needles*' is a row of three distinctive stacks of chalk that rise about 30m (98 feet) out of the sea. They are to be found close to Alum Bay off the western end of the Isle of Wight.

Originally the Needles consisted of four protruding rocks. The tallest rock was known as '*Lot's Wife*'. It was tall and slender standing 36.5m (120 feet high). This rock collapsed in 1772 with a crash that was heard in Portsmouth. The Needles is a place of danger for shipping with over 20 named wrecks recorded in the vicinity. *The Assurance*, a 44-gun frigate sailing from Jamaica to Portsmouth, was lost in 1753, and *HMS Pomone* in 1811. In 1918, two ships *SS Mechanical* and *SS Serrana* were sunk in the vicinity by torpedoes from a German submarine.



Perhaps the most famous wreck off The Needles is that of the Greek cargo ship, *Varvassi*, whose remains are still a danger to other vessels. *Varvassi* ran aground with a cargo of Algerian wine and tangerines on 5 January 1947: fortunately, all the crew, including the ship's cat, were rescued.



Lighthouse near the Needles. 1800
John Nixon 1740-1811.

The 18th century lighthouse on the western tip of Highdown above the Needles.
Watercolour © Carisbrooke Castle Museum Trust

The lighthouses

In 1781 numerous merchants and ship-owners petitioned Trinity House

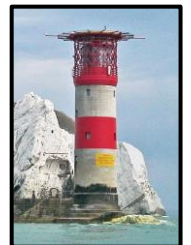
for a lighthouse near The Needles Rocks. They obtained a patent in January 1782 which directed that lights should be:

"kept burning in the night season whereby seafaring men and mariners might take notice and avoid danger... and ships and other vessels of war might safely cruise during the night season in the British Channel".

Negotiations must have failed because it was not until 1785 that Trinity House erected three lighthouses at The Needles, St. Catherine's Point and Hurst Point. The Needles tower was first lit on 29 September 1786.

The tower was situated on top of the cliffs overhanging Scratchell's Bay. The light, 144m (472ft) above sea level was often obscured by sea mists and fogs and of limited use to mariners.

The tower at Hurst, sited to the south west of Hurst Castle, was lit for the first time on 29 September 1786. However, shipping found that this light was obscured from certain directions, so in 1812 an additional and higher light was added to remedy this defect and to give a guiding line to vessels.



The present Needles Lighthouse was built by Trinity House and first lit in 1859.

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