

# No substitute for keeping us safe at sea - Mike Bullock

Anyone who wonders if the need for lighthouses has been done away with by modern technology should bear in mind that GPS and other Global Navigation Satellite Systems are far from foolproof since they can be disrupted by space weather or spoofed by those with bad intentions. The cause of many accidents can be traced to mariners simply not keeping a good look out, and sometimes there is just no substitute for the visual reference provided by physical aids to navigation.

[By Mike Bullock](#)

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*Muckle Flugga Lighthouse on the NW coast of the Island of Unst. the most northerly lighthouse in the UK.*

That was the reassuringly down-to-earth message from a recent presentation to the [Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport](#) which painted a marvellous picture of an organisation with no less than 207 lighthouses that in our lifetimes has been mightily updated – the last staffed lighthouse at Fair Isle South was automated as recently as 1998 – but sits proudly at ease with its heritage. The Commissioners' flag being pre-1801 makes it the only one still flying that omits the diagonal cross of St Patrick. [NLB](#) has been looking after the Isle of Man ever since it won the task in 1815. Home since 1832 at 84 George Street in Edinburgh is still referred to as the New Headquarters, and the working model lighthouse that graces the building prompts tour- bus guides to make predictable jokes about there being no shipwrecks in that part of town.

The Board's original construct containing Law Officers and Sheriff-Principals reflects a time when the coming of safe navigation was not necessarily welcome to coastal communities reliant on the cargoes and timber from shipwrecks. Today however its strategic focus is provision of efficient and effective marine aids, driving towards making its operations Net Zero Carbon with maximum

exploitation of commercial opportunities, continuous improvement of assets, cooperation with the other lighthouse authorities and support to the sustainable economic development of Scotland and the Isle of Man.

Supported by a hypothecated tax called Light Dues which is paid by shipowners, NLB receives no taxpayer support and must submit an annual bid which is subject to close scrutiny by the UK Department for Transport and the Shipping Industry. The Scotland Act 2016 provides a welcome link with the Scottish Parliament. NLB is embedded in the communities that it serves, offering job opportunities including apprenticeships and helping aquaculture and tourism industries. An example of recent responsiveness to economic opportunity was provision of a new lighthouse at the Corran Narrows enabling larger cruise vessels safely to reach Fort William.

Wrecks are similar to crashes on the roads since the first need is to prevent a further accident being caused by the wreck. NLB responds by deploying one of its vessels to identify the exact location, which must then be marked by either guarding the site or placing of a buoy so the risk is mitigated. Carbon consciousness can be seen in NLB's deployment of solar panels, LED lights and batteries, its planned use of wind turbines and expansion of the electric vehicle fleet. Commercial opportunities arise in working with the Met Office, oil companies and the Ministry of Defence.

The legacy of the Lighthouse Stevensons has been acknowledged in support to refurbish the family tomb in New Calton Cemetery and to ensuring that the Marriott Hotel which now occupies Robert Stevenson's home has a lighthouse theme – while a predecessor of the Board's present two ships the Fingal has a new life as a floating hotel in Leith. Eight lighthouses offering public access in normal times are Ardnamurchan, Fair Isle, the Isle of May, the Mull of Galloway, the Museum at Fraserburgh, North Ronaldsay, Start Point and Sumburgh Head.

The most graceful light, Skerryvore has become synonymous with shipping forecasts and a folk band, both Dubh Artach and Hyskeir are glorious for their names and Neist Point has been made iconic by its appearance in many advertisements. Conspiracy theorists may never rest from speculation about the fate of the keepers on the Flannan Isles, but Muckle Flugga will retain its fame as the most northerly light. North Ronaldsay is looked after by the legendary Billy Muir who is reputed to have 20 other jobs on the island, while the Bell Rock will always be renowned as the first sea-washed tower, and the Isle of May deserves note as Scotland's first light in 1636.

***Mike Bullock, Northern Lighthouse Board chief executive***