

Coastal Notes

Going to sea has always been a hazardous undertaking, whether the very early seafarers in their primitive craft, through the great explorers such as the Chinese in the 15th century to modern cruise liners. Many techniques have been developed to make each voyage as safe as possible. One of the earliest and most crucial, even today, was a means of warning sailors of hazards ahead as they approached land – the lighthouse. Early lighthouses were little more than bonfires; however, one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world was Pharos, the lighthouse at the entrance to Alexandria in Egypt. Standing at around 400 feet high, it was the tallest building in the world, and guided sailors to safety for 1500 years, before being destroyed in an earthquake in the 14th century. This was a sophisticated piece of engineering, maximising its light with mirrors.

In the UK, the Stevenson family is synonymous with lighthouse engineering. Much less well known is a local man revered in Japan. His name was Richard Brunton, he was born in Muchalls, trained as a Civil Engineer and in 1868 went to Japan at the recommendation of David and Thomas Stevenson, Engineers to the Scottish Lighthouse Board, of Edinburgh. He was appointed Chief Engineer to the fledgling Japanese Lighthouse Department. Japan was just opening up to the outside world after a long period of isolation. The Japanese Government needed to improve safety for its rapidly expanding foreign trade, as shipowners were unwilling to commit their vessels to the hazardous, unlit coastline.

The apparatus and heavy equipment came from the Stevenson brothers, who had the additional consideration of earthquakes to take on board. However, work went ahead at amazing speed; after eight years, there were 36 lighthouses on the Japanese coast, as well as lightships, buoys and beacons. Brunton also instigated the Japanese lifeboat service in the same period, now the Japanese Maritime Safety Agency. MRI has had links with JMSA for many years and recently their International Affairs Director, Mr Tetsuya Yamaj visited Stonehaven to gain first hand knowledge of MRI. From this visit, word spread of MRI's work, and a donation was received from the crew of one of their large ocean going rescue vessels, which had been visiting London.

That was not to be the end of Brunton's achievements in Japan. He also played a major role in the development of the railway system, advised on, and set up, the new-fangled telegraph, becoming the first to establish the telegraph in the Far East, and erected the first iron bridge in Japan. He was based in Yokohama, then a very primitive city and was tasked to make it fit for Europeans. He drew up probably the first urban planning blueprint in the Far East and laid out its harbour and port installations. He helped found a school of mathematics and compiled the first ordnance survey map of the Empire, which came to be considered a standard work. All this was done in a matter of 8 years before he left Japan in 1876.

Richard Brunton met and worked with Thomas Blake Glover, the Fraserburgh born engineer and industrialist. Between them, they laid the foundations of the modern Japan – a remarkable tribute to the energy and vision of the Victorian Scot. Both men are revered in Japan. A few years ago there was a series of commemorative events to celebrate their contribution to modern Japan

For further information, or to find out how you can support the work of Maritime Rescue Institute, please contact 01569 765768.

Information on Brunton taken from the late Archibald Watt's pamphlet 'Richard Henry Brunton 1841 – 1901'