

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 grandfather's surname.



When Grace was 3 weeks old, she was taken to live at 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 the furthest out of the Farne Islands. In 1826, when Grace was 10 years old, the Darling family moved to the new lighthouse.

## Grace's home

Grace's family lived inside the Longstone Lighthouse. It was built on bare rock just over 1m above water at high tide and

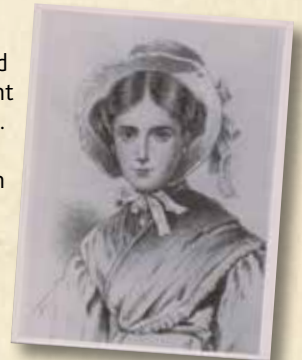


exposed to the full fury of the North Sea. It was a bleak and wild environment where nothing would grow and no birds lived.

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. On 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 Tynemouth that same night.



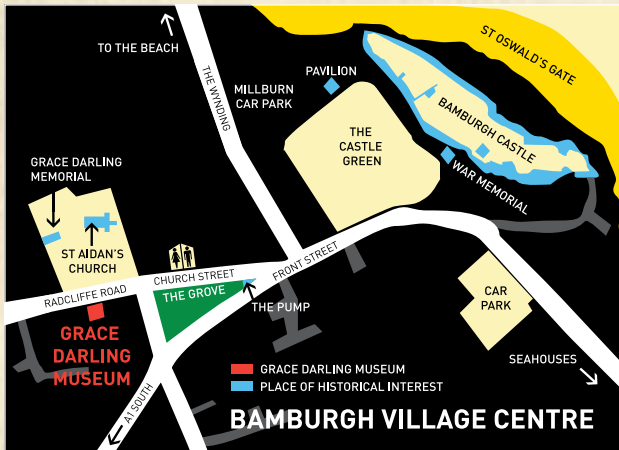




# Grace H. Darling.



## The RNLI Grace Darling Museum



The RNLI Grace Darling Museum in Bamburg tells the story of the fearless girl who became a reluctant celebrity. The collection includes the famous coble used in the rescue, Grace's personal belongings and commemorative items from then to today.

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

## Opening times

Easter to September: Mon–Sun 10am–5pm (last entry 4.15pm)  
October to Easter: Tues–Sun 10am–4pm (last entry 3.30pm)  
School and group bookings are welcome by appointment.  
Our lantern room is available for research and private hire.

**RNLI Grace Darling Museum,**  
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Website: [RNLI.org/gracedarling](http://RNLI.org/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 the RNLI was founded in 1824, its lifeboats, and since 2001, its lifeguards, have saved more than 140,000 lives.



Images: RNLI Heritage



Assisted by a grant from the  
Northern Rock Foundation  
The Foyle Foundation

With thanks to the Foyle Foundation for equipping the Education Room at the Grace Darling Museum.

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**Lifeboats**

A charity registered in England and Wales (209603) and Scotland (SC037736).  
Charity number CHY 2678 in the Republic of Ireland