

A recently completed project in South Ayrshire has combined lighthouses, museums, art, drama and oral history skills in an ambitious and successful education initiative.

Lighthouses and Citadels

Lighthouses as an education resource
By **Jenny Renfrew**, Senior Cultural Coordinator, South Ayrshire Council



“I feel proud about visiting Ailsa Craig. Before I went I just saw it as a boulder in the sea but now I realise that it is a wonderful and beautiful place, full of wildlife and wonder.”

Pupil

This project, supported by grant funding from MGS and carried out in partnership with the Museums Service at South Ayrshire Council, looked at Scotland’s heritage in the form of lighthouses, and in particular at Ailsa Craig and the Mull of Galloway Lighthouses as a local resource to schools in the region. The project also included a visit to Kinnaird Head in Fraserburgh to the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses where the original light from Ailsa Craig is stored.

Lighthouses are not only functional – they link into a number of interesting topics related to contemporary living such as energy conservation and sustainability, communications, technology, design and engineering. They also have an almost mystical air about them, with strange happenings reported that spark the imagination.



2.

Six schools were involved with the project and 200 young people took part. Every school visited a lighthouse to gain an insight into the life of the Light Keeper. The young people received training in oral history interview techniques before interviewing retired Light Keepers and their families at the McKechnie Institute where an exhibition on Ailsa Craig was displayed.

When visiting the exhibition at the McKechnie Institute, the pupils saw clothing donated by a Light Keeper, objects from lighthouses, maps and photographs and a history of the flora and fauna. The museum staff were fantastic about facilitating the schools visits, giving tours of the exhibition and showing archive footage of Ailsa Craig.

In essence a big part of the museum’s collection was living – their connections with the local



3.

community and these retired Light Keepers were invaluable.

The pupils took the information from their visits and experiences and used them in a number of different ways.

A performance element looked at the Stevenson family, who designed the majority of lighthouses in Scotland, and characters and stories in the lifetime of the Lighthouse Service locally and across Scotland. They used storytelling, re-enactment and performance to look at how Light Keepers survived isolation and peril.

The stories, myths and anecdotes of life on a lighthouse were used to create a piece of animation. Working with a filmmaker they used stop motion animation creating models and sets brought to life through digital technology.



4.

Inspired by sea paintings across the ages by artists such as Turner and Eardley, they created their own life size paintings depicting the stormy waters surrounding lighthouses and the very real risks of life and death, isolation and survival.

Working with an artist and looking at ships that have become synonymous with specific lighthouses (e.g. Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary with Ailsa Craig) the young people recreated shipwrecks, lighthouses and sailing boats using willow, and one school created individual suncatchers in stained glass, inspired by the lenses and views from a lighthouse.

Finally, pupils created their own poetry inspired by Scottish lighthouses and in particular Ailsa Craig, as well as visits to the McKechnie Institute and the Mull of Galloway Lighthouse and their interviews with Light Keepers.

“I’ve loved this project and the children have gained a lot from their involvement. The whole idea was far removed from what we can normally do in school – great to give children this sort of opportunity. Very Curriculum for Excellence!”

Teacher

The whole project has been documented by a filmmaker who has filmed the interviews with the retired Light Keepers and their families. This, together with documentary film and animations, has been incorporated into a final DVD which has been used in an Education Pack. The pack also includes a booklet containing all the poems, drawings, paintings and photos of the pupils’ artwork.

“I learned to work in a group with people I don’t play with.”

Pupil

1. Some of the artwork created by the children who took part.
2. Maidens Primary at the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses at Kinnaird Head.
3. Participants interview a Light Keeper.
4. The Mull of Galloway lighthouse.

The resulting work was displayed in an exhibition and performed on stage at Girvan Academy Theatre in June last year.

Although the project was challenging – coordinating six schools which were geographically far apart, museum visits, interviews, timetables and artists – it was all worthwhile when it came together at the Showcase event and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive from all sectors.

For more information contact Jenny on

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