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# Naval Signal Station, North Berwick Law





## Signalling, Suspicion and Secret Codes

*The conical profile of North Berwick Law is a familiar landmark presiding over the plains of East Lothian and crowned by a fibreglass copy of a whalebone arch. Less familiar perhaps, even to those who make the climb to the top, are the remains of a signal station immediately adjacent and the important role it played in helping to defend the nation from sea borne invasion. Now used by tourists and day-trippers as a platform to take in the panoramic views of the Firth of Forth, few are aware of the history beneath their feet.*

*The station was constructed at the beginning of the 19th century as part of a chain of naval signal posts that stretched along the Scottish coast from Calton Hill in Edinburgh to St Abbs. It belonged to a wider network of stations that ran along the coasts of Britain and Ireland serving as an alert system during the wars with France and her allies. The stations were used to monitor the seaways for enemy vessels and forewarn the Royal Navy of any potential threat. Coded messages were communicated from the signal station using a system of flags, pennants and balls hoisted on a flagstaff. The location of a ship was communicated by giving its position in relation to coastal features or local landmarks. The messages were relayed between stations, including harbours such as Dunbar and Leith, where Naval command was based. Once the message had been received, a Navy ship was sent to intercept the suspect vessel.*

*The station would have been operated by a team of four men commanded by a Naval Lieutenant. The men were recruited locally and were usually fishermen or boatmen. With younger men committed to the army and navy, the signal men were individuals considered 'unsuitable for ship service', generally on account of their age. Although life on watch was basic and harsh, the men were supplied with some items of domestic comfort. An inventory notes the supply of tables, chairs, coal, candles and even a bath stove for the commanding officer, together with a flagstaff, mast, pennants and signalling balls.*

*When the war with France ended in 1815 so too did the need for the coastal signal stations. While part of the system continued to be used by the Revenue service to monitor ship movements for customs and excise purposes, most were abandoned or dismantled. Although the lifespan of these buildings was short, those that survive are evidence of Scotland's role in naval history when, in the words of 19th century writer James Miller, 'East Lothian had now most decidedly turned her ploughshare into a sword'.*





## 'Tokens of time and tempest'

*The end of the war with France sealed the fate for the signal station on North Berwick Law and its demise was described some thirty years later by the Reverend Robert Balfour Graham in the New Statistical Account of Scotland:*

*'The ruins on the top are only of modern date, and were the residence of the party – (a naval officer and three assistants,) in charge of the signal station established thereon during the late war, and dismantled on the return of peace. The erections are all unroofed, and yearly accumulating the usual interest and tokens of time and tempest.'*

*Almost a decade later, its continuing decline is depicted on the 1854 1st edition of the Ordnance Survey where three roofless buildings are annotated 'Old Telegraph Station (in ruins)'.*

*Today the remains of the signal station can be seen just below the summit, built into the rock on a small terrace on the north side of the hill. Given such an exposed location they are remarkably well preserved. A survey by Headland Archaeology Ltd in 2001 identified several of the structures associated with the signal station, including two small outbuildings, one of which may have been a privy, as well as a yard containing the foundations for the signalling flagstaff. The layout of the buildings has a close parallel with that at St Abb's, which was part of the same signal station chain.*

*As the saying goes 'History has a habit of repeating itself' and the summit of North Berwick Law was once again utilised when threatened by wartime invasion. In the 20th century, when war exploded across Europe, an observation post was built just below its 19th century predecessor, once again keeping watch over the Firth of Forth.*

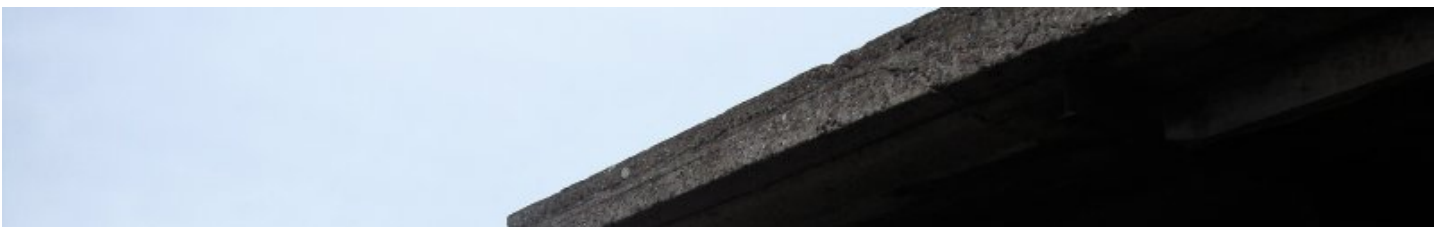
### *Further Reading:*

*Frank Kitchen The Napoleonic War Coast Signal Stations, The Mariner's Mirror, Vol. 76, Issue 4, 1990*

*James Miller The Lamp of Lothian, Or, the History of Haddington, 1844*

*The Rev. Robert Balfour Graham Parish of North Berwick. The New Statistical Account of Scotland, 1845*

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<https://canmore.org.uk/site/73938/north-berwick-law>  
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