

4 WILD WINDS AND WHITE WATER



Above: Being regarded as the most famous lighthouse in the world has meant that Eddystone featured extensively on early postcards and you'll see more of them in this chapter. For most people, the image on a postcard would be their only sight of the lighthouse. The caption of this lovely 1904 sepia card 'Eddystone Lighthouse in Storm' shows exactly that, together with a storm-tossed ship on the left – and a flock of birds whose distinctive black wing tips bear more than a passing resemblance to gannets.

Lighthouses are subjected to some of the worse excesses of Nature we can imagine. A wild sea is a powerful and destructive force, and when combined with a tearing gale the combination can wreak havoc and destruction. The very purpose of a lighthouse is to be placed at the forefront of this struggle between Man and Nature – to warn of the dangers on which it stands. Inevitably they experience the full fury of the elements, but thanks to the genius and skill of their engineers, most of our remote lighthouses are still standing unscathed. Bell Rock will have withstood two centuries of wind and waves in 2011, but Bishop Rock and Eddystone have both had towers swept away by an ocean in fury, and beacons on The Smalls, Eddystone and Longships were replaced before they suffered the same fate.

Really wild seas were always popular subjects for postcards because they tried to illustrate what most people not intimately connected with the sea could only imagine. But it was difficult because it was almost impossible to photograph such events first-hand. An open boat pitching wildly in stormy seas was no place for a photographer trying to set up an early wooden camera on a tripod. However, you'll see there are some cards in this chapter that are actual photographs, but more often than not a postcard of a tearing gale with mountainous seas was the product of an artist's imagination, or even a combination of the two.

Right: Artists' impressions of rough seas were far commoner than actual photographs – for obvious reasons. As you examine the cards in this chapter look out for the elements that all the artists seem to imagine are necessary in such a scene. Lots of white water and spray of course, usually breaking on the rocks or climbing up the tower itself, but notice also the flocks of disturbed sea birds flying around or close to the tower. Couple this with dark skies and vessels sailing uncomfortably close to the lighthouse – sometimes on the horizon, sometimes a little closer, but always at a giddy angle – and you have an almost perfect 'lighthouse-in-a-storm' picture. The only other element that's missing from this colourful 1944 card of the Bell Rock is some floating wreckage – a mast or sail from a vessel that has been driven too close in the storm and paid the price. But don't worry, that'll be along in a moment.





Left: A big wave swamps the bow of a fairly sizeable but unidentified two-masted vessel causing it to almost broach as it struggles past the Casquets lighthouse off Guernsey. The three original towers have been caught in a shaft of sunlight breaking through the dark skies. In the bottom right-hand corner the card is identified as an 'oilette'. This was a process that gave a textured surface to the card – much like the original oil painting from which it was made.

Right: 'The Chicken Lighthouse' referred to in this card's caption is Chicken Rock lighthouse off the southern tip of the Isle of Man. This is not a particularly accurate representation of the light – more of a 'generic' lighthouse than anything the Stevensons produced. But there's lots of spray and spume as the storm drives waves against the rugged coast of the Calf of Man island. Perhaps the circling seabirds are storm petrels, otherwise known as Mother Carey's Chickens, who used the rock on which the lighthouse stands as a favourite perch and so gave it a fitting name.





Left: A sepia card this time, with more than a passing similarity to the previous one. Only the distressed seabirds are absent. It's a wild night on the Longships in this 1912 card, scudding clouds partly obscure the moon, but the lantern is lit to warn any vessels foolish enough to be out on such a night of the dangers below. The representation of the lighthouse is a fairly accurate drawing of William Douglass' 1873 tower, and the amount of white water driven against the reef by a tearing gale is by no means exaggerated.

Right: Another lovely 'oilette' card where you can actually see some of the texturing of the surface. Eddystone's light is flashing but it doesn't appear to be night. A ketch with a few sails still up is being driven past the reef at quite a speed I would imagine. The stump of Smeaton's tower is clearly visible, so it's a scene representing a time after 1883.





Left: Here's the floating wreckage I promised earlier, and quite a substantial piece it is too. Probably the mast of a vessel that has been driven onto the Eddystone reef, and there's another ship struggling past without sails on the left-hand side. The artist of this work clearly has no idea as to what goes on in a lighthouse lantern and the kind of beam it produces. The light from the illuminant is turned into parallel rays by the circulating prisms of glass and emerges as a powerful beam, parallel with the sea, and never as depicted in this view. A pity, because the appearance of the lighthouse is fairly accurate, and we can even see Smeaton's stump emerging from the waves just to the left of the broken spar whose end has been splintered.