

Fred's Thread

December 2009

MUCHALLS TO JAPAN

Richard Henry Brunton was born on the 26th December 1841 in the coastguard house (now 11 Marine Terrace Muchalls) Kincardineshire to Richard Brunton and ex Naval officer and now coastguard officer at Muchalls and his Mother Margaret Telford.

In 1856 he became an apprentice engineering assistant with John Willett of Aberdeen. After completing his apprenticeship he was engaged in the construction of railways and bridges throughout Scotland and England.

During this time trade between Europe and Japan was rapidly increasing and the Japanese Government was under obligation to ensure the waters and harbours around their shores were safe for shipping.

This project had already begun under the direction of the French foreign advisor Leonce Verney but was not proceeding fast enough for the British Government.

In 1868 Mr Brunton was elected an Associate of the Institute of Civil Engineers who recommended him to the Board of Trade as a suitable person for the Japanese project. The noted lighthouse engineering brothers David and Thomas Stevenson also recommended him to the Japanese Government.

Mr Brunton's first task was to survey 1500 miles of uncharted coastline and to select a number of sites for the construction of new lighthouses.

In his position as Chief Lighthouse Engineer to the Japanese Government he was responsible for the designing and supervising of 26 Japanese lighthouses in the Western style. He also established 2 lightships, 13 buoys and 3 beacons.

It should be remembered that although the construction design and light mechanisms he used were taken from the Stevenson's, he had to adapt his building techniques for a country where earthquakes were prevalent. He also had the added problem that the trades of Masons, Blacksmiths, and bricklayers were almost unknown in this country.

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Brunton also established a system of lighthouse keepers modelled on the Northern Lighthouse board of Scotland. He also helped found Japan's first school of civil engineering, which eventually became Yokohama University.

Mr Brunton was consulted on other engineering and railway projects and significantly contributed to the waterworks and harbour design of Yokohama where he is remembered by a commemorative statue.

By the time of his return to Britain he had been made a fellow of the Geological Society and a fellow of the Geographical Society. He worked for 3 years as manager of Young's Paraffin Oil Company and then 15 years as an architect in London before his death in 1901.

He is buried at West Norwood Cemetery where the Yokohama Chamber of Commerce restored his marble memorial on 1991.



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