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This North Ronaldsay beacon rests on the shore of the northern-most island of Orkney.

Picture: Orkney Photographic

Race to save an Orkney landmark

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NORTH Ronaldsay – Orkney's most northerly outpost – is considered remote even to other Orcadians. But residents – which number about 60 – don't let that stop them from putting their tiny island on the map with a series of innovative ideas that have secured national recognition. These actions include selling meat from their seaweed-eating sheep to posh restaurants as well as producing knitwear that uses dyewood from a 266-year-old shipwreck to visitors like Prince Charles.

Now, plans to renovate the island's 18th-century light beacon and the surrounding buildings and pier have resulted in a placing among the top three Scottish entrants competing for funding in the regional finals of BBC2's *Restoration Village*, to be broadcast on 18 August. The programme's film crew left North Ronaldsay enthusing about the uniqueness of the place and the welcome they received.

Robert Stevenson, the famous 18th-century lighthouse builder, would be hard put to recognise it as the same island he had battled for hours to reach by sea from mainland Orkney. Once there he couldn't wait to leave, according to family journals published by Robert Louis Stevenson, the builder's grandson and future author of *Treasure Island*.



The beacon is slowly deteriorating and faces an uncertain future.

Picture: Orkney Photographic

It was the sinking of the treasure ship *Svecia* off North Ronaldsay in 1740 that led to calls for a beacon to light the way round the notorious north-east corner of Orkney. The Swedish East Indiaman cargo ship filled with silk, gold and dyewood had been worth around £200,000 – the equivalent of millions today – and resulted in the first surveys of British waters being carried out by Orkney "map man" Murdoch McKenzie, who became the Royal Navy's first hydrographer.

It wasn't until nearer the end of the century though, when trouble with France was making the English Channel a dangerous thoroughfare for ships, that something was finally done. Robert Stevenson and

his stepfather Thomas Smith were appointed by the newly formed Lighthouse commissioners to erect Scotland's first purpose-built lighthouse at Dennis Head in North Ronaldsay.

For the engineers and workmen heading north from Leith, it must have seemed a formidable undertaking. They were faced with the task of building a beacon on the furthest of what was then considered a remote group of islands whose contact with the outside world was infrequent and uncertain. The main town of Kirkwall was referred to in the Stevenson journals as a "barbarous port where whalers called to take up and return experienced seamen."

By the autumn of 1789 the masons had completed work on a 70-foot tower of local undressed stone. Their final bill for the structure and the lightkeeper's stone-built dwellings and storehouse was nearly £200. On the top of the tower was what was considered the most advanced lighting system of the time – a "copper reflecting cluster" of oil burning lamps.

A decade later it was redundant. Ships directing their course for the North Ronaldsay structure had been falling foul of other treacherous channels round the neighbouring island of Sanday. An unlit beacon on Sanday's Start Point was redesigned by Robert Stevenson to house new state-of-the-art revolving lights. The North Ronaldsay lantern was removed and a big masonry ball that had topped the original unlit Start Point beacon was placed on the top of the Dennis Head tower.

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- **Sinclair Scott**

Two hundred years on, this ball is now in danger of collapsing through the supporting timbers, the nearby cottages are in ruins and the old lighthouse pier is crumbling. The ingeniously designed dome-shaped roof supporting the huge stone ball needs urgent attention, and the North Ronaldsay Trust is hoping to access one of the original whale-oil burning "copper cluster" lanterns that once topped the tower.

Recent letters to *The Scotsman* have voiced concerns about the replacement of the stone ball with a lantern – thus destroying a valuable historical "unlit seamark".

Local councillor Sinclair Scott is quick to assure this is not the case.

"We're very aware of the unique design of the building, which has served seamen well as a *meeth* (an old Orkney word for a sea mark) and we have no intention of changing that. The lantern, if we get it, will be housed in one of the cottages we think was originally used to store the whale oil and lanterns."

But all this of course will depend on the 217-year-old North Ronaldsay tower being voted by viewers through to the national finals of the BBC series.

"What we've got here is unique in terms of national maritime history," says Scott. "It's imperative that something like this is preserved for posterity."