



Access to The Signal Tower is not available to the general public on an everyday basis, so this weekend offers a great opportunity to experience one of Angus's hidden gems.



Visit Arbroath's historic museum

ANGUS FOLK will have a rare opportunity to experience the climb to the top of Arbroath's Signal Tower Museum as part of this weekend's Doors Open Day event.

The Signal Tower complex was home to the lighthouse keepers who manned the famous Bell Rock Lighthouse and their families from 1813 until 1955. Today, the Regency buildings are home to a fascinating museum that tells the amazing story of the construction of the Bell Rock Lighthouse and offers an insight into the lives of those who lived and worked there. The museum also examines the history of the Arbroath area in general, looking at industries such as fishing and the flax mills and the famous lawnmowers factory.

Inside the museum, one of the most popular exhibitions is the Bell Rock Room, which tells the story of the building of the Bell Rock. By the end of the 18th century, the expansion of shipping in the waters of Britain led to an ever increasing number of shipwrecks on the treacherous Inchcape Reef off the coast of Arbroath. The year 1799 saw a great storm and two shipwrecks on the reef itself, prompting calls for a lighthouse at the site to be taken more seriously. Initial attempts at creating a warning beacon were swept away almost as soon as they were built and it took the engineering genius of Robert Stevenson to create a building that could survive the wild seas at Inchcape Reef.

August 2007 marked the 200-year anniversary of the laying of the first foundations at the Bell Rock. It then took four years for what is still the oldest isolated lighthouse in the world to be finished.

The displays in the museum reveal how difficult it was to recruit men to work in the tough conditions at the Bell Rock, where they had to retreat to a ship when the tide came in. Many of the men suffered terribly from sea sickness to the extent that Stevenson eventually built a wooden structure where they could sleep at night away from the movement of the water.

As well as the beacon of light that would guide ships around one of the most treacherous outcrops of rock in the North Sea, Stevenson was aware that vessels would also require an audible warning when the light was obscured by the thick haar. Two five-hundredweight fog warning bells were installed, one of which now has pride of place in the Bell Rock Room.

The room is lined with storyboards, which include anecdotes about the lives of the lighthouse keepers who lived in the Signal Tower complex. The keepers worked in a team of four, three men would always be on the rock, while the fourth lived at the Signal Tower and tended the lighthouse garden. It was a lonely life for the men,

who spent long stretches out at sea, away from their families.

The Signal Tower represented an important life-line between the lighthouse keepers who were on duty and the mainland. Each morning, a copper signalling ball would be raised from the top of the Signal Tower. The keepers at the Bell Rock Lighthouse would raise a similar device in response if all was well, but if there was no response, perhaps because they had run out of drinking water or one of them was unwell, the signal would not be raised and someone would take a boat out to the lighthouse to investigate the problem.

The signal had other uses, too. For instance, if a keeper's wife was pregnant, he was not given leave to come ashore for the birth. He would naturally be anxious for news of the birth and when the baby was born the signal was a pair of breeks flown from the flag pole for a boy or a little dress for a girl.

The Signal Tower itself is 50ft in height. It is accessed via a spiral stair and two steep ladders but the climb is worth the effort as visitors are rewarded with spectacular views of the town, coastline and, of course, the Bell Rock Lighthouse itself, 11 miles out to sea. Looking south, Tentsmuir Forest and St Andrews are visible on a clear day and to the north you can see the coastline disappear round towards Auchmithie. The panorama over the town of Arbroath gives a great perspective on the location of sites such as Arbroath Abbey, the harbour and the water tower.

Museum staff will take small groups up the tower on Saturday and visitors are advised to contact the museum directly on 01241 875598 to book a place as numbers will be limited.

Doors Open Day Angus takes place tomorrow and Sunday and is part of European Heritage Days, which sees the simultaneous opening of buildings of interest all over Europe. Many of the buildings involved in the scheme are not usually open to the public and Doors Open Day gives people in Angus the chance to gain an insight into some of the cultural and historic buildings that the county has to offer. Entry to all the buildings is free and people should look out for the blue banners and Doors Open Day balloon festooning participating buildings.

Apart from the chance to climb the Signal Tower, visitors to Arbroath can also call in to the town's sheriff court, which was built in 1803, visit Hospitalfield House or explore the Royal National Lifeboat Institution at Arbroath Harbour.

Visit www.angus.gov.uk/doorsopen for more details on attractions around Angus taking part in the weekend.