

Beacons of safety

The lighthouses of South Africa

by Lynnete van Hoven

The light of the lighthouse at Green Point, Cape Town, was seen for the first time in that barren environment on the evening of April 12, 1824. The two lanterns in the stone tower had a single wick argand lamp that burned sperm-oil.



• *Capetown*

CAPE of Storms. Skeleton Coast. That was how mariners thought of certain stretches of coastline of southern Africa through the ages. Numerous shipwrecks bear silent witness to shifting sandbanks, variable and stormy natural elements and human error. It is thanks to the lighthouses and dedicated lighthouse keepers that many more ships were not lost.

The earliest Portuguese navigators who erected their grey lime stone crosses

as they progressed around the southern tip of Africa, would probably not believe their eyes if they could see the modern lighthouses with electric and battery powered flashing, revolving lights that guard the coastline today. What a fright they would have had if the old foghorn at Cape Columbine on the west coast could have sounded its two powerful, gruff blasts!

The Afrikaans word for lighthouse, "vuurtoring," or tower of fire, is also used in Dutch and Scandinavian, and evokes images of wood, coal and coke fires. The history of the South African Lighthouse Services actually began with the "vuyrbaecken" that was lit on Robben Island in 1657 by order of Commander Jan van Riebeeck. At night burning rings of pitch were placed on a wooden platform and set alight when ships from the Dutch East India Company approached Cape Town's Table Bay. During the early days of the company's government a burning tar-barrel was hoisted up a pole whenever there was stormy weather — a dreaded task of mortal danger.

The first permanent structure for a navigation light was erected at Green Point in 1824. Cape Agulhas, the southernmost tip of Africa, was next in 1849, followed by Cape Point, Cape Recife in Port Elizabeth's Algo Bay and Bird Island, 58 km south of Port Elizabeth within 10 years. By 1900 the Cape coast had 15 lighthouses while Natal had one. When the Union of South Africa was established in 1910 there were 23. Today 54 lighthouses light the sea passage round the southern tip of Africa which is used by approximately 250 to 300 large ships each month.

During the last century the lighthouse keeper and his family led a hard and lonely life. There was seldom a chance to sleep, especially at a one-man station. During the day the fat, oil or sperm-oil which was used as fuel for the lanterns, had to be prepared for the night. At Cape Agulhas dripping was made from fat-tailed sheep in the fireplaces of the two turrets. The copperware had to be immaculately polished and the tradition of a lighthouse spotlessly clean, inside and out, was established. Until 1904 two men lived on

Roman Rock in False Bay under extremely uncomfortable conditions. The lighthouse was built on a rock that was submerged at high tide — no space for a stroll outside!

At night it was hard work — according to tradition the light must not be doused for a single moment and in addition watch must always be kept for vessels in distress.

The twentieth century brought the advent of paraffin gas lamps. The fumes from paraffin that is kept under pressure, is burned in a large mantle, 35 to 110 mm in diameter. The wick was not single — three to four concentrically placed wicks were burned, which gave a reasonably broad flame. To keep the paraffin lamps alight was an exhausting task, considering that the pressure in the heating tanks had to be kept constant. Often the family had to help out. The wives of three lighthouse keepers on Bird Island kept the lights going for three nights while they anxiously waited for the return of their men when stormy weather prevented them from coming back in the boats they had set out in. In addition the lighthouse keeper had to watch the clockwork with

weights that revolved the lantern, and wind it up every couple of hours. The clockwork was up in the lantern room of the tower, between 18 and 25 metres high, and it took stamina to climb up and down.

Mr. Harold Williams, a retired lighthouse engineer, tells that up to the forties some of the outlying places where lighthouses stand could only be reached by oxwagon and horse carts over tracks that were difficult to traverse. The itinerant engineer's visit was a highlight in this lonely existence and he often had to be marriage and family counselor, psychologist and comforter.

Food and other provisions were also brought by oxwagon and cart. Water was a problem and the lighthouse keeper often had to make his own plan to collect rain water in channels through the rocks, catchment dams and reservoirs.

With the change to electricity in the thirties electric bulbs replaced the old sources of light. Automation took place and today 36 lighthouses are even unmanned. The computer controlled monitor has become a reality. The most advanced equipment available is used. Smaller lenses with high intensity, low power electric lights or high power



In 1914 the lighthouse at Cape Point was rebuilt 163 metres lower than the original. The large lens, heavy machinery and building materials were lowered with ropes and pulleys from the steep cliffs — an amazing feat of engineering for those days.

sealed beam units are used. The most powerful light is that of Cape Point of about 10 million candlepower, with a beam that spans approximately 34 nautical miles.

The history of the South African Lighthouse Services is closely linked with that of the postal authorities in South Africa. Some lighthouses such as Green Point were close to post offices and postal services. Others that were more remote, were used as a kind of post and telegraph office. In 1853, four years after the erection of the lighthouse at

emergency flares and signs that vessels are in distress, so that he can notify the local harbour authority. Maintenance needs a lot of attention in the marine atmosphere — windows need constant washing. The paintwork of these huge towers, each displaying its own characteristic colour scheme so that it can be easily recognized, need some hard work. Some lighthouses are also weather stations and the details are reported three-hourly to the Department of Environment Affairs' weather men at D F Malan and Louis Botha airports.

lighthouse keeper lay dying in his house at Green Point, in Natal, his son kept the light going. In the fifties a brave action ended in tragedy when an assistant lighthouse keeper drowned after swimming nearly a kilometre in icy weather at Walvis Bay to help colleagues in danger of drifting out to sea in a damaged boat. The brother of this same man later saved a life in shark infested waters at the mouth of Durban harbour.

The adaptability of these people is apparent from their many different hobbies. Artefacts are made from semi-precious stones by Mr. Herman Kleynhans, lighthouse inspector at Green Point, Cape Town, while Mrs. Truida Auret, wife of the senior lighthouse keeper at Cape Agulhas, lays out a pleasure garden of plants — even orchids — at each station where they live.

For these exceptional people it is not just a job but a way of life and they are happy in it. Mr. Derek Auret says: "I am a millionaire, I have everything I want here with me. Nature surrounds me. Other people pay a fortune to spend a short time at such a lovely place."



Every six weeks a helicopter brings provisions and technicians from Cape Town to Dassen Island. On its return flight it takes the senior lighthouse keeper, his wife and the exuberant children to Cape Town for four days to do shopping.

Cape Agulhas, a postmaster was stationed there. Four of the beacons appear on a set of special stamps that was issued by the Post Office in June last year.

The South African Transport Services' SA Harbours department controls the lighthouses at the moment and this department takes good care of its people. Their lives differ markedly from those of their predecessors. An immaculately gleaming station is still the tradition and pride. Itinerant trained technicians service and maintain apparatus and equipment. All apparatus and machinery have stand-by units that switch on automatically when there is a fault.

A monitor warns the lighthouse keeper by turning on an alarm in his office or house. His tasks also include constant surveillance of the sea for

Much poetry and prose have been written about the lighthouses and their people, and the remote and often barren surrounds of these lonely beacons. Some come from generations of lighthouse keepers, such as John McLean, of Slangkop, on the Cape Peninsula, whose father, two brothers and son all chose this profession. Round a crackling fire in the comfortable living room full of books and memorabilia of the sea and shore life of a lighthouse keeper, the stories of courage are taken out and dusted off, while a gale rages outside. There is the story of the assistant lighthouse keeper who repeatedly risked his life in the crashing breakers round Robben Island, in an attempt to save the lives of the crew of a stranded whaler. On another occasion, while a

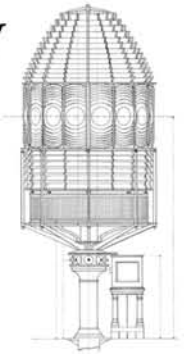


Senior keeper Koos de Kock on duty in the lantern room of the Danger Point lighthouse near Gans Bay. The Fresnel lens appears to be a 3 1/2 order. It is rated at one million candlepower.

This article reprinted from South Africa Panorama magazine with the permission of the editor. All photos by Stuart Semple.



Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today or Give the Gift of Membership!



Restoration & Preservation



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society has donated to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. Most recently we were honored by being presented with the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

*To learn more visit
www.uslhs.org
or
call Headquarters at
415-362-7255*

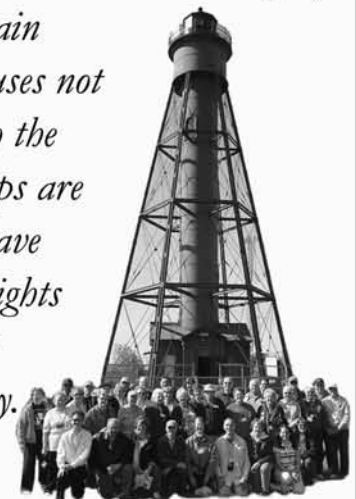
Help Support Our Important Mission!

Education



The Keeper's Log magazine is the only one of its kind and has been published quarterly since 1984. Receive this award-winning publication as a benefit of membership.

The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



Tincum Lighthouse, NJ