

Bird Island Lighthouse

After a number of ships had come to grief on the scattered group of rocks now known as Bird Island, the provision of a lighthouse became a hotly debated subject. The Governor of the Cape Colony at the time, Sir Harry Smith, eventually agreed to the erection of a wooden lighthouse, and a rickety pyramidal building was commissioned on the 1st of December 1852. The first lightkeeper, William Isaac Newton, soon realized that he faced living conditions which could only be described as bleak and harsh. The atrocious weather and lack of water was compounded by the paucity and late delivery of provisions, sometimes crawling with weevils and maggots. The signal lamp was fueled by either seal or whale oil which was often rancid before it even reached the island, making it to smoke so badly that it "dimmed the lamps beyond usefulness". The heat of the flames regularly caused the glass mantles to break, and within a week of starting operations, one lamp was out of order and three mantles had broken. Newton was forced to resort to using ordinary household lamps and even candles, an action which completely negated the purpose of the lighthouse.

In November 1871, the colonial government agreed to the construction of a more permanent lighthouse. Mr. B. Godfrey of Cape Town was contracted to build the structure, under the supervision of Joseph Flack, and the lighting apparatus, watchroom, lanterns, iron floors, girders, and stairs were to be supplied by Chance Brothers and Company from Birmingham, England.

Work began in March 1872, and would have been completed before the end of that year were it not for a delay in shipping some of the components from England. The trenches for the foundations had to be blasted out of the hard rock base, and the foundations themselves constructed out of heavy rough stones built with mortar made from coarse shells, shell lime and driftsand. The 20 meter (66 feet) high square tower was erected on top of this platform, showing on its north and south sides four circular apertures connected to each other by a recess and a large moulding which formed them into a cross. Various other buildings were also fabricated, including two cottages with underground water storage tanks and a signal building equipped with a flag staff. The new lighthouse became active for the first time on the 1st of May 1873.

Life on Bird Island was still extremely difficult. All supplies had to be transported by boat from Port Elizabeth, and up until 1906, the only form of communication was via carrier pigeon. The lighthouse keepers would supplement their diet by fishing or collecting eggs from gannets and penguins, and their isolation would only occasionally be relieved by sporadic visits from seal hunters and guano collectors.

The height of the tower was increased by 6 meters (20 feet) in 1893, and the lighting apparatus was changed at various intervals as more modern technology became available. The lighthouse became fully automated in 1968, thus removing the need for onsite keepers, and today maintenance is carried out by technicians who are transported to the island by helicopter.

Bird Island Lighthouse Fact File

LSA Number	32
Name	Bird Island
Province	Eastern Cape
Location	Bird Island
GPS Coordinates	S33.841638 E26.286738 33°50'29.9"S 26°17'12.3"E
ARLHS Number	SAF-002
Admiralty Number	D6412
NGA Number	32104
Active	Yes
First Established	1852
Commission Date	1 May 1873
Decommission Date	Not applicable
Construction Type	Square stone tower
Daymark	Tower painted red with a white horizontal band at the top and a large white cross on the front face; lantern painted red.
Tower Height	26 meters (85 feet)
Focal Plane	29 meters (95 feet)
Luminous Intensity	1,465,000 candelas
Nominal Range	27 nautical miles
Characteristic	Fl.(2)W.
Period	20 seconds
Pattern	Fl. 0.5s, ec. 2.2s; Fl. 0.5s, ec. 16.8s
Pattern Description	2 white flashes every 20 seconds.
Manned	No
Site Open	No
Fenced	No
Tower Open	No
Accommodation	No
Access Method	Boat
Access Notes	TBC