

# Dassen Island Lighthouse

Islands have always been a problem for shipping, especially for the early mariners that were attempting to find a sea route around the continent of Africa. With no maps or charts, they were forced to hug the coastline to maintain sight of land; if their vision was obscured by fog or heavy weather, there was always a chance of them running aground on an unexpected obstacle, such as a low-lying island.

Dassen Island was no exception. The first recorded wreck was the Dutch whaler, Haagman, which foundered on the rocks in 1683, and at least another 37 wrecks occurred in the period up until 1893. The most prominent of these was the Windsor Castle, a large passenger-carrying mailship which ran aground on the 19th of October 1876. All of the passengers and crew were landed safely and eventually repatriated to Cape Town a few weeks later, but this disaster prompted the authorities to take a decision to build a lighthouse on the island.

Chance Brothers and Company, from Birmingham, England, were selected to supply most of the components. It was decided to erect the lighthouse on the southern side, because this is where the highest point is located, approximately 16 meters (52 feet) above sea level. Stone was quarried on the island itself and transported to the site by ox wagon, and then used to build a tapered base 6.6 meters (22 feet) in diameter and about 4.5 meters (15 feet) in height. The lighthouse was erected on top of this platform, using prefabricated cast iron segments which were bolted together to form a circular tower 28 meters (92 feet) high. It was commissioned on the 15th of April 1893.

The lantern house was fitted with a dioptric apparatus, a complex technological innovation that used the refracting properties of glass and triangular prism sections above and below the main light to produce revolving beams of light. The mechanism and light were later electrified, using a generator to produce the power, and then later still changed over to more modern lighting systems using batteries charged by solar panels. A fog signal was installed in May 1974, and a radio beacon added in January 1975.

The first lighthouse keepers were forced to endure a very lonely and isolated existence. A jetty was built in a natural harbor called House Bay on the northern side of the island, but water and other supplies were often delayed because of adverse weather, and the keepers had to supplement their diet by harvesting seafood from the rocks and the ocean. The only form of communication was via carrier pigeons. The boat service to the island was eventually replaced by helicopters in 1969, providing much easier access and communication. Today, most of the lighthouse functions have been automated, and the island is no longer permanently manned.

## Dassen Island Lighthouse Fact File

LSA Number	10
Name	Dassen Island
Province	Western Cape
Location	Dassen Island
GPS Coordinates	S33.432098 E18.088947 33°25'55.6"S 18°05'20.2"E
ARLHS Number	SAF-042
Admiralty Number	D5860
NGA Number	25956
Active	Yes
First Established	1893
Commission Date	15 April 1893
Decommission Date	Not applicable
Construction Type	Round cast iron tower
Daymark	Tower painted white with three horizontal red bands; lantern painted white.
Tower Height	28 meters (92 feet)
Focal Plane	47 meters (154 feet)
Luminous Intensity	1,400,000 candelas
Nominal Range	26 nautical miles
Characteristic	Fl.(2)W.
Period	30 seconds
Pattern	Fl. 0.3s, ec. 9.7s; Fl. 0.3s, ec. 19.7s
Pattern Description	2 white flashes every 30 seconds.
Manned	No
Site Open	No
Fenced	No
Tower Open	No
Accommodation	No
Access Method	Boat
Access Notes	TBC