

The Hill Lighthouse

Sir Rufane Shaw Donkin was a British military officer with a distinguished career. He served in the West Indies, Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal and India, and was promoted with regularity; he was a captain by age 20, a major 3 years later, and a lieutenant-colonel by only 25. He married his wife Elizabeth in 1815, and she gave birth to a son in December 1817. Just 9 months later, tragedy struck; Elizabeth became ill with a fever, and died in August 1818.

Donkin was devastated. He decided to return to England, but on his way back he stopped over in the Cape, and was asked to take on the role of acting Governor (Lord Charles Somerset was on extended leave). One of his main responsibilities during this period was to oversee the landing of the 1820 Settlers at Algoa Bay; while he was there, he changed the name of the settlement to Port Elizabeth, and also decided to build a memorial dedicated to his wife, in the form of an enormous stone pyramid.

Donkin did eventually return to England in 1821. He was promoted to the rank of lieutenant-general, became a member of the British parliament, and was made a member of the Royal Guelphic Order in the Knight Grand Cross (GCH) class. Although he did remarry, he never recovered from Elizabeth's death and committed suicide on the 1st of May 1841, on what would have been their 26th wedding anniversary. He was buried in the Old St. Pancras Churchyard in London, together with her embalmed heart.

When the Cape Recife Lighthouse was being planned in the late 1840s, the harbor board also tried to entice the government into building a lighthouse in Port Elizabeth itself. The project did not get off the ground until early 1857, when the matter was discussed by the Harbor Master, H.G. Simpson, and assistant government engineer, Matthew Woodfield. They decided that the best site would be adjacent to the Donkin Memorial, and Simpson rather thoughtlessly suggested that the pyramid should be dismantled and the stones used to build the lighthouse. Local residents reacted to this proposal with fury and indignation, and put together a petition to restore the memorial and build the lighthouse alongside it.

Arguments about cost and siting resulted in further delays, and it was only in May 1860 that the harbor board engineer, Alfred Warren, was given instructions to commence the build. Construction was completed a year later, and the lighthouse was commissioned on the 1st of June 1861. It consisted of a 17 meter (55 feet) masonry tower, fitted with a fixed occulting lamp which had a range of 12 nautical miles.

A "time ball" was installed in August 1865, and activated at 13:00 each day by a signal from the observatory in Cape Town. There were a number of teething problems and irregularities, but by 1867 it was reported that the device had become "a most valuable addition to the port". The light source was replaced with a Chance Brothers vapor burner in 1906, the height of the tower was increased by 9 meters (30 feet) in 1929, and the tower was repainted with various daymarks at regular intervals. But all of these changes were to no avail; the lighthouse became indistinguishable amongst the bright lights of the city, and eventually it was decided to decommission it and erect a new light located near the mouth of the Papekuils River at Deal Party. This changeover occurred on the 31st of October / 1st of November 1973.

Today, the historic lighthouse and the Donkin Memorial have become much-loved landmarks in the city. They are situated within the Donkin Reserve, a large park planted with indigenous vegetation and boasting exquisite mosaics, metal artwork, modern benches that reflect contemporary graffiti art, a chrome statue of an African woman, and plenty of abstract art. There is also a restaurant which offers spectacular views over the city center and the harbor, as well as a tourism office.

The Hill Lighthouse Fact File

LSA Number	30
Name	The Hill
Province	Eastern Cape
Location	Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth)
GPS Coordinates	S33.962252 E25.620617 33°57'44.1"S 25°37'14.2"E
ARLHS Number	SAF-013
Admiralty Number	Not applicable
NGA Number	Not applicable
Active	No
First Established	1861
Commission Date	1 June 1861
Decommission Date	31 October 1973
Construction Type	Octagonal masonry tower
Daymark	Tower painted white; lantern painted white with a red dome.
Tower Height	26 meters (85 feet)
Focal Plane	Not applicable
Luminous Intensity	Not applicable
Nominal Range	Not applicable
Characteristic	Not applicable
Period	Not applicable
Pattern	Not applicable
Pattern Description	Not applicable
Manned	No
Site Open	Yes
Fenced	No
Tower Open	No
Accommodation	No
Access Method	Car
Access Notes	All access roads are tarred.