

Dubh Artach Lighthouse

Light Established

1872

Engineer

Thomas & David Stevenson

Position

Latitude 56° 08.0'N

Longitude 06° 37.9'W

Character

Flashing 2 White every 30 secs

Elevation

44 metres

Nominal Range

20 miles

Structure

Grey granite tower 38 metres high with a broad Red band

History

The gap between Rinns of Islay (1825) and Skerryvore (1844) led to many wrecks on the Torrin rocks of ships bound for America and the Baltic ports and opinion was that a light on Dhuheartach (or St John's Rock) would enable vessels to find shelter in one of the many safe anchorages among the islands from Colonsay to Oban. In June 1865 Thomas Stevenson, father of Robert Louis Stevenson, and joint Engineer to the Commissioners with David Stevenson, landed on the rock and in October of that year recommended that a light be established.

In December 1865 and January 1866 storms raged in the North Channel and were of such unprecedented ferocity that on 30 and 31 December 1865, 24 vessels were wrecked or driven ashore in the area bounded by Tiree, Iona, Colonsay and Islay. There were renewed petitions for the erection of a light and after the Commissioners had examined the records of wrecks produced by Captain Fraham of the PHAROS they were resolved in its favour. The statutory sanction of the Board of Trade was obtained on 20 October 1866.

In preference to Tinkershole on the East side of Iona, the island of Erraid in the sound of Iona was chosen as the site of the Shore Station.

On 7 June 1867 the steam tug POWERFUL of Leith picked up workmen at Aberdeen and sailed west. Preliminary arrangements included the dressing and fitting of the whole of the materials on a platform at the shore Station; for the materials to be put on the decks for four barges capable of carrying 20 tons of stone at a time and towed to the rock by a paddle steamer which was fitted out as a tug (the "Dhuh-eartach") and for a vessel of 60 tons to be moored at a convenient distance from the rock to accommodate the men working on the rock until such times as the temporary barrack was erected for the use of the workmen in the summer. This barrack was to be built on similar lines on those used at the Bell Rock and Skerryvore - ie it was constructed of a malleable iron framing fixed into the rock, rising 35 feet above the rock's surface and 60 feet above high water mark and on which was to be placed the habitable part of the barrack, formed of a malleable iron cylinder of riveted plates, 20 feet in height and 16 feet in diameter and divided into two storeys.

The barrack was completed on 28 September 1868 at which date three quarters of the 5 feet foundation for the tower had been excavated from the rock. From May to September landings were impossible on only 38 days.

In 1869 working without season extended from 25 March - 29 October with 59 landings. Workmen had occupied the barrack from 26 April to 3 September. The foundation had been completed and 5 courses of the tower erected. Mr Stevenson reported "our anticipation as to the difficulties of marking landings at Dhuheartach have been most fully realised ..."

At the beginning of operations one of the workmen had to make the return journey of 40 miles across Mull and by open boat to Oban to collect the pay, hiring a conveyance on the return because of the weight of silver carried, which took one week in each month. So an arrangement, which for the sake of secrecy was referred to as THE BOX, was made with the Royal Bank of Scotland, Glasgow, whereby the £600 to £1,000 required each month was put in a box and taken to the clerk on the "Dunvegan Castle" who fastened it to part of the ship by a chain and padlock. The cashier at Erraid and the bank held the two keys. This arrangement continued until November 1871 and £26,500:5:9d was conveyed without loss of a single penny.

In 1870 there was 62 landings April to October but bad weather restricted the real working season to June, July and August. The 31st course had been completed and the tower was 50 feet high.

On 29 November 1871 the masonry had been completed. The upper course was 101 feet above the foundation. The tower originally designed to be solid to the 13th course, had been built solid to the 21st course, and the door of the tower had been raised to 31 feet above the surface of the rock instead of 20 feet as originally planned. The maximum diameter at the base of the tower was 36 feet and the maximum at the top was 16 feet. The interior was divided into 7

compartments or rooms affording accommodation amounting to 7,280 cubic feet. The whole of the outer or face course of the tower and parapet was of granite and the internal work was of freestone.

Season 1872 was spent placing the lantern and apparatus and completing the inside fittings of the tower. The Commissioners visited the rock on 29 July 1872, landed "without difficulty" and reported that they "were extremely well pleased" with what they saw. The light was exhibited for the first time on the evening of 1 November 1872 and on the following day the Principal Lightkeeper, James Ewing, wrote to the secretary "I beg leave to inform you that the light exhibited on the 1st conforms to your orders. I am also glad to state that we can carry a magnificent flame, which eventually must eclipse all the lights on the west coast." The light in fact was so bright that one month later the Principal Lightkeeper reported that the lightkeepers' eyes were being adversely affected and requested "preserves".

The pay of the Lightkeepers at this new Rock were Principal: £73:10:0d per annum, 1st assistant: £65, 2nd and 3rd Assistants £60, each lightkeeper also received £10 per annum for land and 7/6d per annum for getting provisions.

The total cost of the Lighthouse was £83,710:2:10d.

The spelling was changed in 1964 from Dhuheartach to the present form Dubh Artach. There is however, a certain amount of controversy about the derivation of the name: Adamnan in his "Life of St Columba" calls it "A'Dubh-lar-stac", the black stack of the west. Modern etymologists maintain the word is "an uibh-hirteach", the black one of death. "Irt" as in Hirta (St Kilda) is identical with old Irish gaelic for A"death".

Dubh Artach was automated in 1971 and is now remotely monitored from the Board's Headquarters in George Street, Edinburgh.