

# Skerryvore Lighthouse

## Light Established

1844

## Engineer

Alan Stevenson

## Position

Latitude 56° 19.4'N

Longitude 07° 06.9'W

## Character

Flashing White every 10 secs

## Elevation

46 metres

## Nominal Range

23 miles

## Structure

Grey granite tower 48 metres high. There are 151 steps to the top.

## Fog Horn

Blast every 60 seconds

## History

Skerryvore Lighthouse, the name of which is derived from the Gaelic words "Sgeir" meaning the rock and "mhor" ("mh" is pronounced "v") meaning big, marks a very extensive and treacherous reef of rocks lying in the sea off the Hebrides some 10 or 11 miles south west of Tiree. It was built of granite quarried on the Island of Mull during the six years from 1838 to 1844, to the design of Alan Stevenson, Engineer and constitutes an outstanding example of lighthouse engineering. The beautiful symmetry of the outline of the tower, the proportions of which are a height of 156ft with diameter of 42ft at the base tapering to 16ft at the top, ranks it amongst the most graceful of all lighthouse towers; it is even asserted by some that Skerryvore is the worlds most graceful lighthouse. Alan Stevenson and his workmen eventually landed on the rock in June 1838 to undertake the first task which was to erect a wooden barrack for housing the men during their stay throughout the coming summers which were to be regarded as the working seasons.

When possible, Stevenson and his men landed on the rock at 4am each morning and worked until 8pm each night with two half-hour breaks, a 17 hour day. Landing on the rock was often impossible and it was soon obvious that the barrack would not be completed the first season. On 11 September the season

finished until the following Spring and the uncompleted barrack stood for two months before it was totally destroyed during a severe gale on 3 November. Although this represented a severe setback to plans, in that four months toil had been devastated, Alan Stevenson refused to be moved from his belief that it was still possible to erect a Lighthouse on the Skerryvore reef.

Work started again on 6 May 1839 on the erection of a new barrack and also on the excavation of the foundations. It was little surprise nevertheless that progress was at the time minimal as on several occasions cranes, tools and materials were swept into the sea. Despite these frustrations however the barrack was finally completed on 3 September and that year's season came to an end.

It should perhaps be mentioned that while two or three dozen men were employed on the rock, much larger groups of men were employed on the Ross of Mull quarrying the granite for the tower. The massive blocks of stone were then dispatched by tender to Hynish on the island of Tiree where a further workforce dressed and shaped the stones so that when they were landed on the rock each would fit perfectly onto and into the adjoining sets.

On 30 April 1840 the workmen landed on the rock for the start of the season's operations and found to their relief that the barrack had withstood the winter's gales. After the disappointment of the previous year they now seemed to be making headway and on 4 July work on the actual tower was embarked upon. Three days later the Duke of Argyll, accompanied by the Duchess, were landed on the rock and with due ceremony, laid the foundation stone of the tower. Work pressed on now and the precise work done at Hynish by the masons bore fruit and enabled the rock workmen to set as many as 85 blocks in a day. By the end of the season the tower had risen to a height of 8 feet 2 inches.

The new season began again on 20 May 1841 and by 8 July, the solid base of the tower was completed. Work ended for that year on 17 August when 37 of the 97 courses of stone had been laid.

The 19th May saw the start of operations in 1842 and on 25 July the last stone of the top was laid. The masonry of the tower was now 137 feet 11 inches in height and it contained 58,580 cubic feet of material of about 4,308 tons. The lantern arrived in sections and was assembled during August and September of that year.

In January 1843 Alan Stevenson was appointed Engineer to the Lighthouse Commissioners and the final stages of the tower were left to his younger brother Thomas, who succeeded him as resident engineer and was later to become Engineer to the Board. Thomas Stevenson visited the rock on 29 March 1843 and found the whole structure watertight. The rest of that season was spent in repointing the tower and fitting the interior which comprised 11 rooms in all.

The tower was now ready for manning and on 1 February 1844, Skerryvore beamed out for the first time. Two large fog bells were sounded 1 stroke every ½ minute. The larger of these bells is now in St Connan's Kirk, Loch Awe.

From February 1844, when it was first exhibited, the white light flashed out each night without fail until the night of 16 March 1954 when a disastrous fire broke out and badly damaged the structure. As a temporary measure an unmanned lightvessel (ex Otter Rock) was laid in position 4 miles 235° from Skerryvore on 24 March 1954 (Notice to Mariners No 3 of 1954 refers) exhibiting a flashing light which gave one flash of 0.5 seconds duration every 6 seconds.

In July 1955 these two lights were discontinued (Notice to Mariners No 13 of 1955 refers) and the Dalen revolving light, giving one flash of 0.5 seconds duration every 10 seconds, was re-exhibited until further notice.

In October 1958 the Dalen light was replaced by a temporary watched light (Notice to Mariners No 22 of 1958 refers) which exhibited one flash of 3 seconds duration every 10 seconds which remained in operation until 6 August 1959 on which date the present light (Notice to Mariners No 11 of 1959 refers), which exhibits one flash every 10 seconds, was re-established.

Reconstruction work on the lighthouse commenced in 1956 and was completed in 1959 when the light was made electric. It is now a self-generating station, power being produced by 3 diesel generators, any one of which is able to carry the full station load.

In mid July 1940 a stick of bombs dropped at Skerryvore, exploded on the rock near the tower, cracking 2 lantern panes and shattering an incandescent mantle.

Communication between personnel on the Rock and those ashore was initially by visual means. The Signal Tower at Hynish, South Western Tiree, was built during the period 1840 - 1843 under the supervision of the Board's Engineer, Alan Stevenson LLB, FRSE, MICE. The purpose of the Signal Tower was to transmit and receive semaphore signals to or from Skerryvore Lighthouse (visibility permitting) at pre-arranged times or otherwise in the case of an emergency. At this time, which was before the introduction of wireless telephone, this was the only means of communication with the lightkeepers of Skerryvore, some 14 miles distant from Hynish. The Hynish Shore Station offered few advantages and its remote situation, destitute of any shelter for shipping, decided the Commissioners to transfer the Station to Earraid on the Island of Mull. On the accomplishment of this transfer in 1892, the land owned on Tiree was sold to the Duke of Argyll, but with the exception of the Signal Tower which is now the Skerryvore museum.

With the advent of radio and its ability to remit communication over greater distances, the Shore Station, for this and other social reasons, was re-located at Oban.

In 1972 a concrete helicopter pad with additional fuel storage tanks contained therein was constructed on the rocks at the base of the tower. This allowed the reliefs to be carried out by a helicopter which is not so likely to be affected by adverse weather conditions.

Skerryvore Lighthouse was automated in 1994.