

Start Point

Start Point Facts

Light established: 1806
Engineer: Robert Stevenson
Position: Latitude 59° 16.7'N
Longitude 02° 22.5'W
Character: Flashing (2) White every 20 seconds
Range of light: 18 nautical miles
Elevation: 24 metres (above sea level)
Height of tower: 23 metres

The first beacon to mark the Start Point on the Orkney island of Sanday was an unlit masonry tower, but this beacon proved inadequate as ships continued to be wrecked on the island. At the time Robert Stevenson was engineer to the Northern Lighthouse Board and he decided to transfer the light from the neighbouring island of North Ronaldsay to Start Point. Building work began and the new lighthouse, which is still in existence, was established and first exhibited on 2 October 1806. The original great ball from the top of the first beacon was removed and placed on the old beacon at North Ronaldsay - this can still be seen today.

Start Point was the first Scottish lighthouse to have a revolving light which gave it a unique character making it easily distinguished from other lights. Start Point lighthouse was painted with its black and white vertical stripes around 1915, which makes it a recognisable day mark; it is the only Scottish lighthouse painted in this way.

Disaster struck during the building of Start Point lighthouse when the vessel "Stromness" set off to return the workmen back to Leith. A tremendous storm blew up forcing the "Stromness" back northwards to shelter off Flotta island. During the night the cables broke and she was smashed to pieces on the rocks with the loss of all on board except the cabin boy, who was found clinging to the top of the mast.

All Scottish lighthouses now operate automatically. The last Scottish lighthouse to be automated was Fair Isle South in 1998. Now, when daylight falls and rises between set levels, a light sensor switches the light on and off. The status of the light and all its associated equipment is relayed back to the Northern Lighthouse Board's head office in Edinburgh by phone link, radio signal or satellite.

Prior to the automation of Start Point in 1962 a Principal Lightkeeper and an Assistant, with their families, lived at the light. The families were almost self sufficient and would have kept cows and sheep at the station. Lightkeeping was a remote, lonely and hard existence. At night each keeper was required to keep a watch in the lightroom to ensure that the light flashed correctly to character. During daytime keepers were engaged in cleaning, painting if necessary and generally keeping the premises clean and tidy.

The magnificent lens at Start Point is an original 4th Order Fresnel lens, with a new lamp system. So named after its French inventor, Augustin Fresnel. It is made from a series of perfectly polished crystal glass lenses set into a brass structure.

An emergency back-up light is positioned on the balcony should the main light ever fail.

Start Point Lighthouse is powered by Solar energy; a bank of 36 solar panels charge batteries which are then used to power the light. The Northern Lighthouse Board has successfully used solar energy at its lighthouses for over 20 years and have also converted all its statutory lit buoyage to solar power.

Open to Public

On the 2 October 2006 Start Point lighthouse will celebrate 200 years of operation. To mark this occasion the lighthouse will be open to the public on a limited number of days during the season. This venture has been made possible with the kind assistance of the Sanday Ranger. The lighthouse, which is unique with its black & white stripes, is situated on the tidal island of Start Point on Sanday's exposed eastern tip.

Guided visits to the light are planned (weather permitting) on the following dates during 2006.

Sunday 21 May, Sunday 11 June, Sunday 9 July, Sunday 6 August, Sunday 3 Sep, Monday 2 Oct and Sunday 8 Oct.

Booking is essential for these tours, for further information on timings and meeting locations please contact the Sanday Ranger, Rod Thorne, Tel: 01857 600341. Binoculars would be useful and wellies are essential!

Note: There will be a small charge for these tours to cover costs