

Sule Skerry Lighthouse

Light Established

1895

Engineer

David A & Charles Stevenson

Position

Latitude 59° 05.0'N

Longitude 04° 24.3'W

Character

Flashing (2) White every 15 secs

Elevation

34 metres

Nominal Range

21 miles

Structure

White tower 27 metres high. There are 84 steps to top of tower

History

The lighthouse is listed as a building of Architectural/Historical interest. Some 40 miles west of Orkney, and as far north of the coast of Sutherland, Sule Skerry lies in the track of vessels passing through the Pentland Firth on passage to or from the Iceland seas. With a surface area of 35 acres and rising in the centre to 45 feet above water, it is almost out of sight of all land. About four miles away rises the stack, 140 feet high, and 15 miles farther south is the sunken Nun Rock, 13 feet below water. Sule Skerry is the home of innumerable puffins and seals and the ground is covered with them - also it has a great variety of fauna and flora. Here the most isolated lighthouse in the British Isles was built in 1892-94 by David A Stevenson and brother Charles. It is 88 feet high with a huge lantern (16 feet in diameter) made to accommodate a powerful 'Hyper-radial' lens. This was replaced with a Dalen Operated gas light with a 4th Order Lens giving a character of Group Flashing (2) white every 15 seconds.

Sule Skerry had the distinction, acknowledged by the Guinness Book of Records of being the remotest manned lighthouse in Scotland (in fact in Britain). Its position is given in the publication as being 35 miles (56kms) offshore and 45 miles (73kms) north west of Dunnet Head, Caithness.

Two seasons were needed for building the 88 foot tower, completed during the exceptionally fine summer of 1893. Winter work was ruled out by the short daylight and stormy weather.

The next year was devoted to internal fillings and work connected with the landing-places and a tramway for carrying heavy stores. Lighting was delayed for a year while the Board of Trade and Trinity House argued with the Commissioners about the cost and character of the apparatus. A hyper-radiant was added as well as an arrangement of equi-angular prisms invented by Charles Stevenson, which caused less loss of light and less divergence than in other forms of lens. The new light was observed from Cape Wrath, 35 miles away, on 60 evenings during the first 3 months. The lantern required was larger than any hitherto designed for any lighthouse service. Sixteen feet diameter compared to the normal 12 feet and this gave Sule Skerry a profile new to the Northern Lights. Pigeon post was tried as a means of communication but was not successful! Lack of sun hindered an experiment with a heliograph made by Assistant Lightkeeper Tomison.

The first permanent Radio beacons in Scotland were established in 1929 at Kinnaird Head in March and Sule Skerry in October. The Boards Notice to Mariners stated that they would transmit continuously in thick weather and at ½ hour intervals in clear weather, in order to afford facilities to Mariners for obtaining bearings.

The monthly relief of this lighthouse was carried out by the Pole Star. On many occasions Sule Skerry had been cut off for days by heavy seas, preventing any landing. But since 1973 this remote lighthouse was relieved fortnightly by helicopter. The Sule Skerry families lived in Stromness from 1895 until the station was automated in 1982.

The station was attacked on 5 February 1942 by a twin engined enemy bomber, which dropped three HE bombs on the island about sixty yards north of the lighthouse. No one was injured and damage was minimal. On 18 November 1944 a floating mine drifted ashore and exploded.

Sule Skerry was made fully automatic in December 1982.