

Sumburgh Head Lighthouse

Light Established

1821

Engineer

Robert Stevenson

Position

Latitude 59° 51.3'N

Longitude 01° 16.3'W

Character

Flashing (3) White every 30 secs

Elevation

91 metres

Nominal Range

23 miles

Structure

White tower 17 metres high. There are 52 steps to top of tower

History

The name Sumburgh comes from Norse - Sunn Borg, the South Broch. On Mr Stevenson's inspection voyage of August 1815, he stated that Sumburgh Head was an eligible situation for a lighthouse and he will survey the rock and report as to the proper site for a lighthouse.

The building work started in January 1819 with Mr John Reid of Peterhead as the building Contractor. Sumburgh had walls of double thickness to keep out the damp, it also had 26 reflectors instead of the normal 21 and in 1822 the annual cost of maintaining this station was £650.00.

The most serious offence a lightkeeper could commit was falling asleep on watch, as this might allow the light to be extinguished, impair its efficiency, or even alter its character by letting the revolving machinery run down. There was fifteen cases of this kind in the second half of the 19th Century, the worst was a conspiracy at Sumburgh Head in 1871 by which two lightkeepers agreed not to report the other for sleeping at his post; one of them was a Principal lightkeeper with 23 years service - both were dismissed.

The optical apparatus is group flashing with Stevenson's equiangular refractor showing flashes every 30 seconds. The contractors were Chance Brothers & Co Ltd of Birmingham and also James Dove & Co of Greenside, Edinburgh.

The following notes of wrecks at Dunrossness may be interest.

15th October 1820 'Freemason'. Ship of Lerwick, Leslie, Master. Foundered at the entrance to Greetness Voe bound from Peterhead to Greetness with glass & materials for Sumburgh Head Lighthouse which was then being erected. One man was saved.

19th January 1864 'Royal Victoria'. Ship of Liverpool, Captain Thomas Leslie. Foundered Latitude. 63°N Longitude 13°W Sunderland to Calcutta with coal. Nineteen saved, Thirteen perished, one lifeboat with Captain and some of the crew came to Scatness some of the crew dead and one badly frostbitten. Captain Leslie and five of the crew interred at Dunrossness Churchyard. A bell was presented by Captain Leslie's parents and put to Sumburgh Head to be used as a fog bell but on the establishment of a fog signal in 1906 (which was discontinued during 1987) it was removed and hung in the Parish Church at Dunrossness, where it still remains.

In 1991 the Station was fully automated and the Keepers finally left the Station. The former keepers cottages and out buildings (not the tower) are now owned by the Shetland Amenity Trust and will be developed in the near future as visitor attraction.

DGPS

Sumburgh Head is the most northerly transmitting station for the General Lighthouse Authorities Marine Differential GPS Service. Which is a satellite based navigation system. It is the newest element of the mix of visual, audible and electronic aids to navigation provided by the three General Lighthouses Authorities of the UK and the Republic of Ireland under their Marine Navigation Plan.