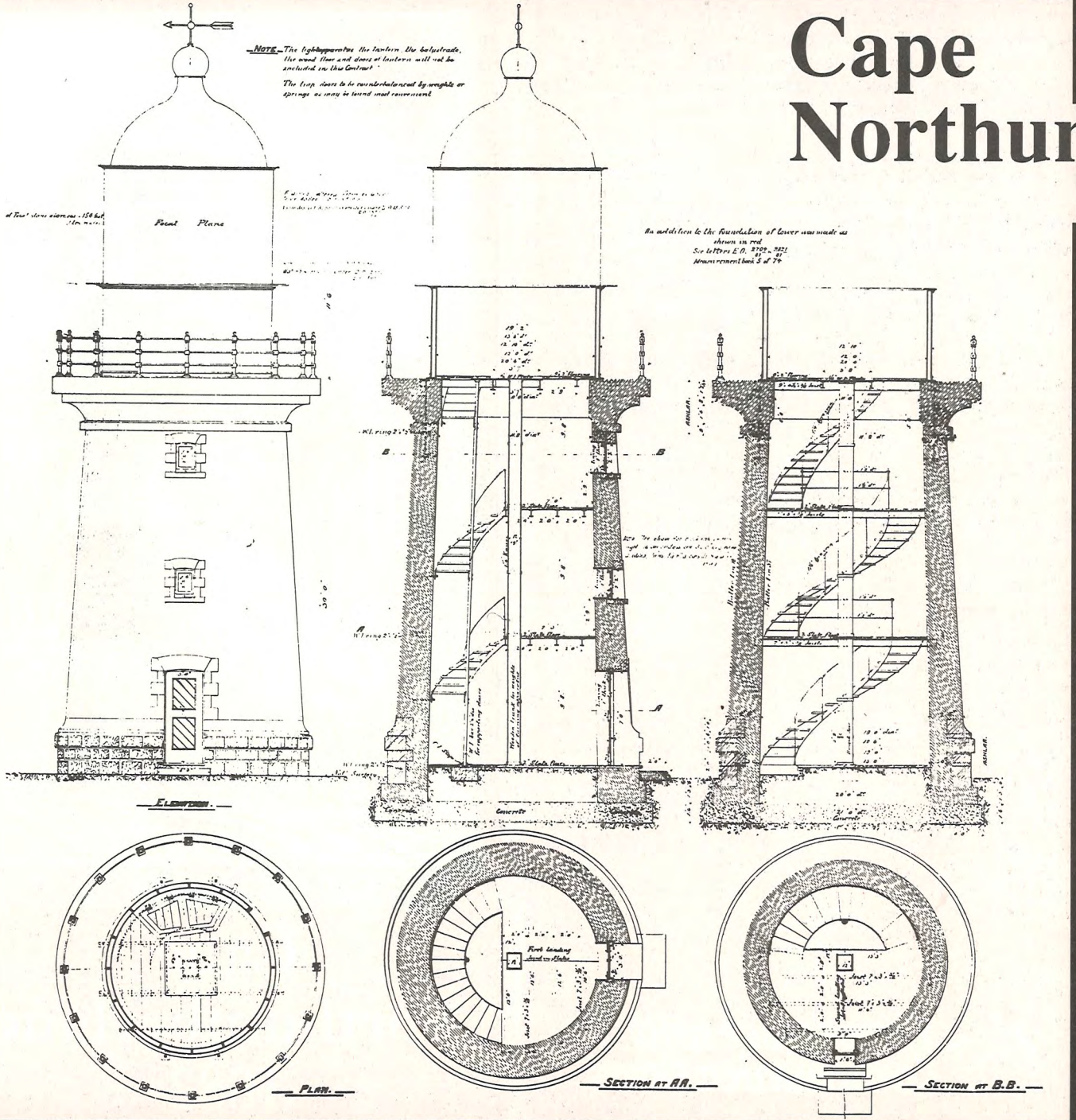
Cape Northumberland Lightstation



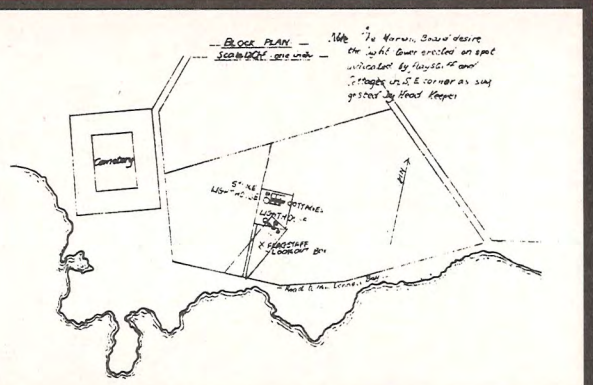
There has been a lightstation on Cape Northumberland since 1859. The first light was named for Governor Sir Richard Graves MacDonnell, and while the lighthouse itself now bears the name of the feature on which it stands, the Governor's name is perpetuated in the name of the nearby fishing community - Port MacDonnell.

The original light was not of the highest order, being visible for only 18 nautical miles in good conditions. It was a multi-coloured light, showing alternately red, white and green and was also built rather closer to the edge of the cliff than proved desirable, and, after less than twenty years, the sea had made considerable inroads and the lightkeepers were concerned about the stability of the tower.

The President of the Marine Board pointed out these deficiencies in his report to Parliament in 1878, recommending that a "first-order" light be established on Cape Northumberland.

In his 1880 report, the President wrote:

"A light of the best description procurable is required for Cape Northumberland, which is a most important turning-point on our coastline, and should be provided with an electric or other first-class light without unnecessary delay, especially as doubts have been expressed about the stability of the lighthouse. The Board visited the Cape in August last and recommended that a fixed electric light should be placed on a spot about 700 yards NE by E from the present lighthouse (this light should be removed to Cape Banks where numerous shipping casualties have occurred)."



Cape Northumberland lightstation marks the southernmost extremity of South Australia and shows mariners where to "Turn right for Adelaide".

The President's words must have found receptive ears, because a report of early 1882 stated:

"The new light establishment at Cape Northumberland is rapidly approaching completion and will, no doubt, be ready for use by the advertised date - May 1st next."

The new tower, built of limestone on a concrete foundation is 400 metres to the east of the old one. The tower is recognizable during the day by its white colour with a band of red painted around the middle. It is ten metres high and situated 45 metres above the high water mark.

The station buildings consist of the tower, an engine house, stores building, and two identical keepers' cottages.

The light went into service as predicted, on 1 May 1882, and the old tower was demolished. The original lightstation commemorated by a monument to the first lightkeeper, Benjamin Germein, near the site and about 500 metres to the west of the tower. The remaining keepers' cottages are not the originals. When the station was built on the present site, there were three stone cottages, but these had begun to erode by 1918-1919 and were demolished. The timber framed cottages were built as keepers' quarters in 1909-10.

Despite the Marine Board's declared preference for electric light, the Cape Northumberland lightstation used a wick burner fuelled by mineral oil. In 1906 the original was replaced by an incandescent kerosene burner (rather like a large pressure lantern), and, in 1936, the light was electrified. In 1977 automatic switching equipment was installed and on 29 January 1980 the keepers were withdrawn.

The light is now powered directly from the mains, but in case of failure there is a diesel generator, and in case of generator failure there is a 24 volt battery as a second standby. During the hours of darkness it identifies itself to sailors by flashing for one-fifth of a second every five seconds.

The main light is visible for 22 nautical miles, and the standby unit for some 18 nautical miles.

The original, century-old, optical equipment was made, as was common in those days, by Chance Bros in England. It is still, as are most of these excellent lanterns, doing sterling service.

The Cape Northumberland lightstation is on the register of the National Estate and the lighthouse and cottages are registered with the National Trust of South Australia.

AUSTRALIA
Transport and Communications

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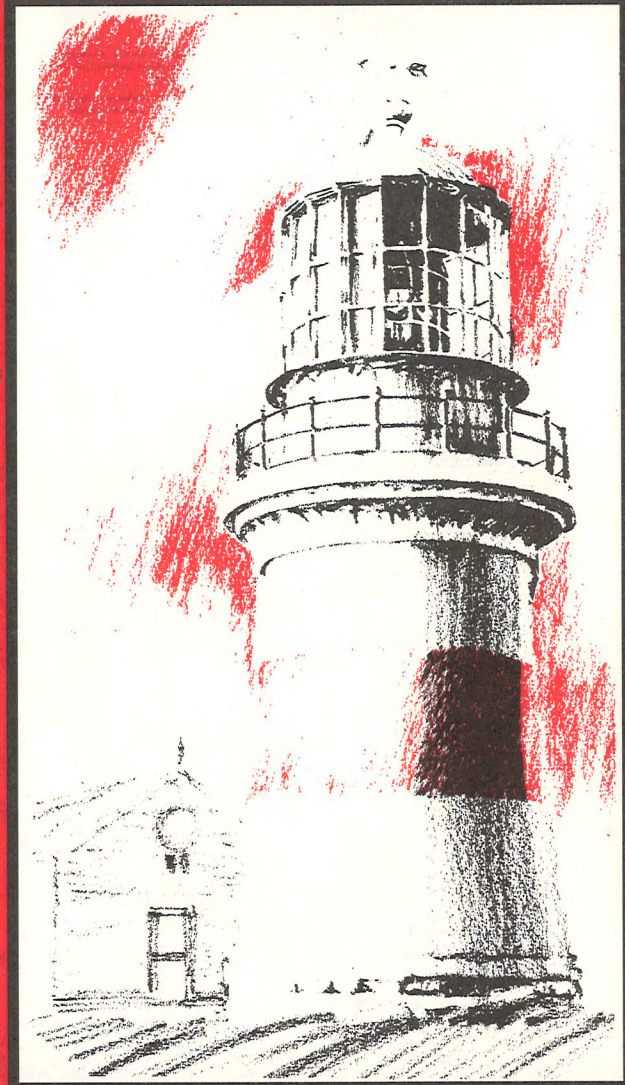

Cape Northumberland 1882