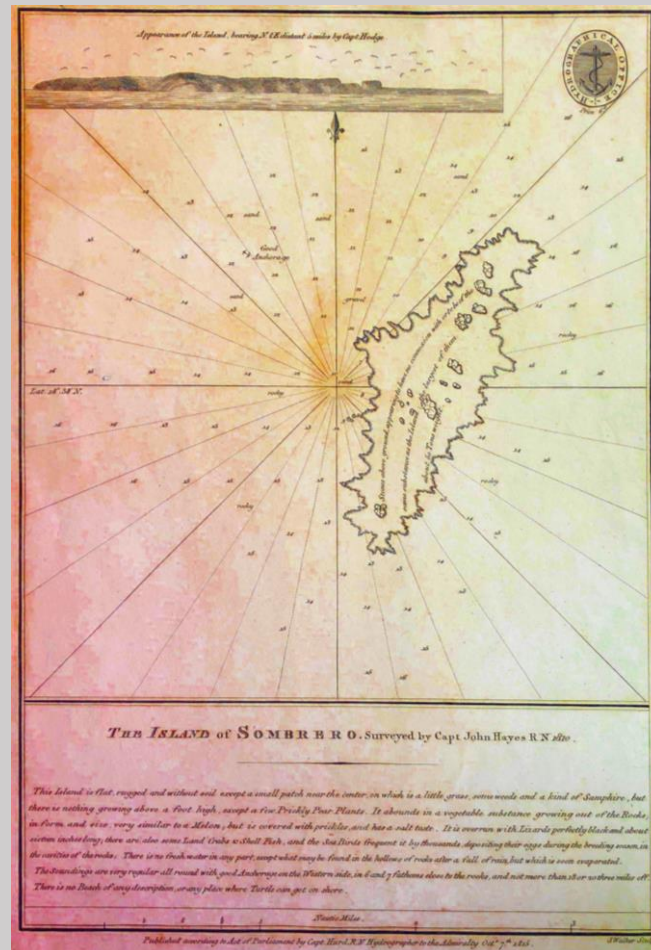


Sombrero Island

Sombrero is located 34 miles North West of Anguilla in the Leewards Islands. Columbus first sighted the island during his voyage of 1493. The story is told that the sailors thought the island resembled a Mexican hat, hence the name Sombrero.



The small island, “probably of volcanic origin, subsequently capped with Pleistocene limestone, exhibits eroded limestone rock rising in cliffs on all sides, varying from 20 to 40 feet high., There is no beach, no tree, no bush or shrub on the island, except an occasional stunted prickly pear cactus, together with ground trailing plants that appear to thrive on sea spray. Sombrero is about one mile long and 400 yards wide. Its surface is pock-marked with huge quarries, evidence of mining operations carried on here during the late 19th century.”

The lighthouse on Sombrero is about 160ft high. Every 5 seconds the flash of light beamed across the water is visible for approximately 22 miles. (Note: visibility depends on weather conditions.) On a calm night, the signal can be clearly seen from Anguilla, 34 miles away and 200ft above sea level. Originally the lighthouse was administered by the Imperial Lighthouse Service, then by the Board of Trade (Bahamas) and since 1984 by Trinity House, London. The Trinity House Lighthouse service is governed by a Lighthouse Board which has been delegated responsibility from the Court to function as a General Lighthouse Authority. Commercial shipping shares the full cost of the Service from which it benefits through the user charges called light duties – at no cost to the taxpayer. With continued financial assistance from Trinity House, the Government of Anguilla presently controls the lighthouse. All ships from the great ports of Europe pass safely from the Atlantic Ocean, through the Anegada Passage to the Caribbean Sea and on to the Panama Canal under the protection of the Sombrero Lighthouse.

Sombrero has a varied history of ownership. Claimed by the Spanish through the voyages of Columbus, many years would pass before the island is again mentioned. Seemingly of no strategic importance to anyone, Sombrero is nevertheless “included in the letters of patent issued by Charles I in 1627, which authorised the St. Kitts settlement,” and “was thereafter to form a part of the Colony of the Virgin Islands, which in 1666, had been settled by the English and in respect of which Charles I had issued a formal grant in 1672.” Britain ended in Napoleonic Wars in possession of all the Lesser Antilles except for Guadeloupe, (confirmed by the Treaty of Amiens – 1802), and of Sombrero island, which being situated on the main sea lane between the Americas and the West Indies, was now becoming of increasing commercial importance.



The following account of an ill-fated seaman published anonymously in 1843, extracted from page 264 of a book entitled "Letters from the Virgin Islands."

Seaman Abandoned on Sombrero

“The incident occurs in connection with the desert island of Sombrero, situate a few leagues to windward of the group we are now quitting, It created an intense sensation at the period and has conferred an evil notoriety on the principal actor.

Robert Jeffrey, a native of Polperro in the south east coast of Cornwall had been impressed from a privateer into H.M. eighteen gun brig Recruit, commanded by the Honourable Warwick Lake. In December 1807, The Sloop of war now cruising in the West India seas, this youth aged eighteen years, and whose original trade of a blacksmith had procured him the rating of an armour's mate on board, was detected in helping himself from the spruce beer cask – the ship's company being at the time on short the allowance of water. He had previously been charged with stealing a bottle with rum in it from the gunner's cabin. For these offences he was placed by the Commander's orders on what is technically called “The Black List.”

Three days later (December 13th) towards nightfall, the Recruit was passing a rocky islet, and Captain Lake learned, on enquiry from the sailing master that they were off Sombrero. The place noticed was un-inhabited at the date of Father Labat's voyage and, as indeed, the honourable navigator ought to have very well known, remained no otherwise then. However this might be, Jeffrey was sent away in a boat under charge of the brig's second lieutenant and, by order of his tyrannical captain, abandoned on this desolate spot, without shoes or other clothes save what he wore, and not even a biscuit for food.

The officer observing the poor fellow's feet were cut by the rocks, begged a pair of shoes for him from one of the boat's crew, together with a knife; and, advising him to keep a sharp lookout for vessels, pulled back to the sloop, Lt. Mould's considerable kindness had also supplied the victim with a telegraph, in his own pocket handkerchief and that of a midshipman sent with him on this dastardly errand. Her Commander's spleen thus gratified, the brig filled, and made sail from a place, henceforth to become while the word lasts, a monument to the Honourable Warwick Lake's barbarity.

Warwick Lake was not long in finding this out. Sir Alexander Cochrane, Commander-In-Chief, on the instant of the brig joining company, sent him back to Sombrero to away with the man, if yet surviving; accompanying the order with a severe reprimand for his inhuman conduct. On the 11th February, the Recruit anchored off the island; but the most diligent search could discover nothing of Jeffrey dead or alive: in fact, he had been preserved by almost a miracle.

The poor fellow, thus recklessly left to parish, wandered about for eight days, barely subsisting on a few limpets found ad hearing to the rocks, and slaking his thirst with the

rain water that lodged in their crevices. Several vessels passed, but at too great a distance for him to hail, and his signals were unobserved by them. On the morning of the ninth day providence mercifully conducted an American schooner “Adams” to the wretched man’s relief. From this period Jeffrey who’s wrongs appear to have been forgotten, until early in 1810, when it became known that he was yet alive and exercising his handicraft at Marlehead, Massachusetts, where his preserver had landed him. This was closely followed by a court-martial, held at Portsmouth, on his late Captain, “for abandoning seaman of the Recruit on the desert island of Sombrero” and, being found guilty of the charge, the Honourable Warwick Lake most deservedly lost his commission.

Jeffrey’s case being much bruited in England, he was taken, by order of Government, on board His Majesty’s Schooner Thistle, for a passage home, and landing at Portsmouth, received his discharge and a; arrears of pay due at the Admiralty (October 22nd). The friends of his late commander, to avoid the issue of a civil action, liberally compensated him for what he had undergone, and Jeffrey returned to the smithy in his village a much wealthier man than when he left it.”



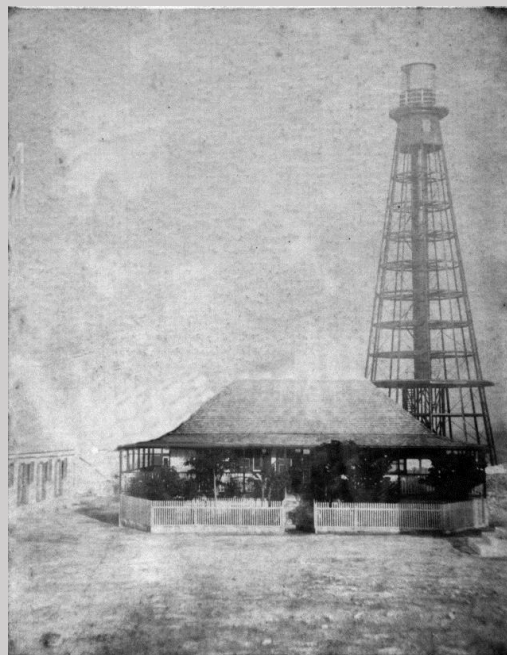
In 1811, a British geologist discovered deposits of phosphate of lime on Sombrero. These remained undeveloped until after “the American Civil War ended in 1865 and large areas of the southern United States were being opened up for agriculture, resulting in a heavy demand for fertiliser. Americans came to Sombrero in 1860 and for about 20 years mined the phosphate deposits, paying an annual rent of 1,000 to the British Crown Agents for the Colonies, an amount subsequently reduced to 500 on appeal to the House of Lords. The barren rock was equipped with a light railway, a steam rock crusher, accommodation for

the workers, and loading points set up on the shoreline. By 1870, some 3,000 tons of phosphate were being shipped each year. This phosphate was found in pockets in the rock which could only be worked by blasting.” When surface reserves had been exhausted the Americans “tried drilling areas underwater.” This procedure proved too expensive and production fell off so greatly that by 1890 the project was abandoned.

“With the increase in number and size of merchant ships using the Anegada Passage the need for a light on Sombrero became more urgent. This was reported to the Admiralty in 1848 by nothing was done. Eleven years later a Royal Mail Steamer, the Parametta, was wrecked there with considerable loss of life.”

Ownership: During this time, the United States claimed possession of the island, one result of which was a new American survey of the island in 1859, afterwards used by British Admiralty as the basis for its own chart first published in 1868. Names were also given to the main coastal points of the island. After the dispute was settled the “British Treasury sanctioned the erection of a lighthouse. A metal girder lighthouse was built and came into operation on New Year’s Day, 1868. By this time Sombrero was humming with a different sort of activity which made the light even more essential.”

Structure: As stated, the original lighthouse was made of metal girders and shone its first light on January 1st, 1868. This served very well until in 1931 when the light system was upgraded to 200,000 candle power. “The old Argand lamp and reflectors were abolished and a more efficient method of vapour and incandescent mantle lighting installed.” At this time the base of the structure and supporting columns, which began showing signs of stress, were encased in concrete.



Except for experienced seamen, most people sadly underestimate the power of the sea. Hurricanes like Donna (1960) and huge Atlantic rollers, consistently change the surface of the island, erasing and re-arranging anything and everything in their way. “When the seas boom and pound against this wall of rock, the noise is deafening and the sight most spectacular.” Buildings once used as accommodation for workers, commemorative tombstones of persons who had died there, and rock dumps of old phosphate workings have been all scattered or washed into the sea, creating a desolate, unwelcoming landscape.

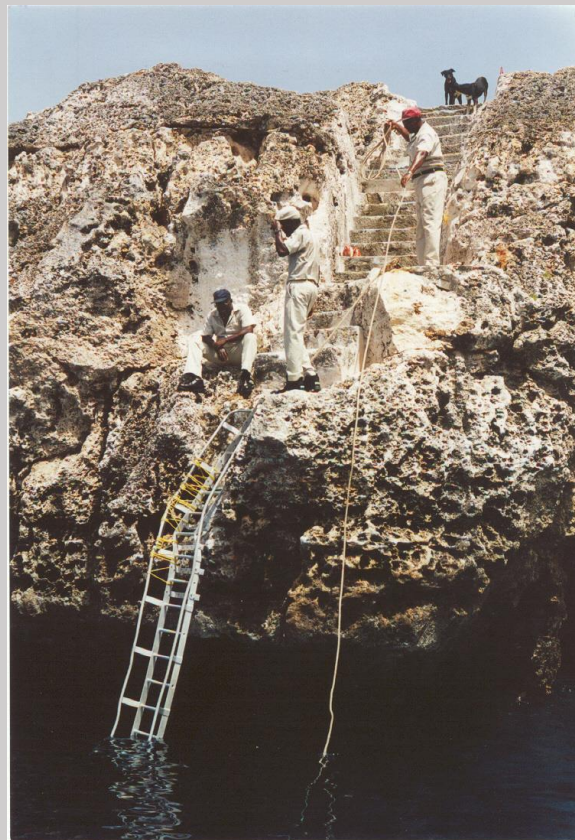
Over the years, the staff consisted of four light keepers and a cook. The rotation systems for the keepers was six weeks on the job and two weeks off. In the early days it was a lonely and dreary existence. The only means of communication with homeland Anguilla was through the bi-monthly supply sailing vessel. Names of these include: S.S. Daffnia, S.S. Yolanda, S.S. Ismay (a schooner), S.S. Carmela, and M.V. Warspite (also a schooner). In the early twentieth century two men, Arnold Bryan and Hugh Owen, both of North Hill, Anguilla, died – in separate incidents – because medical attention reached them too late. Light keeper Eric Owen barely made it home in time to have a ruptured appendix removed.



Working by the light of a Tilley lamp, Dr. A. McDonald, moving as fast as was possible, was able to save his life. Eric Owen never went back to Sombrero. Living conditions for the keepers greatly improved in later years with the introduction of faster supply vessels, radios and television. Monthly rations were generous and reflected whatever foodstuffs were available at a particular time. A typical shipmewnt would be six boxes of herrings, jam, salt, raisins, sugar, tea, vinegar, sweet oil, firewood, (very important) 100 lbs. Of beef, 2 sheep, potatoes, pork, cornmeal, butter, biscuits, cheese and flour. An abundance of fresh fish was readily available from the waters around Sombrero. During the last years, the business of procuring and supplying food was carried out by Errol Carty of Sandy Ground, Anguilla. While a sailing vessels could take as long as six hours to make the trip, (one way) using the fast tender ‘Esmeralda,’ Rollie Easily made the bi-monthly trip in one and one-half hours.



In 1995, the Anguilla Archaeological and Historical Society tentatively explored the possibility of using the facility as a tourist attraction. The project was not successful mostly due to the difficulty in off-loading inexperienced people from larger boats onto the rock – a very risky procedure. To land on the rock a small boat must be positioned under a metal ladder lowered into the water. After grasping on to this ladder a person would then climb up a number of steps cut into the sloping rock face, and onto a safe platform at the top. A simple misstep could mean falling into some very deep water below.



Around this same time, rumours began to circulate regarding Beal Aerospace Enterprises of Texas, and their plans to lease the island in order to construct a launching pad for communications satellites. As you can imagine the people of Anguilla and many environmental agencies, were greatly opposed to this venture as it would greatly affect the environment in a negative way,

Whether the Beal proposal would have been beneficial or otherwise was never determined. With all these discussions, some very heated, it is very scary, uneasy, and an upsetting reflection to note that it was not the British Government, neither the Anguilla Government nor the much-concerned environmentalists who caused the demise of Beal Enterprises in this region. In the midst of the uproar, the U.S. Government awarded NASA a contract to build and launch communication satellites thus effectively eliminating any ambitions private companies might harbour.

“The true importance of Sombrero is that it lies directly athwart one of the busiest, deep channels between the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Seas, and it has a lighthouse. The Admiralty Bible, “Ocean Passages for the World,” lists Sombrero to, among others, Bishop Rock, The Cabot Strait, Lisbon, Ponta Delgada and the Strait of Gibraltar).”

For the lives of the first keepers of the light, January 1st, 1868, to the last crew who came home to Anguilla on September 8th, 2001, (Donald Lloyd - Principal Keeper, Samuel Richardson (Pops), Mckenson Joseph, Wendell Thomas, Hubert Niles and their dogs), sailors through these waters give a silent sigh of thanks. According to Sir Emile Gumbs of Sandy Ground, Anguilla. Outage of the light for 20 minutes in 1943 was reported by 42 ships.

With one, half of its human contacts (keepers) relegated to the pages of history; their counterparts (merchantmen) now depend on an automatic flash of light to guide them on their way. Importance of the Sombrero Lighthouse to the economy and safety of all shipping passing through these waters is incalculable.

Of Note: The Global Positioning System (GPS) for guidance and location developed by NASA for use in tracking satellites is now in general use around the world. However, the margin of human error when using this system is obvious as ships still run aground or hit submerged reefs. Signals from a lighthouse may serve as a ‘wake-up’ call to sailors to check the GPS.

Editor’s Note: All references, except where specifically indicated, courtesy the Archives and published writings of I. Don Mitchell.



Personal Comment by Violet Owen-Berry

*When the 160ft lighthouse and its light keepers were replaced September 8, 2001, by a 60 ft. automatic system, a special era passed into history. Having had a grandfather, Principal light keeper Herbert Owen and most of my uncles (his sons and in-laws) Hugh Owen, Ozzie Owen, Ivor Owen, Eric Owen, Frank Bryan and Arnold Bryan, working as light keepers, as a child I knew one or the other of them was usually coming up from or going down to Sombrero. With no electricity in Anguilla, the Bright flash of light seemed to keep a comforting contact with those across the water. **The Light is no longer visible from Anguilla.***