

BETTER HERITAGE INFORMATION SUMMARY OF STATE HERITAGE PLACE

COMMENTARY ON THE LISTING

Description and notes with respect to a place entered in the South Australian Heritage Register in accordance with either the *South Australian Heritage Act 1978* or the *Heritage Places Act 1993*.

The information contained in this document is provided in accordance with s14(6) of the *Heritage Places Act 1993*.

NAME: Obelisk

PLACE NO.: 10263

KNOWN AS: Cape Dombey Obelisk

ADDRESS: Bunganditj Country
Cape Dombey, Robe SA 5276
CR 6128/656; H441800 S592
Hundred of Waterhouse

CONFIRMED IN THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE REGISTER:

24 July 1980

STATEMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The Obelisk at Cape Dombey demonstrates Robe's importance to the early pastoral development of South Australia, and in particular, the South East from the 1840s until the 1860s and as an arrival point for many migrants from Britain, Ireland, and China to the colony. The Obelisk was built in 1855, during Robe's heyday as a key intercolonial and international port assisting merchant and migrant vessels to find safe passage. The Obelisk is an important representative of the role such structures played in preventing shipwrecks, at a time when maritime transportation was fundamental to the success of the colony.

RELEVANT/INDICATIVE CRITERIA (under section 16 of the *Heritage Places Act 1993*)

(a) it demonstrates important aspects of the evolution or pattern of the State's history

The Obelisk demonstrates Robe's association with the early development of the pastoral industry in the South East, migration to the colony and maritime history of South Australia. Robe was founded as a government seaport town in 1846 to enable the transportation of wool grown by pastoralists situated throughout the recently colonised South East. The government officially declared Robe as a port in 1847. Unlike other regional ports that relied on Port Adelaide as a shipping hub, Robe became a major intercolonial and international port throughout the 1850s and 1860s. Activity at the port began to decline towards the end of the 1860s, however, Robe was the principal maritime transport hub for the burgeoning wool industry in the South East and a point of entry for thousands of migrants to South Australia, including British, Irish, and Chinese people.

The Obelisk was erected at Cape Dombey in 1855 during Robe's heyday as a port town. It was developed as a daytime navigational beacon to assist marine vessels entering Guichen Bay, where Robe is situated to the south. The Obelisk can be viewed several kilometres from the shore and thus guided the many merchant and migrant vessels entering Guichen Bay. Further, the internal storage area of the obelisk was used for lifesaving rescue equipment such as line-throwing rockets in the event of a ship wreck. The Obelisk is an important representative of maritime navigation aids and the role such structures played in preventing shipwrecks and subsequently the economic development of South Australia at a time when sea transportation was fundamental to the success of the colony.

SITE PLAN

Cape Dombey Obelisk

PLACE NO.: 10263



Obelisk Road, Cape Dombey, Robe SA



Obelisk – Robe, Obelisk Road, Cape Dombey CR 6128/656 Hundred of Waterhouse

N ↑

LEGEND

-  Parcel boundaries (Indicates extent of Listing)
-  Outline of Elements of Significance for State Heritage Place

SITE PLAN

Cape Dombey Obelisk

PLACE NO.: 10263



Cape Dombey, Robe SA



Obelisk – Robe, SSHP 10263, CR 6128/65 Hundred of Waterhouse

N ↑

LEGEND

-  Parcel boundaries (Indicates extent of Listing)
-  Outline of Elements of Significance for State Heritage Place

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Obelisk, standing 12.2 metres high, is a rendered and painted pyramidal structure made of limestone featuring a painted rendered plinth, and is about thirty metres above sea level.

A large cavity, accessed by a tapered doorway on the eastern façade was used to store lifesaving equipment, namely rockets to assist in marine rescue efforts. Historic photos depict a wooden door and lintel, however, a door has not been present for decades.

The exterior of the pyramidal structure is painted in alternating bands in white and red, featuring three white bands and two red bands of equal size (approx. 2.2 metres in depth), while the plinth is painted dark cream.

Elements of Significance:

Elements of heritage significance include (but are not necessarily limited to):

- 12.2 metre pyramidal structure comprised of rendered limestone and mortar,
- Plinth at the base of the structure,
- Tapered doorway,
- Three white and two red alternating painted bands of equal size (2.2 metres in depth); first band from top is white.

Elements not considered to contribute to significance of place include (but are not necessarily limited to):

- The surrounding site, including cliffs, vegetation, rocks, etc.,
- Pathways leading to the Obelisk,
- Security fencing adjacent to the Obelisk.

HISTORY OF THE PLACE

Guichen Bay in the South East of South Australia forms part of the traditional lands of the Bungandijj people, whom have been present in the larger area for at least 30,000 years.¹ Europeans first charted the coastline of the region in 1802 during the Baudin and Flinders expeditions and sealers established a presence at Guichen Bay in 1831.²

European exploration of the South East took place from 1839 and settlement began as early as 1840.³ Much of the South East was initially settled by pastoralists and by 1847 approximately half of the region was held under pastoral licence. As primary production expanded the colonial government began to provide a series of Government Towns as service and staging centres. The provision of ports to ship goods to market was also viewed as essential.⁴ Robe was established in 1846 to provide a port for the burgeoning wool clip then being obtained from the South East. It was officially declared as a port by the government in 1847.

Situated towards the south of Guichen Bay, the town at Robe (or Robetown) went on to become the first major town of the South East.⁵ Over the next two decades, Robe developed as an international port that serviced the local wool industry and import and export markets. It also facilitated the arrival of thousands of migrants, including British and Irish people, as well as Chinese prospectors during the Victorian gold rush (c.1851-late 1860s).⁶

Recognising the hazards ships faced in Guichen Bay, particularly rocks, and in response to wrecks that occurred in the area, Captain Thomas Lipson, the Harbour Master, determined in 1852 that a navigational beacon was necessary at Cape Dombey.⁷ Allegedly due to the inability to secure a contractor who would commit to the project, the Obelisk would not be built until 1855.⁸

In the years between 1852 and 1855 several ships were wrecked in Guichen Bay, with seven ships wrecked in 1853 alone.⁹ The most infamous cases up to and including 1855 included the *Thompsons*, the *Duilius*, and the *Joseph Lee Archer* wrecked in 1849, 1853, and in 1855 respectively.¹⁰ It is not known if the latter occurred before or after the Obelisk was built, but it no doubt confirmed the general need for greater safety measures in the area.

Around three years after Lipson recognised the need for a beacon, construction of the Obelisk began in c.1855. Although fixed lighthouses had been built elsewhere in South Australia as early as 1852, Cape Willoughby at Kangaroo Island being the first, the Obelisk evidently was not designed to project artificial illumination at night. While it is not clear why, it was designed instead as a navigational landmark to guide marine vessels towards Guichen Bay during the daytime.

Local builder George Shivas was paid £230 to build the Obelisk. It is probable that he was assisted by local stonemason Levi Cooper and builder Sandy Park.¹¹ Upon completion in 1855, the Obelisk stood at 12.2 metres high and was about thirty metres above sea level. At some point in its early years, perhaps upon its completion, the Obelisk's interior was used to store marine rescue devices like line-throwing rockets, which were used during disasters such as the wrecking of the *Alma* and *Livingstone* in 1861.¹²

Initially the Obelisk's exterior was painted white. In response to mariners who advised that they could not distinguish the Obelisk from its surroundings, in 1862 the Government decided to paint the Obelisk in alternating red and white bands to increase its visibility from the sea.¹³ It has been repainted many times since then but has retained the same pattern and colours.¹⁴

From the early 1870s, Robe's position as a major colonial port was challenged and the town began to decline. The decline was due to various factors, however, the rise of competition from other port towns, such as Kingston, and the emergence of railways in the region are particularly notable.¹⁵ Reflecting this downturn, the population

dwindled from about 600 residents in the late 1860s and early 1870s to 170 in 1891.¹⁶ Vessels continued to sail in and around Guichen Bay thereafter, but the international merchant and migration traffic of Robe's early years had virtually ceased. In the years that followed its heyday as a port town, Robe became a 'quiet country village'.¹⁷

A large earthquake occurred at Beachport on 10 May 1897. According to the *Advertiser*, the earthquake caused 'much damage' as well as 'excitement throughout the Colony'. However, the 'South-East' was 'most affected'.¹⁸ The *Narracoorte Herald* reported that the 'Obelisk and approaches thereto' had been 'considered by the Harbour Master to be unsafe'.¹⁹ The Obelisk itself likely suffered minor cracking.²⁰ The President of the Marine Board tendered repair work in 1898 and the Obelisk was repainted that same year.²¹

Robe has been a popular tourist spot throughout its history, especially during the Summer. During its heyday as a government town and international port, it was one of several seaside resorts visited by colonial elites. Its popularity owed in part to it being Governor James Fergusson's preferred summertime retreat.²² Following Robe's decline in the late nineteenth century, it appears that tourist activity dwindled too. An article in the *Pictorial Australian* from 1891 observed that Robe was 'not so well patronized as it ought to be, with its many attractions'.²³

This alleged neglect was to change over the course of the twentieth century. By 1918, the *Daily Herald* described Robe as a 'very picturesque spot and a popular resort for visitors in search of cool temperatures and fresh air'.²⁴ Tourism grew markedly with the popularisation of the car in the 1920s and intensified with the post-WWII economic boom.²⁵ A new road leading to the Obelisk was built in 1954 to cater for these new visitors.²⁶

As noted by the *Daily Herald*, visitors indeed did recognise Robe as picturesque. The newspaper also listed the Obelisk as one of Robe's 'favourite spots'.²⁷ Over time, the Obelisk went on to become a common attraction. It similarly became a popular site for photographers and painters, professional and amateur, which persists to this day. The natural scenery surrounding the Obelisk no doubt has driven much of this appeal, but the Obelisk has frequently been featured in photographs and paintings both as part of the landscape and as a focal point.²⁸ Its recurring presence within such media attests to its place within the iconography of Robe.

Since the 1990s, there has been increased awareness that the Obelisk is threatened by coastal erosion and the site itself has been closed to vehicles and pedestrians for over two decades, although it can still be viewed from behind a fence.²⁹ A 2009 report on cliff-top erosion at Cape Dombey identified that the Obelisk 'could be undermined at any time and certainly will not last a further 40 years'.³⁰ Due to the prohibitive cost of repairing or relocating the Obelisk, preventative measures have not been taken.³¹

More affordable alternatives, such as building a replica at a different site, have been proposed.³² As of June 2023, the Obelisk stands, but its future is uncertain.

CHRONOLOGY

Year Event

1846 Counties of Grey and Robe are proclaimed and opened to claim under pastoral license.

1847 Robe is officially deemed as a port by the Colonial Government.

1849-1855 Multiple ships are wrecked at or around Guichen Bay, including the *Thompsons* (1849), *Duilius* (1853), and *Joseph Lee Archer* (1855). It is not known if the latter was wrecked before or after the Obelisk was erected in 1855.

1852 The creation of an obelisk to serve as a beacon on Cape Dombey is suggested by the Harbour Master, Captain Thomas Lipson.

Obelisk (SHP 10355) at Port Elliot is built.

1855 The Obelisk is constructed on Cape Dombey and intended to serve as a landmark or 'day guide' visible up to sixteen kilometres for marine vessels entering Guichen Bay. Local builder George Shivas accepts £230 to build the Obelisk and is likely assisted by stonemasons Levi Cooper and Sandy Park.

1862 Government decides the Obelisk should be painted to increase off-shore visibility. Obelisk is painted with three white bands and two red bands, each 2.43 metres in depth.

1870 Obelisk is repainted by George Hailes for £3/15.

1897 Earthquake at Beachport results in damage throughout the South East. The Harbor Master at Robe declares that the Obelisk and approaches to it are unsafe.

1898 President of the Marine Board invites tenders for repairs to the Obelisk. Obelisk is repainted.

1954 A new road leading to the Cape Dombey is built for tourists and visitors.

2002 Heritage SA approves Development Application **DA 822/09/2002** to paint and repair the Obelisk. Obelisk repainted by Save the Obelisk Society.

- 2012 Robe District Council announces that coastal erosion threatens the Obelisk and that without intervention it will fall into the sea. By 2012, Cape Dombey has eroded by around twenty-six metres since 1896.
- 2016 Report *Maintenance of the Obelisk* estimates that painting and repair costs are approx.\$102,000. Save the Obelisk Society advocates in the Community Newsletter that it should be painted 'one last time' and that the Robe District Council resolved a new site needs to be selected for a replica to be built.
- 2017 Robe District Council confirms that it cannot afford to save the Obelisk from coastal erosion and that it will eventually collapse.**
- 2021- A hole the 'size of a tennis court' develops near the Obelisk due to cliffs
2022 collapsing. Hole increases in size in 2022 following another collapse.

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- 'Robe's Obelisk Can't be Saved', *Coastal Leader (Kingston)*, 1 March 2017.
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SITE DETAILS

Cape Dombey Obelisk

PLACE NO.: 10263

Cape Dombey, Robe SA

DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:	Pyramidal-shaped obelisk with four sides and plinth made of rendered, mortared limestone and standing approx. 12.2 metres. Painted in alternating white and red bands, plinth painted dark cream. Tapered doorway to internal storeroom.
DATE OF CONSTRUCTION:	1855
REGISTER STATUS:	Confirmed 24 July 1980
CURRENT USE:	Tourist attraction, symbol for Robe. c. 1900 to present
PREVIOUS USE(S):	Landmark or 'day guide' for marine vessels in and around Guichen Bay; storage site for rescue rockets. 1855 – c.1900
ARCHITECT:	William B. Hays 1855
BUILDER:	George Shivas 1855
LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA:	District Council of Robe
LOCATION:	Street No.: N.A. Street Name: Cape Dombey Town/Suburb: Robe Post Code: 5276
LAND DESCRIPTION:	Title Reference: CR 6128/656 H441800 S592 Hundred: Waterhouse

PHOTOS



Historic photograph of the Obelisk, 1919.

Source: State Library of South Australia, PRG 280/1/17/85.



The Obelisk, c. 2010. Note the coastal erosion that has occurred since the 1919 image above.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

PHOTOS

Cape Dombey Obelisk

PLACE NO.: 10263

Cape Dombey, Robe SA



Panoramic view of Cape Dombey Obelisk showing surrounding cliffs and coastline from the south, 2023.

Source: Wikimedia Commons



Cape Dombey Obelisk showing the tapered doorway to the internal storage area and erosion to the cliff face, 2016.

Source: Flickr.com (user: 'denisbin'). Reproduced per CC by 2.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>).

PHOTOS

Cape Dombey Obelisk

PLACE NO.: 10263

Cape Dombey, Robe SA



The Obelisk in 1979, the year before it was listed as a State Heritage Place. Note the wooden lintel and door.

Source: DEW Files



Black and white photograph of the Obelisk entered to the News' Photo Contest by G. R. Evans, 1938. This image is one of many examples of the Obelisk's photogenic quality and scenic value.

Source: trove.nla.gov.au

PHOTOS

Cape Dombey Obelisk

PLACE NO.: 10263

Cape Dombey, Robe SA



Photograph of fence in front of the Obelisk instructing visitors to stay away for safety reasons, 2020.

Source: ABC South East SA (via Facebook.com)



The Obelisk, February 2023, showing the current condition and the extent of erosion to the cliff.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

¹ Liz Harfull, *Almost an Island: The Story of Robe*, reprinted edition (2013; Mile End: Wakefield press, 2015), 12-14; Susan Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days* (Robe: District Council of Robe, 1985), 11-12.

² Harfull, *Almost an Island*, 11; Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days*, 12.

³ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, 14-16; Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days*, 14.

⁴ Roger André, 'Wool', SA History Hub, History Trust of South Australia, 19 March 2014. <https://sahistoryhub.history.sa.gov.au/subjects/wool>. Accessed 9 June 2023; Michael Williams, *The Making of the South Australian Landscape: A Study in the Historical Geography of Australia* (London; New York: Academic Press, 1974), 339-341.

⁵ John Dallwitz and Susan Marsden, *Robe Historical Interpretation Study: Stage 1 in the Establishment of the Robe Historical Interpretation Centre* (Adelaide: Department of Environment and Planning, 1983), 4-10.

⁶ Dallwitz and Marsden, *Robe Historical Interpretation*, 10-16.

⁷ 'Cape Dombey Obelisk', Heritage Survey Item Identification Sheet, Region 6: South East, Item No. ROB:009.

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⁹ District Council of Robe, 'The Obelisk [Signage]', Cape Dombey, Robe, South Australia.

¹⁰ Shipwrecks and Sea Rescue: Shipwrecks, 1802-1850', *SA Memory*, State Library of South Australia, 2007. <https://www.samemory.sa.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=725>

¹¹ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, 57.

¹² Kathleen Bermingham, *Gateway to the South East: A Story of Robetown and the Guichen Bay District* (Millicent: The South Eastern Times Ltd., 1961), 105-106; Harfull, *Almost an Island*, 57; Henry Melville, *Compensation for a Life's Service under Civil Service Regulations of South Australia* in 'Port Robe and Shipwrecks', District Council of Robe. <https://www.robe.sa.gov.au/explore/history/portrobeshipwrecks>. Accessed 23 May 2023.

¹³ Bermingham, *Gateway to the South East*, 105; Harfull, *Almost an Island*, 57.

¹⁴ For example, see 'Tenders Accepted', *Adelaide Observer*, 2 July 1870, 4; 'The Holiday in the Country', *Chronicle* (Adelaide), 11 June 1898, 16; Kate Hill, 'Most Dangerous Paint Job in SA: Facelift for Crumbling Robe Obelisk a Risky Business', ABC News, 16 December 2015. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-12-16/robe-landmark-renos-deemed-risky-business/7033596>

¹⁵ Dallwitz and Marsden, *Robe Historical Interpretation*, 19-21.

¹⁶ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, 42.

¹⁷ Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days*, 46.

¹⁸ 'An Earthquake Shock', *Advertiser*, 11 May 1897, 5.

¹⁹ 'The Earthquake: Shocks Still Continue at Kingston; Great Damage Done Along the Coast', *Narracoorte Herald*, 14 May 1897, 3.

²⁰ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, 117.

²¹ 'Robe', *Narracoorte Herald*, 29 March 1898, 3; 'The Holiday in the Country', 16.

²² Harfull, *Almost an Island*, 185-186; Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days*, 38-41.

²³ Acord [pseudonym], 'Robe', *Pictorial Australia* (Adelaide), 1 November 1891, 178.

²⁴ Lizzy Hudson, 'Robe: A Little Sketch', *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), 23 September 1918, 8.

²⁵ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, 184-203.

²⁶ 'New Road to Robe Obelisk', *South Eastern Times* (Millicent), 26 November 1954, 1.

²⁷ Lizzy Hudson, 'Robe: A Little Sketch', *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), 23 September 1918, 8.

²⁸ For example, see Acord [pseudonym], 'A South Australian Sanitorium: the Seaport of Robe', *Pictorial Australian*, November 1891, 177; 'Snapshots with the Premier in the South-East', *Observer* (Adelaide), 17 July 1926, 31; 'Five More Entries in Photo Contest', *News* (Adelaide), 16 March 1938, 14; 'Pictures Here, There and Everywhere', *News* (Adelaide), 14 January 1939, 8; and Jeffrey Smart, *Cape Dombey*, 1947, oil on canvas, University of Sydney in Harfull, *Almost an Island*, 89.

²⁹ Douglas Fotheringham, *Cliff Top Erosion Adjacent Cape Dombey Robe, South Australia* (Adelaide: Department for Environment and Heritage, 2009), 12.

³⁰ Fotheringham, *Cliff Top Erosion*, 16.

BHI Summary of State Heritage Place: 10263

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Confirmed in the South Australian Heritage Register on 24 July 1980

The South Australian Heritage Council endorsed the content of this BHI - SSHP on 6 July 2023.

³¹ 'Robe's Obelisk Can't be Saved', *Coastal Leader* (Kingston), 1 March 2017, 4.

³² Milnes, 'Wind, surf pound landmark', 13; 'Robe's Obelisk Can't be Saved', 4; 'Save the Obelisk Society', *District Council of Robe Community Newsletter*, no. 414 (January 2016), 1.