

MARITIME HISTORY AND SHIPWRECKS

Introduction

The climatic and oceanographic features of the Eastern Cape coast make it one of the most dangerous in the world. There are 150 shipwrecks between Hood Point and Gonubie alone.

The Buffalo River offered a sheltered refuge for ships to land military supplies during the frontier wars and the town of East London grew up around the port activities. In 1847, small ships could enter the river and anchor at a small jetty erected on the west bank. It soon became clear that the river mouth was usually clogged with sand and ships could only enter after a small flood. Efforts to narrow the mouth by constructing 'training walls' to concentrate the flow were unsuccessful. A breakwater was built to shelter the mouth in 1880, but it was not until 1886, when a dredger was introduced, that ships could enter the quiet waters of the port. As ships became larger, so the limitations of a narrow mouth were exposed and the banks had to be widened. There were six river ports along the Cape coast during the 19th century, but East London is the only one to have survived.

Sites selected for the Harbour

Port Control grounds to view the harbour structures and facilities

Latimer's Landing

Hood Point Lighthouse

Dolos

East London Museum

Sites selected for Shipwrecks

Hood Point Lighthouse grounds

Esplanade

Bonza Bay

Cintsa East

East London Museum

PORT CONTROL GROUNDS

This is the best site where an overall view of the harbour can be seen. From here the features and dates when constructed can be pointed out:

The Breakwater:

The first part was constructed in 1876 - the half round protuberance about half way along the wall shows the original length.

The old **Victoria Slipway** on the west bank, where small ships could be repaired was completed in 1897.

The **Kings Warehouse**, a customs building, with its imposing clock tower (clock now missing), was built in 1904. It is a National Monument.

The **Orient Pier** on the east bank was completed in 1929.

In 1935 part of the east bank was excavated, to form a **Turning Basin** for the larger ships. Before this, passengers and cargo had to be unloaded onto lighters or tugs out in a basket out in the roadstead.

During the Second World War, a **Graving Dock** was constructed where shipping repairs could be undertaken. In 1959 the harbour was widened further by excavating on the west bank.

The **Grain Elevator** was built in 1966.

THE DOLOS:

This breakwater block was invented in East London. It has been very successful and can be seen protecting exposed breakwaters throughout the world.

The breakwater protecting the East London Harbour was constantly being battered and damaged by the high seas so common along the Eastern Cape shores. Eric Merrifield, Harbour Engineer at East London, embarked on a project to design a block which would interlock and break the force of the waves. The result was a concrete block shaped like a twisted anchor. They were first used in 1966.

Models of the dolos and its story can be seen at the East London Museum and lining the outer rim of the breakwater.

LATIMER'S LANDING:

This is the old fishing wharf and is where the world-famous coelacanth was landed in 1938. Commercial fishing ceased during the 1970s. In 1990, Portnet began a waterfront development project with restaurants and small shops. It was named Latimer's Landing to honour Dr Marjorie Courtenay Latimer, and opened by her on 18 December 1993. The wooden decks are the only ones remaining in the country.

HOOD POINT LIGHTHOUSE:

The need for lighthouses along coasts to warn ships of danger was recognised during the 19th century, and prior to electricity, gas or paraffin lights and mirrors were used. East London had one such, Castle Point Lighthouse, built of wood and situated on the west bank at the mouth of the Buffalo River. By the 1890s East London was one of the fastest growing ports in the Cape and the existing lighthouse was inadequate. The Hood Point Lighthouse was built and the light was first lit on 4 June 1895, visible for 31 sea miles.

Description

This is a conical structure of bricks and cement. It was originally painted in squares of red and white, but today is only white.

Location

West Bank, entrance off the road to the West Bank Golf Club.

Access

Permission may be obtained for tourist visits by permission of the Port Manager.

SHIPWRECKS

Hundreds of ships have come to grief along the inhospitable shores of south-east Africa. The earliest were those of the Portuguese, which sailed to India during the 1500 and 1600s. There are three of these sites along the Buffalo City shores: the *Santo Alberto* of 1593 at Sunrise on Sea, the *Madre de Deus* of 1643 at Bonza Bay and the *A talaia* of 1647 at Cintsa East. By the 19th century, coastal trade increased and the severe storms saw ships being wrecked in great numbers. The earliest wreck at the

East London harbour was the *Ghika* in 1847. The *Lady Kennaway* (Kennaway Hotel) of 1856 came ashore where the Orient pier now stands and at very low water, some of the spars can be seen. Most of the ships were wrecked during the 1870s and 1880s, before dredging allowed entrance into the more protected waters of the harbour. The *Orient* (Orient Beach) was wrecked in a storm in 1907. Many of the street names in the Quigney were named for shipwrecks (eg the *Brighton* and)Even in modern times, the *Oranjeland* came to grief off the coast in 1986 and the *Sagittarius* in 2002.

View sites:

A series of mounted plaques in the front of Hood Point list some of the famous shipwrecks of the Buffalo City coast.

A series of plaques listing six of the more famous wrecks are embedded in the low sea-wall along the Esplanade, placed there by the Border Historical Society.

Blind River, Bonza Bay: *Madre de Deus* – 1647

Cintsa East: a Monument to the *Nossa Senhora da A talaia*, wrecked between Cintsa and Cefane in 1647 stands in the village. The site is a proclaimed National Monument.

All artefacts from these sites are protected by an Act of Parliament. Finds should be handed in to the East London Museum.

EAST LONDON MUSEUM:

There are two galleries devoted to Maritime History. The one features the Portuguese, Dutch and English shipwrecks as well as displays on the *Oceanos* (1992) and the *Grosvenor* (1783). There is a gallery where the full history of the harbour is shown.