

Basic Detail Report



MV Cape Don

Vessel number

HV000208

Date

1962

Primary Maker

NSW State Dockyard

Description

MV CAPE DON was built in 1962 at the NSW State Dockyard in Newcastle for the Commonwealth Lighthouse Service and designed in Australia by the Australian Shipping Board. The steel ship is just over 76m long, one of a class of three identical vessels purpose-built to service the many navigation aids and support the manned lighthouses around the Australian coastline. It is one of the few Australian designed and built ships from the 1960s that has not been scrapped and is still in the country. CAPE DON, with its sisterships CAPE PILLAR and CAPE MORETON, worked until the 1980s when most of the lighthouses were automated. CAPE DON operated mainly on the western and northern coastlines. Much of this coastline, especially in the north west, is a vast area of islands, bays and archipelagos, with massive tides and miles of wilderness. There are many navigation markers or beacons defining channels and highlighting hazards which were serviced by CAPE DON. In 1973 CAPE DON under the command of Captain John Marion was used to recover two anchors lost by Matthew Flinders when he was charting the coastline in 1803. The anchors from his ship HMS INVESTIGATOR were retrieved in waters off Esperance WA. Captain Richard Ireland joined the CAPE DON in 1974. He recalls that up until 1981 the CAPE DON was responsible for the navigation aids from Esperance in the south and as far around as Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria. From 1981 onwards they also did South Australian, Victorian and Tasmanian lights during the summer period, then Western Australian and Northern Territory lights in the winter period. He also recalls CAPE DON helping out in Queensland waters on Moreton Bay when an additional ship was required. The CAPE ships were manned by Australian crews, and built to provide a versatile platform for various technicians to work from. They featured workshop and cargo storage spaces and a crane on the foredeck to lift buoys on board and to move cargo. They could carry a LARC amphibious vehicle, stowed on the port side. The fitout included first class accommodation in VIP quarters for officials. Relief lighthouse crews often brought their families on board. The ship was able to remain at sea for extended periods, allowing it to cover long distances between major ports. Phil Osborne served aboard Cape Don and recalled the following, a reflection of the period in the early 1980s. " I was in service for 5 years with the DOT and may I say they were the best years of my life. If you have the crew lists you will find me under the Galley Staff. I worked as a 2nd cook, Scullery/3rd cook and Peggy (crews pantry and mess assistant, cabin boy). I started in 1981 through to 1986. In that time I got to meet a lot of blokes who could tell you a few stories about lighthouses, the islands, serious weather and of course drinking. (I can still see those 10 gallon kegs in the

vegie fridge just chilling). Thanks Phil Osborne. " CAPE DON remained in service from 1963 to 1990, a period of 37 years. The three ships were then retired around the same period. CAPE MORETON went to the Maldives as the OCEAN PARADISE while CAPE PILLAR became the cattle ship KALYMNIAN EXPRESS. CAPE DON was renamed WESTERN EXPRESS when it was sold in 1990. It was then the subject of a number of schemes that came to nothing, including hopes to sail to the Barcelona Olympics and to refurbish it as a cruise ship. At one time it did become a prop for the feature film 'Dogwatch'. The breakers yard seemed to be its inevitable end until the MV Cape Don Society stepped in. A team of volunteers including past crew from all three vessels is currently restoring the ship.

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 76.25 m x 67.05 m x 12.8 m x 4.37 m, 2139.8 tonnes (250.18 ft x 219.99 ft x 42 ft x 14.34 ft, 2174.04 tons)