Saving the Agulhas Lighthouse (By SJ du Toit)

Cape Agulhas Lighthouse is situated at the most southerly tip on the continent of Africa. It was named by the Portuguese as the “Cape of the Needle”, the reference to needle being the compass needle which behaved strangely when their ships rounded this cape. The light at Cape Agulhas was first lit on the evening of 1 March 1849. The power initially came from the fat tails of sheep which were rendered down at the lighthouse. For the next 100 years the light never failed and in 1949, at the centenary celebrations, the light was relit for the next 100 years.

In 1968 the tower light was moved to a steel tower and soon the old lighthouse building fell into disrepair. The authorities planned demolition, but some cultural leaders fought to save the historical old place. After many letters in the press and meetings, a restoration-contract was signed in 1984.

Restoration was neither easy nor rapid. It took several years to complete. In the meantime, a stone monument to indicate the southernmost point of Africa, the meeting place of the Indian and Atlantic oceans, was built and on 23 October 1986 inaugurated by the then State President, Mr PW Botha.

Long before holiday homes were built around the lighthouse, farmers from the area used to camp close by. They found sufficient fresh water and grazing for their animals and made a tidal pool where all could bathe in safety. Angling was in pools or with a bamboo rod and reel in the sea.

It would be fitting to mention the reinstatement of the name L’Agulhas. This French form of the name was used as far back as 1849, but was forgotten over the years and by 1968 was never used.

Portuguese seafarers christened this tip of Africa, “Cabo das Agulhas” which means “Cape of Needles” and refers to the needle of the compass which at this point shows no real deviation between true north and magnetic north. During restoration, the old name was re-instated and accepted by the National Names Commission.

After completion, the lighthouse, costing more than R400 000 to restore, was handed back to the Portnet Authorities. After 20 years, the light shone brightly from the Egyptian style lighthouse building across the rocky bay once more. Die Burger wrote: “Ou vuurtoring gered om sy reddende lig weer te laat skyn’. (Old lighthouse saved to send its saving rays out once more.)