



LIGHTHOUSES & SHIPWRECKS

Australian Lighthouses Fact Sheet

In this document you will find some fascinating information on Australia's lighthouses. This information is intended as a source and starting point for further online research. You will find an extensive number of online references to click through. Lighthouse topics covered in this document include:

- Early Australian Lighthouses and their important role in marine navigation safety.
- Lighthouse and shipwrecks
- Lighthouse keepers and family life
- Restoration, preservation and management

NB: Design and construction – see additional PDF download.

Lighthouses – built as towers with lights – warn sailors, especially at night or in a storm, to straighten their position so they don't hit reefs and rocks on shore.

In Australia, lighthouses are built in harbours, on islands, coral reefs and beaches. In 1983, there were 367 lighthouses and navigational aids and today it is estimated that there over 350 'light houses' – all built in the last 200 years.

In early times, people set fires at the edge of the water to warn boats of dangerous rocks on shore. The Egyptians completed the tallest lighthouse ever built in 283. It stood 122 metres high on the island of Pharos in the harbor of Alexandria. The Pharos lighthouse used a mirror, whose reflection was seen up to 50 kilometers away.

http://www.users.bigpond.com/msn/gary_fletcher/seven.html#LA

Australia 's first colonial navigation beacon was lit on the South Head of Port Jackson, New South Wales (NSW) in 1793 when a bonfire was lit for the passenger ship *Bellona* . By 1794, a fire was lit in the metal basket suspended from a tripod each night.

http://www.coastguard.com.au/archives/documents/sth_head_station.html

It was at South Head Signal Station that the first lighthouse structure in Australia was started in 1816 and completed in 1818 at the command of Governor Macquarie. The work was undertaken by Francis Greenway, the famous convict architect.

The lighthouse still did not guarantee safe passage and unfortunately, the *Dunbar* was tragically wrecked below the Signal Station in 1857. Despite the cries being heard through the night, there was only wreckage and one survivor (out of 121 passengers and crew) the next day.

<http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/objectsthroughtime/objects/dunbar/>

Lighthouses were built to improve safety at sea, becoming refuges for the survivors of shipwrecks and all too often the final resting place for victims. In Australia, Lighthouse Keepers and their families experienced a unique lifestyle; small communities living a lonely existence usually in a very remote place. Visitors were few and far between.

http://www.maritimetas.org/LLK_WQ.html

LIGHTHOUSES AND SHIPWRECKS

Many of the earliest Australian lighthouses were built in direct response to shipwrecks in the treacherous waters in the Southern Ocean and the Tasman Sea – part of which was known as the shipwreck coast. Lighthouses became critical aids in preventing shipwrecks.

<http://culture.gov.au/articles/shipwrecks/>

King Island waters

The coastline surrounding King Island in the Bass Strait, for example, claimed at least 60 vessels and 800 lives prior to the construction of lighthouses. The great majority of the lives lost were: the 224, mostly convict, women from County Cork, Ireland, who perished in the wreck of the *Neva* in 1835 and 362 emigrants from Liverpool, England on the *Cataraqui* in 1845.

<http://www.kingisland.net.au/~maritime/neva.htm>

<http://www.kingisland.net.au/~maritime/cataraqui.htm>

Despite this tragic loss of life and property, it was not until 1861 that a warning light was erected on King Island's northern tip at Cape Wickham and it was not until 1883 that the lighthouse was finally built.

In 1875, an Intercolonial Board of Inquiry recommended the construction of a second light, on the west coast at Currie Harbour. Between 1861, when the Cape Wickham light was erected and 1880, when the Currie Harbour lighthouse was established, another twenty vessels were wrecked.

The construction of the [Currie Harbour] lighthouse is significant as a reminder of the many shipping disasters in the area, prior to the light being built. The fact that there has been only one minor wreck since its construction is testimony to the safe passage of marine vessels in the area.

<http://www.aussieheritage.com.au/listings/tas/Currie/CurrieHarbourLighthouseandBuildings/12678>

LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS

Duties: lights, bells, canons, weather and tide records

In the past the lighthouses were run by keepers. The main duties of lighthouse keepers included warning ships by lighting the light when fog came up, as well as ringing bells every hour or shooting cannons. Lenses had to be cleaned, gas cylinders changed, clockwork mechanisms wound and later, generators maintained.

<http://www.nla.gov.au/pub/nlanews/2005/sep05/article1.html>

At Moreton Bay Pile Light, Queensland, a second function of the keepers was to keep the record and signal the state of the tides to the passing ships.

Lighthouse keepers also had to keep watch for any suspicious vessels. At the time of the Crimean War 1853 - 6 (during the Gold Rush) when there was a fear of a Russian invasion with her Pacific Fleet, fortifications of several beacons were made to prepare Port Phillip Bay and Sydney Harbour against any invasion from the sea. In 1854, a cannon was placed below the South Head Signal Station to alert the Colony should the Russian Fleet arrive at Sydney Heads. Lighthouse keepers had responsibility for the canon.

<http://culture.gov.au/articles/goldrush/>

http://www.coastguard.com.au/archives/documents/sth_head_station.html

As is the case in most countries, there are no longer any manned lighthouses in Australia due to the belief by the operators of large ships that ships with radar and other navigational aids were no longer dependent on the lights. (This was a controversial decision in Australia which was made following a Report from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Expenditure, *Lighthouses: Do We Keep the Keepers?*, December 1983.)

Keeper's families

Personal aptitude was important if keepers were to cope with life in isolation. Sometimes keepers had probationary postings year to find out how they coped with the life and the duties involved. For example, the keepers destined for Cape Jaffa (SA) and other remote outposts were usually posted to Kingston Lightstation for a year.

Life for keepers' families was often contradictory. Their personal stories and experiences varied from the tragic experiences through humorous to exciting times.

MaatsuykerIsland (Tasmania) 1891 – 1960s: wrecks, carrier pigeons and idylls

As with most isolated lighthouses, the keepers at Maat (as it was called) had to assist survivors of wrecks at sea. In 1907 the *Alfhild*, a Swedish Barque, was wrecked with six survivors, who were cared for by the keepers until the supply ship could pick them up.

Early communication in events such as illness or shipwreck was by carrier pigeon to Hobart. The attrition rate was so high that in a serious emergency at least 3 birds would be dispatched in the hope that at least one of them would make it. The birds would take 3 hours to reach Hobart with their owners receiving a fee for each message received.

<http://www.lighthouse.net.au/lights/TAS/Maatsuyker%20Island/Maatsuyker%20Island.htm#History>

In contrast, the Nan Chauncy's, *The Lighthouse Keeper's Son* (1969) set on Maatsuyker Island documents an idyllic life for a ten year old boy.

Gabo Island (Victoria), 1920s – rough seas

Alexander Lyall, a granddaughter of a lighthouse keeper, James Stewart who manned the lighthouse on Gabo Island in the 1920s, explored, what she described as, an essential paradox of lighthouses in a series of 'highly regarded' paintings. Lyall's view was that lighthouses 'saved the lives of mariners while destroying the lives of the people who lived and worked in them'.

<http://www.abc.net.au/austory/transcripts/s647601.htm>

As a child, I grew up with the story of my grandmother collapsing at Gabo. All the living children were born whilst taken away on a little fishing ketch to Eden , in rough seas.....

North Reef Lighthouse (Queensland), 1940s – nothing atoll

Because of the harsh conditions of living on the North Reef Lighthouse only men without families were allowed to be keepers there. There was a 'poem' near the entrance to the lighthouse – carved in a whale bone (believed to be the work of Jack Mitchell who was a keeper there around 1949). The words on the whale bone are:

NORTH REEF ATOLL
NO BEER ATOLL
NO WOMEN ATOLL
NOTHING ATOLL

<http://www.lighthouse.net.au/lights/Bulletin/0309/Bulletin%20Sep%2003.htm#NorthReef>

Cape Jaffa, South Australia, 1950s – life in corrugated iron lighthouses

The experience of the keepers and their families has been recounted by Margaret Hill, the wife of one of the keepers :

everything was 'found'; except for our food, which was fresh and cheap....The weatherboard lighthouse cottage was large and comfortable. ...The laundry facilities were primitive, but the wood-fired copper was burnished bright and there was always a good supply of dry wood...The cottages were built on a rise directly across from the sea... Beyond the back garden, the ground dropped down into thick scrub. Snakes were a worry...

<http://www.lighthouse.net.au/lights/bulletin/0208/Bulletin%20Aug%2002.htm#Corragated>

RESTORATION, PRESERVATION AND MANAGEMENT

Most lighthouses now belong to the various State Parks and Wildlife Services. Some are still operational with a caretaker who makes weather reports and maintain the property. Others are maintained by Maritime Museums, local shires, and manned by volunteers – and sometimes it takes all of these entities to restore, preserve and maintain the lighthouses.

Maatsuyker Island

The last officially manually operated lighthouse was Maatsuyker Island in Tasmania, Australia's most southerly light. The historic light was de-activated and replaced with a solar powered light in 1995. It is not for the faint hearted. In April 2008, hurricane force wind gusts of up to 110 kilometres per hour were predicted for Maatsuyker Island .

Wildcare members voluntarily staff Maatsuyker Island and Deal Island as island caretakers – working three-month shifts. Special training in weather reporting is provided for caretakers on Maatsuyker Island, as the volunteers provide 3-hourly weather reports to the Bureau of Meteorology.

http://www.wildcareas.org.au/pages/groups_details.php?group_id=44&group_type_id=2

Arts Tasmania and the Parks and Wildlife Service Tasmania have come together to offer the Maatsuyker Island Natural and Cultural Residency for an individual or, preferably, a collaboration of practising artists working in any art form to develop their work in response to the natural environment of Tasmania.

(See Sue Lovegrove Maatsuyker – Island of the Mind

<http://www.bettgallery.com.au/artists/lovegrove/maatsuyker/index.htm>)

Currie Harbour Lighthouse and Buildings

Only the Lighthouse, the Original Head Keeper's Quarters, Stores Building and remnants of the Jetty survive and are among the oldest remaining structures on King Island. The tower comprises a circular wrought iron lantern supported by six tubular stays set on screw pile foundations.

The original Head Keepers Quarters are occupied by the King Island Historical Society as a museum. The Currie Harbour Lighthouse was completely recoated in 1983 with a zinc silicate chlorinated paint system replacing the old lead-based oleo-resinous system that had built up over the lighthouse's 100 year history. In 1992 both the steel and paintwork were reported to be in predominantly good condition although in need of maintenance painting. The store, original keeper's quarters and the modern assistant keeper's quarters were said to be in good condition in 1993. By August 2000 the general condition was said to be poor and rundown. (February 2002)

Cape Jaffa Lighthouse, South Australia

The Cape Jaffa Lighthouse, now located on shore at Kingston in the South East, is managed by the National Trust, and the former South Neptune Island Lighthouse, now located at Port Adelaide, are lighthouses open for public inspection. They form part of the [South Australian Maritime Museum](#).

Jarman Island Lighthouse, Western Australia

The lighthouse is a heritage listed structure and is built from cast iron. In 1999, a Conservation Plan, undertaken to be administered by The [National Trust](#) of Australia (W.A.) for the [Shire of Roebourne](#), deemed Jarman Island lighthouse to be *an element of 'exceptional' significance because of its importance as a landmark, architectural and technological importance, historical associations, and its relative intactness.*

The [Shire of Roebourne](#) has been awarded a \$75,000 grant under the [Australian Government's Regional Tourism Program](#) to conserve and restore the 19th century [Jarman Island Lighthouse](#).

http://www.roebourne.wa.gov.au/pdf/Jarman_Island_Interpretation_Plan.pdf

Wollongong lighthouse

Wollongong lighthouse, the 7th oldest in NSW, was constructed in 1872 and classified by the National Trust in 1977, after it was closed in 1974. The lighthouse was opened as a tourist attraction but fell into disrepair making it unsafe for public access in the mid 1980's.

There was a public outcry at calls for its demolition. In 1999/2000 funding of \$300,000 was approved for restoration of the lighthouse under the project management of the NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation.

The South Channel Pile Light (Vic)

After 125 years, the South Channel Pile Light has been restored and relocated to a safer location to assure its preservation as a piece of our maritime history.

<http://www.lighthouse.net.au/lights/VIC/South%20Channel%20Pile%20Light/South%20Channel%20Pile%20Light.htm#Preservation>

Smoky Cape, South West Rocks, NSW

Smoky Cape, South West Rocks sees a change of 'lighthouse keepers', on a lease arrangement, with the appointment of new lessees to operate the cottages as accommodation at this historic site run by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).

<http://www.seasidelights.com.au/au/nsw/smokycape.asp?fState=NSW>