

SHIPWRECKS & SAFE HAVENS

Cape Wickham Lighthouse 1861

“I suppose there are no lights in these waters so blest by sailors as the two upon King Island.”

WILLIAM HICKMOTT *Lighthouse keeper at Cape Wickham*

The treacherous waters of Bass Strait have claimed hundreds of ships and more than a thousand lives. “Thick weather”, strong currents and heavy seas have been cited at many an inquiry into shipwrecks on King Island.

Ever since the strait was charted by George Bass and Matthew Flinders in 1798, ships’ captains have preferred to risk the passage rather than make the longer journey around the southern coast of Tasmania. Many came to grief.

The need for a series of lighthouses was soon recognised. The Victorian government built the Cape Otway lighthouse in 1848, and there were calls for another light on King Island.

But there was continuing argument about where it should be sited, and who should pay for it. Fifty years before Australian federation, there was no existing mechanism for the sharing of such financial burdens among the states.

The Tasmanian government felt that they should not have to bear the cost of the lighthouse because they gained little benefit from it, and they held off until New South Wales and Victoria agreed to pay three-quarters of the cost.

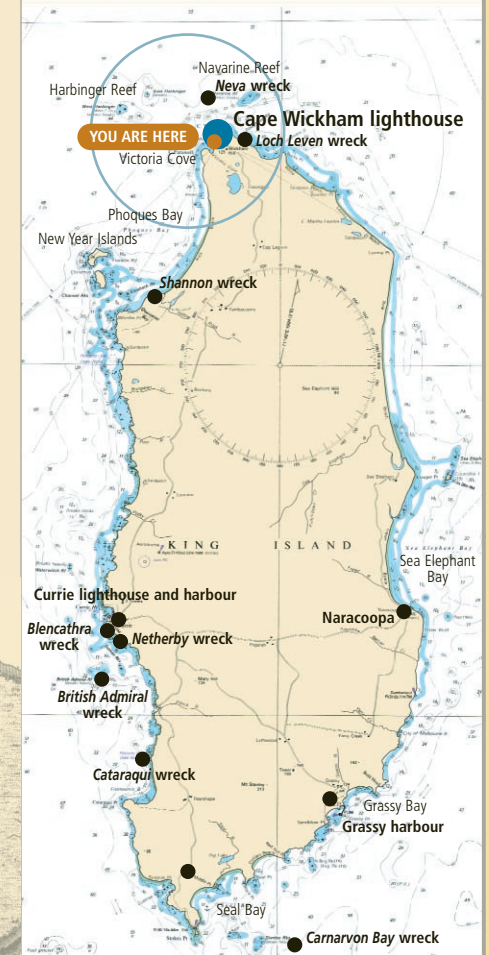
There was a high price for these years of inaction. In the time between the planning and the building of the lighthouse, a further nine ships were wrecked in the immediate vicinity.

Compounding the danger

Some of the delay in building the Cape Wickham lighthouse resulted from fears that it would cause more shipwrecks than it prevented. A lighthouse generally points the way to a safe passage, but this light had to perform the opposite function—to warn of present danger.

The established Cape Otway lighthouse on the Victorian coast had a revolving light, so to avoid confusion Cape Wickham’s was fixed. But in heavy seas, with waves breaking the horizon, it was easy enough to misread the signal. Many ship’s captains, thinking they were off Cape Otway, sailed straight onto King Island’s jagged coastline.

The *Arrow*, the *Anna*, the *Blencathra*... all made the same mistake. The danger only eased with the construction of the Currie lighthouse in 1879.



Above: Cape Wickham lighthouse in its early days, with Victoria Cove in the foreground. —AUSTRALASIAN SKETCHER 24 NOVEMBER 1877
 Top left: Detail from the wreck of the *Netherby*, as it appeared in the *Illustrated Australian News*, 27 August 1866. —LA TROBE PICTURE COLLECTION, STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA

In 1802, the French explorer Nicolas Baudin conducted a survey of King Island, naming features as he went. One of these was the Baie des Récifs (Bay of Reefs), destined to become a graveyard for ships over the next hundred years. —VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY TO THE SOUTHERN LANDS, 1811

A life of watchfulness and attention

Spare a thought for the keepers at Cape Wickham, manning the tallest lighthouse in the southern hemisphere. At the start of each shift they had to climb eleven flights of stairs, each with twenty steps.

Then there was the unloading of stores. The supply ship called every three months or so, and the men were required to row the surfboat out through the breakers to

collect them. Since their boat needed six men to handle these rough conditions, the entire lighthouse staff—including the superintendent—would have to pitch in.

This contravened the strict rule that the lighthouse must always have at least one keeper on hand. After all, if the surfboat were to capsize, the lighthouse would be left unmanned.

Eventually the superintendent was granted his request that another staff member be employed—but only if he personally paid half the man’s salary!

There were some perks to the job, however. William Hickmott, a keeper at Wickham during the 1860s, named the house he built ‘Loch Leven Castle’, after the shipwreck from which he obtained the timber.

Facts and figures

Position	Latitude 39°36’ south, longitude 143°57’ east	Range	24 nautical miles
Commenced operation	1 November 1861		
Height	44.2 metres (tallest in southern hemisphere); height above high water mark 85.4 metres		
Light	Large single wick lamp using sperm whale oil; wick needed trimming every 5 hours		
Lens	Fixed light catadioptric by Chance Brothers, Birmingham UK		
Signal	Originally fixed, now two quick flashes of 550,000 candelas intensity every 10 seconds		
Staffing	Originally a keeper and three assistants; automated 1918		



KING ISLAND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION