

SHIPWRECKS & SAFE HAVENS

Currie Lighthouse 1880

“People seem to have romantic notions about lighthouse keepers, but I’ve found nothing romantic about it. It’s a long way up that light at 2.00 am.”

COL COTTER *Lighthouse keeper, Currie*

When he retired in 1983 after 18 years at Currie, the late Col Cotter explained what attracted him about the lifestyle. “I took the job because of the benefits of being a lighthouse keeper, requiring a bit of initiative as well as being your own boss.”

Keepers and their families had to be self-sufficient in fresh food, so there were vegetable gardens to tend, and stock to care for. Other supplies arrived by ship only a few times a year, so you had to plan your needs very carefully.

But central to the job was tending that massive light, with all the responsibility it entailed. Keeper’s daughter Sheila Burn

remembers climbing up to see her father at work one night in the 1930s:

The inside of the lighthouse was dark and narrow. The stairway did not go straight up, but wound round and round spirally ... I did not dare look down; it was so deep and so dark: but with my eyes fixed upwards kept climbing... At last I reached the room where he sat beside the great light.

It was dazzlingly bright, and I was awestruck with the enormous plate glass windows revolving in opposite directions. At precise intervals they would meet and dim the light, then they would completely separate and the light would flash its brilliance far

out through the blackness of the night and across the sea.

Fascinated, I stood beside my father watching. Out there in the darkness and the storms, many mariners and their passengers looked to this light for guidance and safety. It was the lighthouse keeper’s duty to see that it never failed.

Lighthouses all around Australia have been converted to automatic operation, and there are no more job opportunities for keepers. Many people express nostalgia for a vanished lifestyle, but would YOU like to climb up the light at 2.00 am?

Another shining beacon

Even after the Cape Wickham lighthouse was built in 1861, the shipwrecks continued. Many ship’s captains mistook the Cape Wickham light for Cape Otway’s, causing them to sail straight onto the coast.

Currie lighthouse was planned to address the problem. It was positioned to be visible to ships approaching from the south-west, and to remain visible to the north until the

Cape Wickham light could be picked up. It was set to flash, to differentiate it from Cape Wickham’s fixed light.

After Currie lighthouse commenced operating in 1880, the number of shipwrecks did decrease. But no solution is perfect. In 1910 the skipper of the steel clipper *Carnarvon Bay* saw the Currie light and mistook it for Cape Otway—

he was clearly very far off course! Scrabbling to set a new course to round King Island to the south, he cut the passage too fine and struck a reef off Stokes Point.

Pictured above: Steamship at Currie harbour.
—QUEEN VICTORIA MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

Facts and figures

Position	Latitude 39°57’ south, longitude 140°51’ east	Range 17 nautical miles
Commenced operation	1 March 1880 (tower is stamped with date of construction in England, 1877)	
Height	21.3 metres; height above high water mark 48.8 metres	
Light	Oil-burning wick lamp	
Lens	Revolving catadioptric by Chance Brothers, Birmingham UK	
Signal	One 22,000 candela flash every 12 seconds	
Staffing	Originally a keeper and two assistants; automated after World War Two	

Read the instructions

When the Cape Wickham lighthouse was built, the contractors were delighted to discover an ample supply of stone nearby. No such luck for Currie’s lighthouse. Instead, a state-of-the-art iron structure was ordered from the English lighthouse experts, Chance Brothers in Birmingham. Because it could be shipped in prefabricated sections, it was an economical solution. The structure arrived in 312 pieces which were duly assembled.

There was one little hitch on ‘opening night’: the working drawings and details were nowhere to be found. Superintendent Howard’s entry in the log book read, “Felt a great want of the diagram which must have been taken away ... I had no instruction ... as to the management of the light and had to commence the duty under a great disadvantage but thank God everything went satisfactorily.”



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