

# BEACONS BY THE SEA

*Stories of Australian Lighthouses*

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF AUSTRALIA  
EDUCATION KIT



## 2. A Brief History



*Children playing games, Althorpe Island, SA, 1963 NAA: A1200, L43660*

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## STORIES OF AUSTRALIAN LIGHTHOUSES

Lighthouses have played a significant role in Australia's history. *Beacons by the Sea: Stories of Australian Lighthouses* is an exhibition based on the people who lived and worked in these coastal beacons and the dramatic events that took place around them.

### Lighthouses: federation, trade and travel

The lighthouse was often the first Australian landmark sighted by European colonists. For some, Australia was the sign of a new life, while for others, a sign of home. In the lead up to Federation, lighthouses and maritime issues were vital to the colonies.

Sea journeys would have been far more hazardous without the safety lighthouses provided. The gold rushes of 1850s saw a trebling of the ships coming to Australia and a marked increase in shipwrecks on the southeast coast of the continent. In response to this, an intercolonial conference was held in 1856 to make the 'sea highway' around Australia safer.

By the late 1800s states were anxious to transfer the responsibility and expense of maintaining lighthouses to the new Commonwealth. After 1901 maritime navigation and safety became a Commonwealth concern and the Commonwealth Lighthouse Service was formed. Lighthouses were so important they were written into the Constitution.

### Shipwrecks: rocks, reefs and rescuers

Many lighthouses mark the site of lost ships. Australia has seen 40 000 shipwrecks since British occupation in 1788. Before that, Dutch ships were wrecked off the coast of Western Australia on the way to Indonesia. Cape Wickham, Tasmania was often the first landfall a British ship encountered upon reaching the south of Australia. Its lights were sometimes mistaken for Cape Otway on the Victorian coast. Captains who wrongly steered their ships to the south instead of to the north were wrecked off King Island. The first recorded British maritime mishap was Captain Cook's *Endeavour*. It ran aground on the Great Barrier Reef in 1770.

Keeping the lights burning to guide and protect ships was a lighthouse keeper's main duty. While many keepers helped rescue people from shipwrecks, this was not their key responsibility. Keepers sometimes had to choose between leaving the light unattended and risking loss of the light and going to the aid of a ship in distress. Improved navigational aids such as global positioning systems, differential global positioning systems and computerised charts have relegated lighthouses to the position of a back-up system.

### Living in a lighthouse: personal stories of home and community

People who worked for the Commonwealth Lighthouse Service referred to it as working for 'the lights'. The Service excluded women, but through illness or absence of lighthouse keepers, their wives were known to have acted as temporary keepers. The lighthouse keeper's first duty was to keep the light working but he, along with his wife, had to be multi-skilled. A lighthouse keeper's duties included: cleaning the lens, washing down the sea spray, oiling the clockwork cables and weights to keep the lights turning, reporting on maritime weather, unloading stores, grass-cutting and collecting firewood. And there was always the painting.

Manned lighthouses were also called lighthomes. Australian lighthouse keepers, unlike those in Britain, brought their families to the lightstations. They did not live in the lighthouse building, but in a specially built cottage on the site. Usually the head keeper had a separate house and the assistant keepers had adjoined accommodation.

The stations, often in remote locations, formed tiny, unique communities. Lighthouse families grew fruit and vegetables, kept goats, chooks and cows, and caught fish, crab and lobster to

supplement the sometimes long-delayed supplies. Children had a unique but isolated life. Narelle Friebe, daughter of a lighthouse keeper on Montague Island in the 1960s, wrote:

*Our school days were Sunday to Thursday with correspondence lessons and the odd radio program. The rest of our days were spent exploring, fishing, bird and seal watching and collecting nautilus shells in season ...*

## Technology: towards automation

At its simplest, a lighthouse is a stick with a light on the end. The height of the 'stick' depends upon how far away the light needs to shine. The Australian lighthouse design comes from the classic British lighthouse – a tall tapered building built to resist wind and wave actions. Lighthouses have been made from such varied materials as corrugated iron, double brick, stone and reinforced concrete.

The distance the light travels depends on its design and the fuel that powers the light. At various times lighthouses have been powered by whale oil, coal oil, kerosene, acetylene, electricity and solar power. Earlier lights used a reflective surface to increase the brightness of the light. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the lights used prisms, which concentrated the beam and made it much brighter. From the mid-nineteenth century the Chance Brothers of Birmingham, Great Britain, provided much of the optical equipment in Australian lighthouses. They were able to supply a whole prefabricated lighthouse and assemble it on a chosen site.

From the beginning the aim of the Commonwealth Lighthouse Service in Australia was to make lighthouses automated. This was the cheapest way to light the coastline. Originally manned lighthouses needed three keepers. Over the years, as technological advances saw more automation introduced into lighthouses, there was less and less need for lighthouse keepers. As Stan Gray, the lighthouse keeper of Deal Island Lighthouse (1977–92), put it: 'Lost me my job, technology did'. The last lighthouse keeper left his station in 1996.

## Lighthouses: heritage sites and tourist destinations

For most of the twentieth century, lighthouses were managed on a national basis. They operated under centralised rules and regulations. Over the last decade the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) has transferred all Commonwealth lightstation properties to the States. AMSA leases the towers back from the individual States to manage the navigational lights. People still live in lightstations which are either managed by State departments or by private operators who often open the site for visitors. The Register of the National Estate now includes as many as 65 lightstations. Organisations have been formed to restore decommissioned lighthouses and record the history of the structure and the people who lived and worked in them.

Lighthouses are among Australia's top tourist destinations and have become part of our cultural heritage. Lighthouse keeper's quarters have been converted into tourist accommodation and several 'lighthouse to lighthouse' walks have been established in national parks. Community consultation is now a feature in the management and use of the sites. This includes people who have associations with the lightstations, Indigenous people who have traditional links to the lands where lights are located, heritage bodies, local governments, scientists and people who have a general interest in the lightstation's changed functions.

## Beacons of light: cultural symbols and icons

Lighthouses have come to symbolise a diverse range of things including safety, security, resilience, strength, romance, tourism and history. They are intimately linked with Australia's maritime history. The popularity of lighthouses in Australian culture is reflected by their frequent use in logos, commercials and trademarks, as well as for the setting of novels and the subject of newspaper articles. Collectables range from the kitsch to high art.