Aspects of Station Life

Water [262]

The water system for Cape Brett originally provided each house with a 25,000 litre concrete tank and an 1800 litre washhouse tank. Additional tanks around the station had a capacity of 1800 litre each and were located at the school, lighthouse, signal hut and on the tramway. A tank was also provided for stock. Hot water systems were not installed in the houses until January 1944 after one was installed for the Navy. Originally the only water was rain water fed into the tanks.

The Navy sourced water from a stream in Pig Gully when building the radar station and installed a pump house that would take the water to the reservoir at the top of the hill. When the Navy abandoned the station the Marine Department took over the system. In the following decades the pump house became expensive to maintain. Problems with the pipes rusting, leaking and clogging were frequent and the posts that held up the pipes rotted and required replacing. To keep the motor running in the pump house the keepers had to cart diesel the mile from the station every week.

Dry spells during summer often saw the tanks around the station dry up. On one occasion they were so low that there was only a few days of fresh water left - and the pump had stopped working and the spouting on the houses was full of holes. When the Navy was present personnel would often run out of water — the keepers blamed the flushing toilet — and would have to use lighthouse settlement supplies.[263] The Navy would then replace the supply, in one case filling old oil drums with water. The Navy boys then had to deal with an oil contaminated water tank; the keepers however had sensibly not filled their tanks from the drums.

In 1959 the principal keeper managed to requisition a 1000ft plastic hose so he could water the vegetable garden at the top of the hill from the ex-Navy water tank.

Power

The houses originally had no power, so candle or lanterns were used for lighting. Meals were cooked on the coal range and food was stored without refrigeration. In the 1940s the department upgraded the appliances after complaints from the keepers' wives.[264] The department installed new hot-water stoves — enamelled in a colour of the lady's choice — and a family-sized, kerosene-powered fridge for each house.[265]

The upgraded signal hut and radar stations were both operated using diesel electric motors.[266] It wasn't until 1955 that the lighthouse was converted from kerosene to operate on diesel electric power.[267] In 1968 the station was connected to the national grid and the lighthouse and houses went electric.[268]

Transport

The most popular method of transport at Cape Brett was boat. Keepers originally moved between stations on the Government steamers and whatever boat was available was used to get to Russell for any appointments.

The track to Deep Water Cove/Rawhiti was popular if weather was rough, or in an emergency. When the Navy station needed a new motor to operate the radar during a

storm they had to take turns at carrying it on poles on the slippery track back to the station from Deep Water Cove.[269]

Helicopters were used in the 1960s and 70s to transport some of the Marine Department's technical specialists. Helicopters were also used to place the lighthouse power poles, to move large objects from the landing to the top of the hill and to build the helipad at the lighthouse.

Figure 146 – A helicopter ferrying items to the top of the hill.

Figure 147 - The new helipad, 1970s.

Food and Stores

Ordering and receiving stores for the keepers did not change very much over the station's 68 year operation. Each family had a catalogue filled with all the items a keeper could possibly want. Each item was assigned a number to be written on the order form along with the quantity needed of the item (ie 3 cans or 25oz). Mistakes often happened, with one family at another lighthouse inadvertently ordering a 14 year supply of matches and another ending up with a four gallon container of cashew nuts.[270]

To begin with the ordered stores were delivered every four months. The stores were delivered by the Government steamers on their Northern lighthouse tour.
Between the 1940s and 1970s this increased to roughly every month/three weeks or fortnight depending on the contractors and costs.

During one delivery in the 1970s the Proebstels had ordered ice-cream in two gallon and four gallon containers. While the ice-cream was in the crane's basket something snapped sending the ice-cream into the ocean. The children quickly raced to retrieve bowls and spoons, the ice-cream was fished out of the water and then immediately consumed — it would not refreeze with all the salt in it.[271]

Figure 148 – Offloading stores, 1932.

The keepers were generally expected to produce their own fresh produce and the houses at Cape Brett all had their own vegetable gardens, as well as the communal garden. Farm animals were kept for milk, eggs and meat. The wives baked bread and would preserve meat before the stations received freezers.

Noel Proebstel was also one of many who brewed his own lager. Noel's was called 'Lighthouse Lager.' It was said to have been a 'beautiful brew, light, clear, with good fluffy head and no after effects.'[272]

Figure 149 - Jack Saunders rowing the fortnightly mail and stores ashore from the *Alice*.

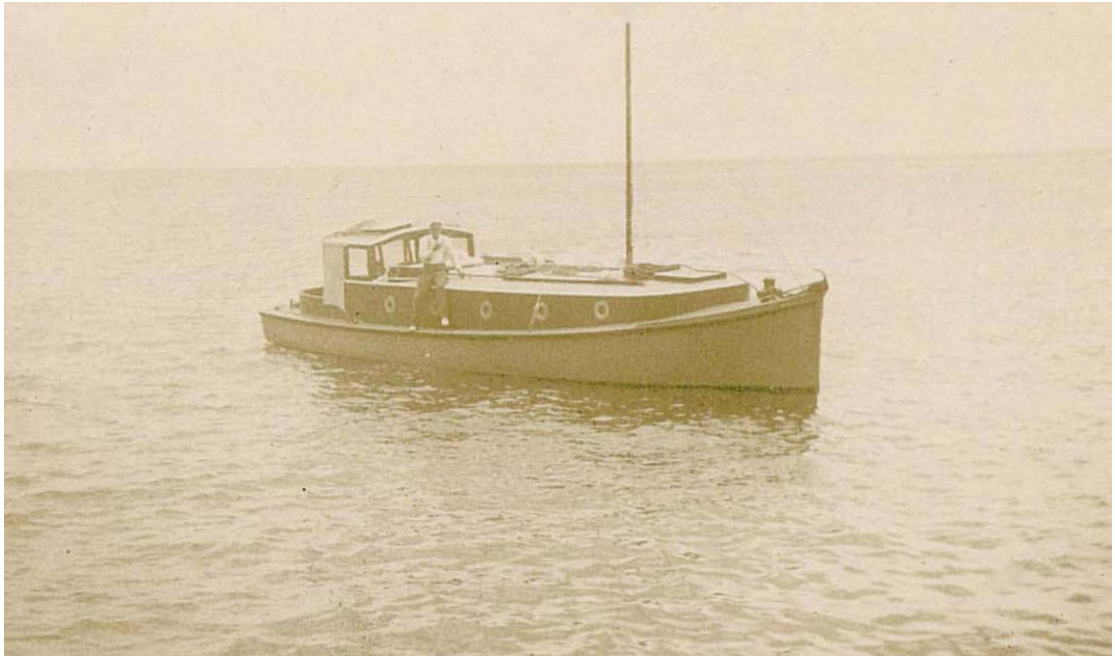


Figure 150 - *Alice* — One of the mail launches.

Mail

Getting mail to the Cape was initially quite an achievement. From the station's construction mail was delivered by several different methods, the most taxing of which was the trip from Rawhiti.

Figure 151 - The Government Life Insurance Department's Cape Brett stamp.

Rewiri Ahu Tapu accepted the role of postmaster when the post office opened in Rawhiti's schoolhouse in 1905.[273] A man of slight build, Rewiri had his hands full with the mail run. His day would start with the row to Oneroa to collect the mail from Russell, back to Rawhiti to sort, after which he would have to row out to the Cape. During rough weather Rewiri would deliver the mail to the Cape on horseback. Rewiri continued his run until he died on 23 May 1917.

The post office subcontracted the Cape Brett mail run to Harry Fuller after Rewiri's death. Fuller in *Phyllis* delivered the mail weekly until 1926 when the Marine Department delivered the mail with the stores trip.[274] This continued until the 1940s when the trips were divided between the *Tainui*, the Fuller's launch and the Meynall's launch.[275]

The Cape had its own post office —in the principal keeper's office — and postmasters. The station also had its own franking stamp and when the *Government Life Insurance* lighthouse stamp series was released in March 1962 it had its own postage stamp.

The earliest piece of mail remaining from Cape Brett is a postcard sent from Bakewell, England to John Clark at Cape Brett via Russell dated 23 April 1909.

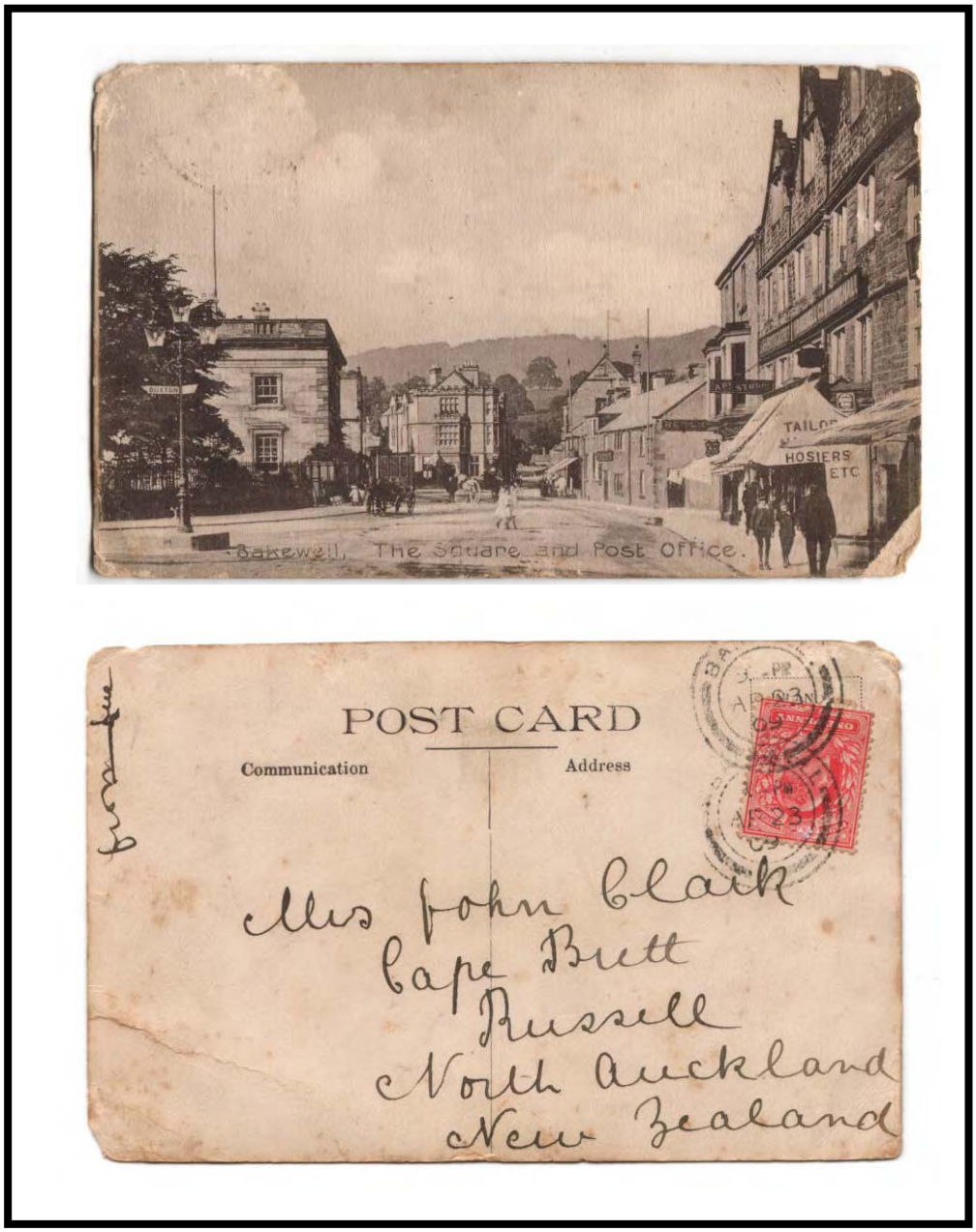


Figure 152 – Postcard to John Clark, postmarked 23 April 1909.

Communications

There were many ways the station kept in touch with the outside world. These included:

- Radiotelephone
- Telegram
- VHF equipment
- Telephone
- Signalling
- Letters

These methods of communication all seem to have been established during construction. The telephone line came sometime between 1910 and 1935 and ran from Rawhiti to the station. The shared line, known as a party line, was also used by the Deep Water Cove settlement and others living on the peninsula.

The telegraph line ran from Russell to Cape Brett, at one point splitting for a line for the Whangamumu whaling station. This ran both above ground and underwater utilising the quickest, reasonable route between the two places.

Signalling was conducted from the signal hut and involved using the flags and signal mast. The keepers were often asked, early on, to relay messages between the ships and the shipping companies and would do so using the flags.

Strict rules governed the communication methods, dictating how they where to be used and etiquette. For most of the equipment, including the phone, licences were supposed to be held. However all the keepers' wives and children were taught how to use the telephone and radio equipment in case of emergency.

The Weather

Meteorological Service

Because many of the lighthouse locations around New Zealand were in exposed places they often made the best weather stations. The meteorological office of the Department of Science and Industrial Research established weather recording sites at 14 stations, including Cape Brett.[276] The relevant gadgets were set up around the station with the permission of the Marine Department and keepers were expected to provide regular forecasts.

In 1956 the keepers were reporting the weather three times a day. In the 1960s they had to report the weather statistics to the Auckland weather office seven times a day, about every three hours (0000hrs; 0300; 0600; 0900; 1200; 1500; 1800 NZST).[277] They would report the wind speed and direction, sea conditions, rainfall, amount and grouping of clouds and the barometric readings.[278] The keeper used both the phone and the radio-telephone (RT) system to report the weather to the Auckland office.[279] By 1974 they were reporting four times a day (at 0600; 0900, 1800, 2100).[280] The equipment installed included a barometer (used to measure atmospheric pressure) and a barograph (which makes a graph of atmospheric pressure) kept in either the tower or the principal keeper's office.[281] The keepers also used the lighthouse wind vane, a set of New Zealand aviation cloud charts (so they could identify the different types of cloud formations which indicated weather patterns) and thermometers.[282] The automation of the light and withdrawal of keepers from Cape Brett put a stop to the human reporting. An automated weather station was installed and information was read by telephone.[283]

Storms[284]

Storms at Cape Brett didn't need to be very intense to have a huge affect on the operations of the station. Because the landing is quite exposed even a small ocean swell could prevent people and supplies from being dropped off by boat, effectively cutting off the station. It was when both the swell and wind got up that the real problems occurred.

In 1916 the Marine Department opened a 'Storm Damage' file at their head office specifically to file all the weather related damage reports they received from keepers.[285] The first storm damage reported by keeper Cameron was the result of a gale of unreported strength hitting the Cape on 4 August 1916. The crane was

damaged, with the main support post snapped in half. Any objects tied down on the landing were washed away, including the station boat.[286] During this storm the waves were said to have come up the tramway – halfway up to the stores shed (roughly 20m).[287]

A total of 11 storms were recorded in the file and the strongest winds were estimated to have occurred during the storms of 5 December 1952 and 14-15 August 1954.[288] The largest wave reported is estimated to have broken over the principal keeper's house – 43 metres above sea level.[289] When he reported this he was not believed but once the next keeper had experienced similar waves the scepticism quickly vanished.[290]

The bad weather that produced the largest wave occurred between the 28 February and 1 March 1951. The principal keeper's story was as follows:
'[He] awakened at 2.30am to a crash of water on the roof and windows, on going outside the place was flooded with sea water, the waves were breaking occasionally over [his] house (131ft above MSL). The crane and landing were out of sight under water most of the time.'[291]

Figure 153 - A small swell down at the landing, 1969.

Damage done to the station mostly consisted of the roofs being blown off the small sheds and houses, or small sheds being blown over completely. The damage most reported was always to the fences around the houses. They were blown over or off the cliff or severely damage during seven of these storms. The fowl houses were often victims of the storms and during five lost their roofs, were blown over, off the cliff or scattered around the station. The telephone wires were equally damaged (both the line between Russell and those between the lighthouse and houses). The crane was damaged during four storms and during early May 1924 the gale and seas were so vicious they completely demolished the crane, ripping it off of the concrete it was bolted to (see Figure 157).

Figure 154 - The waves during a 1978 storm with the cow bail in the foreground.

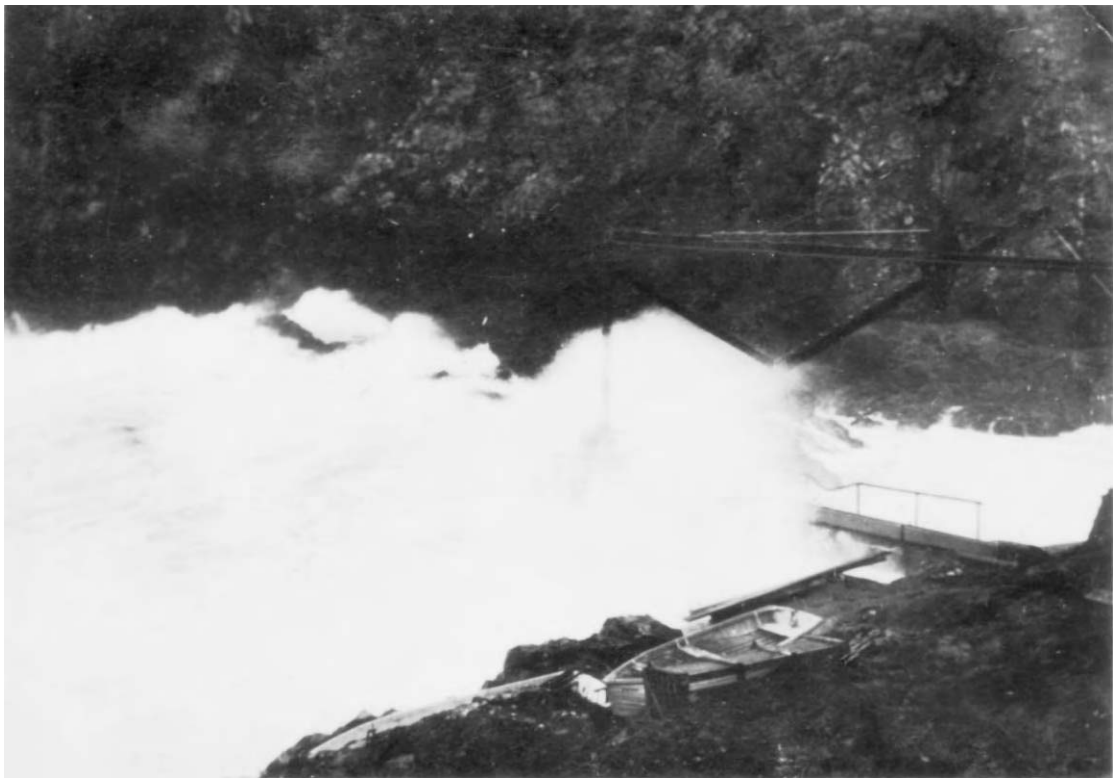


Figure 155 - The landing during a 1940s storm, note the dinghy lashed down.

Figure 156 - One of the fowl houses after a storm, 1940s.

Figure 157 – The landing after a storm had washed the crane away, August 1924.

The tower also suffered damage especially when the winds were so strong that they would hurl stones at the structure, chipping the paint. Some of the smaller windows (not the light panes) were smashed by the wind on different occasions. The station also lost its official dinghy twice, because of waves, and both times the keepers were growled at by the Marine Department.

A major issue during and after a storm was that if the seas were too heavy, salt spray contaminated the station's water supply. The spray would also cover the station, killing off grass and destroying the vegetable gardens.

Storm damage often took a long time to repair, either because it had to be added to the keepers' regular work programme or because the damage was severe. There were also

many times when they had either not had time - or had only just finished repairs - when the next big storm would blow through, causing even more damage. One such occasion was in 1954, with the first storm hitting on 30 July lasting till 1 August, and the second arriving two weeks later on 14 and 15 August. The first was an ES Easterly with gale force winds and heavy seas. The second was a NW Northerly with winds of 97km/hr and heavy seas. The first storm damaged the copper spouting removing it in most places. During the next few days it was repaired and/or replaced, but during the second storm all the keepers' hard work was undone when the storm ripped off most of the repaired spouting.

Some of the worst storm damage included the 'tearing up' of the bottom of the tramway (see Figure 158).[292] The note that accompanied the photo was as follows: *'To the Secretary - A view of the Tramline taken about 8 hours after the mountainous seas had decreased, showing the damaged line where it was tossed about by seas.'*[293] Figure 158 shows the iron rails of the tramway bent and twisted. The upper section of the tramway in the photo is also covered in rock debris and most of the wooden slats have been ripped up. This was the same storm that swept away the crane and removed a section of the concrete pad of the landing.

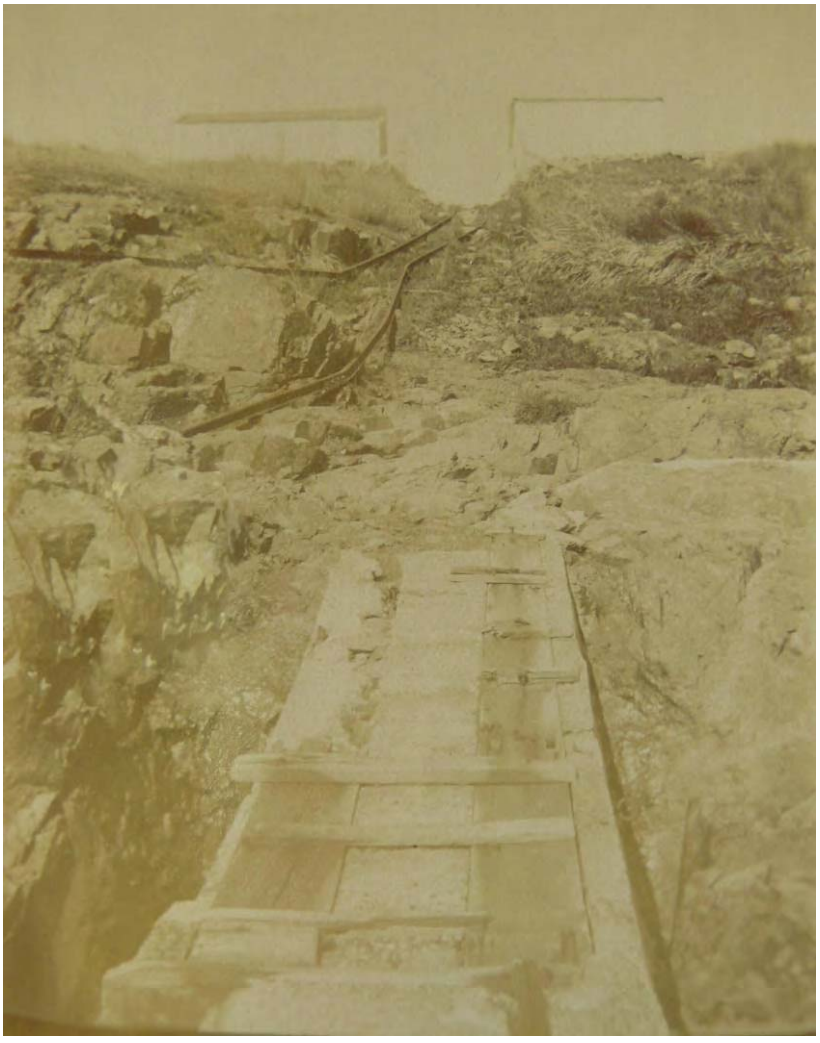


Figure 158 – Damage done to the tramway after a particularly rough storm, June 1943.

Storms continue to damage the station even today. During the winter storms of 2008 wave action damaged the landing, bashing out a section of the concrete (see Figure 159). This storm also swept away most of the safety rails that had been concreted into the landing. The tramway also sustained some minor damage with a small section of concrete being swept away.

Figure 159 – The landing being inspected by Ranger Grant Oakes after the storms of 2008.

The Cape is open to significant amounts of bad weather, but equally experiences some magnificent clear days. On average by 1967 Cape Brett had an average rainfall of 30 inches (762 millimeters).[294]

Figure 160 - The tower on a summer's day, December 2007.

Rescue Services

The remote location of New Zealand's lighthouses meant they were often in advantageous positions to aid the national Sea Air and Search Organisation. Keepers could literally keep an eye out for missing boats, yachts and ships off the coast. The stations were also equipped early on with radios, primarily to contact the Marine Department, and ordered to maintain a listening watch.[295] Useful too were the notes that keepers had to record on movements of ships during the 1900s.[296]

One particular case where the Cape keepers helped in a small search and rescue operation was during the *Wahine* storm when tropical cyclone Giselle hit New Zealand in 1968. The keepers were asked to watch for a yacht that had sailed out of the shelter of the Bay, so they spent their night watching for flares.[297] The next morning the keepers were told of the yacht's rescue by the Navy.[298]

Health Care

Routine healthcare was readily available off the station. For medical emergencies a doctor, dentist or nurse would travel — often in extreme conditions — to the Cape. The Marine Department seems to have preferred births to take place in hospital at the expense of the keeper, and for all other appointments to be attended on the keepers' vacation days.

There are several stories still floating around relating to different incidents and illnesses that affected the inhabitants of Cape Brett station.

[299] One of the earliest comes from Eric Creamer (son of the first assistant. 1912-14) who was seriously injured when playing around the tramway trolley when he was around seven years old in 1913-14. He was 'helping' his father at the dobbin to bring the wire (attached to the trolley) up the tramway when his fingers jammed between the rope and pulley. His version of events is as follows:

'I had of course to release my hold on the wire before the pulley was reached and I succeeded in doing this for quite some time, but perhaps success made me a little overconfident because a time came when I saw – and felt – the first and second fingers of my right hand ... begin to vanish between rope and pulley. I gave a mighty yell and a mighty pull and then stood looking in stunned surprise at the blood streaming from my two mangled fingers. The wire rope ceased moving and presently my father came hastening down. He took the situation in at a glance, grasped me tightly by the wrist and obtained a short explanation and escorted me down the hill.'[300]

Eric's fingers were put into finger stalls, apparently by his father who was in contact with the Russell doctor by phone, and both fingers remained immobilised for several months. He understandably experienced intense pain, which continued for several years. When they did start to heal it was found that the wound had closed with lint inside it – this resulted in the second assistant keeper (Mr Pearce) having to cut the lint out. To do this Eric was handed a glass or brandy and water to drink to mask the pain, but it was unneeded as he ended up passing out instead.

This is one example of how injuries were dealt with by keepers who weren't provided with official first aid skills until the 1960s.[301] The Creamer family was also the first to go through a natural birth on the station, aided by the family's good friend Nurse Currie (in her starched white uniform).[302] Another birth that occurred in the early 1960s was that of the Sears' daughter (see Figure 128 above). The Fuller's fishing launch of the time transported Dr Citrine and the District Nurse Sister Tulloch out to the Cape for the station's most dramatic birth. It wasn't until 1967 that the Marine Department began to provide funding for up to three ante-natal treatment trips, and the refund for one post-natal visit on the advice of medical practitioner, with the option for a doctor to visit the station.[303]

The illness-afflicted Keeper and Mrs Thwaites were sent to Kawakawa Hospital for immediate medical attention due to the seriousness of their disease. The Thwaites were unfortunately infected with tuberculosis (*tubercle bacillus*) a serious infectious disease that was easily spread at a time when New Zealand was not performing mass vaccinations (the outbreak didn't until the end of World War 2).[304] The keepers' handling of this illness was appropriate for their skill level and they did the best they could by having the Thwaites transported to Kawakawa.

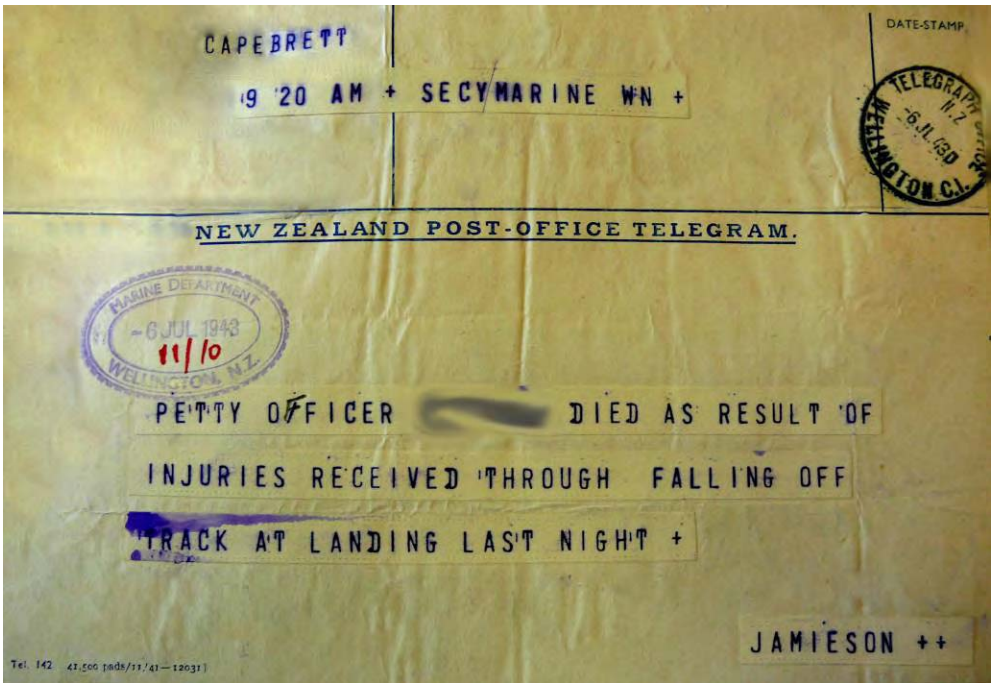
During late April 1941 Mabel Pollock's father wrote her a letter detailing the spread of the flu around the station:
'. . . Hope this finds you all well, we've had enough sickness the last few days to last us for years. All hands have been sick with flu except Mrs Todd & the signalmen & myself. Barbara was bad first then Mrs Webley, then Mum, Winnie, Davy & Anne then Mr Webley then Mr Todd. Davy was very bad, so was Mum. The youngsters all went playing up the hill today, they seemed all right, but Winnie soon came home & went to bed looking pretty bad. Old Mr Carter had it bad too & was in bed for 2 or 3 days…'[305]

Living in such conditions definitely would have promoted the spread of some of the more common ills. During the war the naval personnel were also said to have bought in diseases such as measles which the children had probably not previously been exposed to.[306]

From around the 1950s the District Nurse began making regularly scheduled trips to give the children inoculations and provide advice on other health matters.[307] The quickest way to get medical advice was via the radio or telephone party line to talk to a health professional.

There was one particularly sad incident, often debated, said to have occurred in July 1943 during the operation of the signal and radar station.

It is told that one night a young naval rating was at the landing for some reason and he fell to the rocks below. Some say he died instantly, others say he was put onto the boat to be taken to hospital but died on the trip, and others say he survived the trip but died in hospital. The only hard evidence we have for the incident is a simple telegram sent by the principal keeper, Hugh Jamieson, to the Marine Department stating that the Petty Officer had died of injuries after he fell from the landing.[308] Death was an unfortunate part of life out at the Cape.


CAPE BRETT

9 20 AM + SECY MARINE WN +

DATE-STAMP

TELEGRAPH 6 JUL 1943 WELLINGTON C.1.

NEW ZEALAND POST-OFFICE TELEGRAM.

MARINE DEPARTMENT 6 JUL 1943 WELLINGTON, N.Z.

11/10

PETTY OFFICER [redacted] DIED AS RESULT OF

INJURIES RECEIVED THROUGH FALLING OFF

TRACK AT LANDING LAST NIGHT +

JAMIESON ++

Tel. 142 43,500 pads/11/41—12031

Figure 161 – Jamieson's memo to the Marine Department – Name of Petty Officer removed.

Dental visits and any scheduled medical appointments normally involved a few days offsite. There was only one case where the dentist had to come out to the Cape. It is unknown when exactly this was but apparently one of the keepers had a severe toothache so the *Tainui* transported Russell's retired dentist to the station.[309] Now the dentist had a wooden leg and therefore was unable to go any further than the rocks below the landing. So everyone came down to view the tooth extraction.[310] The dentist's chair consisted of a banana box and as anaesthetic the use of a dead stingray was attempted.[311] Why a smelly stingray wing being hung from the crane was considered a viable anaesthetic is not known, but in the end cocaine was used.[312] As the tooth was pulled out with a great yell from the keeper, a wave broke over the platform soaking everyone involved.[313]

School life

For the lighthouse children there were at least three different ways to experience school. Two were through the Auckland Education Board which did its best to provide the teachers and necessary equipment. Option three was the Correspondence School of New Zealand.

In the Classroom

The school at Cape Brett was open for three periods:

- March 1931 to December 1935
- July 1937 to May 1941
- March 1944 to December 1944

The opening of the school relied heavily on the presence of enough primary school age children (5-6 to 13-14) to warrant a teacher. The number of children needed was between seven and 10 and if there were more than 10 a better quality of teacher was provided. The school followed the standard three term structure with holidays in May

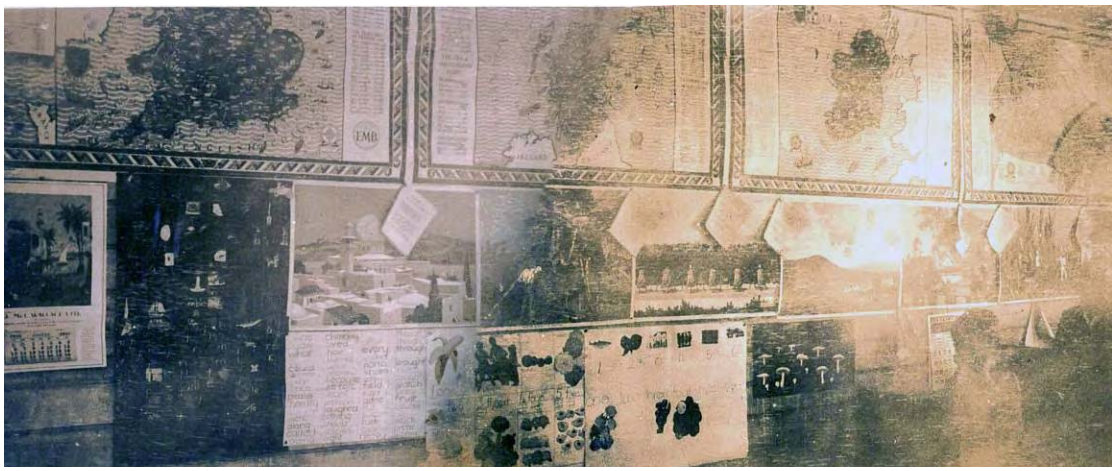


Figure 162 - The walls of the schoolroom, 1932-33.

and late August. The only thing that set this lighthouse school apart was when the holidays were shifted to fit in with the closest mail trip of the month so that the teacher had the opportunity to get to Russell for a break from the children.[314]

Life at the school would have been like any other country school around New Zealand. Mixed age classes were standard with all the children's learning being structured to their year level. Students were expected to be at their desks at 9am for attendance to be taken, there were the usual morning, afternoon tea and lunch breaks (when the children could be seen on the playground) and school finished at 3pm.[315]

Subjects taught included English, arithmetic, geography, history, science and drawing.[316] The children had to sit their exams and school report cards were sent home just like in any other school in New Zealand.[317]

Figure 163 – The children and their teacher during school hours, between 1937-41.

Figure 164 – One of the Tennent boys 'playing shop' in the schoolroom.

Corporal punishment was also a feature at the school (and not unexpected due to the time the school operated) with the 'corporal punishment register' being filled in for the year 1934 by teacher Mr Atkinson.[318] The children would receive one or two of whatever punishment method was being used for either producing poor work, disturbing the class, not doing homework, cheating and so on.[319]

The playground for the school was not a flat rugby field, but a small valley area just outside the school's door. This made for interesting twists to the standard school yard games, such as "Rounders." At Cape Brett this required more skill than strength because if you hit the ball as far as you could the ball was likely to go into the ocean.[320] The rules for the game were also set so that if the ball was hit over the fence the team was out but off the cliff and everybody was out.[321] The playground also featured a stream lined with toi toi that ran through the middle whenever it rained.[322]

Boarding School

When the children reached the third form (now Year 9) the best option for their education was often boarding school. The settlement's closest options would have been in Whangarei. The girls were often sent to Whangarei Girls High while the boys went to Whangarei Boys High. The teenagers often returned home during the holidays. Because of the expense involved in sending children to boarding school and the lack of other options available, the Marine Department provided a small subsidy in 1923. By the 1970s this increased to 80% of the annual boarding fee.[323]

Correspondence

The Correspondence School of New Zealand was always available for young children. The school was established in 1922 for primary aged children, though it wasn't till 1940 the courses were available to secondary school pupils.[324] In 1955 the school was featured in the film 'A Letter to the Teacher' that also showed the pupils at Cape Brett at their desks doing their school work. The film was later admitted to the Berlin Film Festival.[325] Once it became clear that the school would not reopen modifications were made to the kitchens in the first and second houses to accommodate the children's work area.[326]

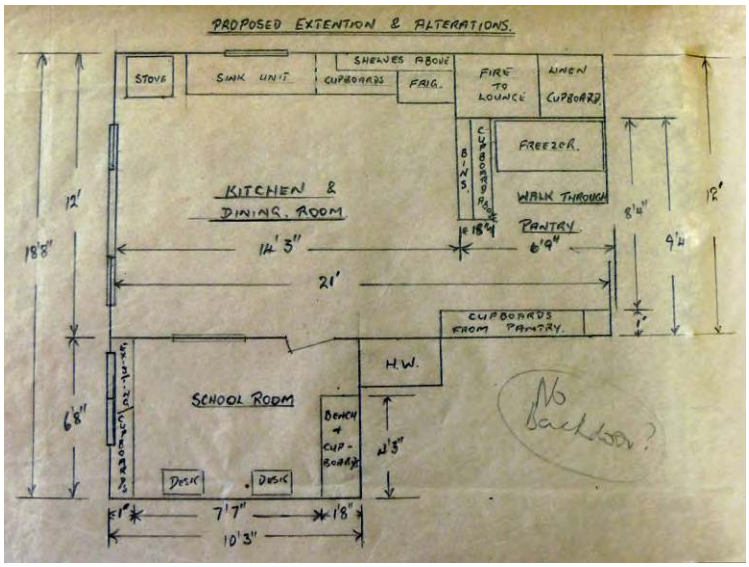


Figure 165 – Plan showing the proposed alterations to house one to add schoolroom.

The children had set hours for their school work and would generally start at 8.30am and work until midday so that their afternoons were free for either swimming or fishing.[327] The children's lessons arrived by mail and, at least during the 1970s, a teacher would visit the pupils twice a year – weather permitting.[328] Every two weeks the pupils received approximately 15 to 20 sets of lessons, plus any additional materials needed for the subjects assigned.[329]

An interview with Joy Proebstel from 1973 shows that the switch to the correspondence school put a large amount of pressure on the mothers who were expected to teach their children.[330] Joy told how her day involved juggling the children's school work with her regular cooking, washing and other household duties. However, she was very positive about how it helped her to understand how well her children were doing in school.[331] The article also commented on how advanced and independent most of the children enrolled at the school actually were as they didn't have to wait for other classmates to catch up or stick to the set 9am till 3pm days.[332]

Figure 166 – Joy helping her children with their correspondence work.