

Matiu/Somes Island lighthouse

There has been a lighthouse on the southern end of Matiu/Somes Island since 1866. The present tower is the second at this site.

Published by
Science & Research Unit
Department of Conservation
P.O. Box 10-420
Wellington
March 2001

Text by Tony Walton

1866—a lighthouse for Matiu/Somes Island

Increasing numbers of ships entering Wellington Harbour in the mid 19th century resulted in the establishment of a lighthouse at Pencarrow Head in 1859. It soon became apparent that a further light within the harbour itself was needed for safe navigation and Somes Island was selected as the most suitable location. A 14 foot high cast-iron tower and a lantern were im-

ported from Britain and the light entered operation on 17 February 1866. At that time it was one of only eight lighthouses in the country. It was the first inner harbour lighthouse and showed a fixed white light down the centre of the channel and red or green light to either side. Light was generated by burning colza (rape-seed) oil until about 1878 when paraffin oil (kerosene) was introduced.



Figure 1. Lighthouse settlement in 1886 with first lighthouse tower centre left and lighthouse keepers' cottage on the right. Shed showing far left was in the bay below the settlement. (E.R. Williams Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library National Library of New Zealand, Te Puna Matauranga o Aotearoa, G- 25715-1/1 -)



Figure 2. Lighthouse settlement in the 1910s showing current tower. A tramway runs from shed (to right of tower) to bay below. (Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Te Puna Matauranga o Aotearoa, F- 112225- 1/2 -)



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

1900—a new, more powerful, light

By 1895, there were numerous complaints that a stronger light was needed, so that it could be seen further out to sea. This required a new tower and equipment. Built next to the existing tower, which was later removed, the new lighthouse entered service on 21 February 1900. The new light was visible for 16 miles but the more powerful light used more paraffin oil and consumption rose from just over 200 gallons per annum in the 1890s to between 600 and 800 gallons per annum in the 1900s and 1910s. An incandescent burner, which vaporised oil under pressure and increased the amount of light generated from a given amount of fuel, was installed in the 1910s.

TABLE 1. PRINCIPAL AND ASSISTANT KEEPERS 1866-1910.
(Source: National Archives. ML-Appendix 3, Lighthouse Keepers' Service compiled by J.H. Christie.)

NAME	POSITION AND SERVICE PERIOD
Lyall, William	Principal Keeper 1866-1871
Buckridge, Robert	Principal Keeper 1871-1874
Achison, William	Principal Keeper 1874-1882, 1885-1910
Connell, Alex	Principal Keeper 1883-1885
Arnold, William J.	Principal Keeper from 1910
Achison, William	Assistant Keeper 1871-1874
Long, George	Assistant Keeper 1874-1877
McGowan, Alexander J.	Assistant Keeper 1877
Wilson, Edward	Assistant Keeper 1877-1878
Marsh, John	Assistant Keeper 1878-1883
Scollay, Daniel	Assistant Keeper 1883-1884
Davis, Charles	Assistant Keeper 1884-1886
Dawson, Duncan	Assistant Keeper 1886-1888
Runge, Richard	Assistant Keeper 1888-1889
Cheel, William	Assistant Keeper 1889-1890
McCartney, George	Assistant Keeper 1890-1891
Anderson, James	Assistant Keeper 1891
McKinna, John	Assistant Keeper 1891
Sinclair, Jerome	Assistant Keeper 1891-1892
Fletcher, Arthur	Assistant Keeper 1892-1897
Ross, William	Assistant Keeper 1897-1900
Parks, Edward M.	Assistant Keeper 1901-1905
Simpson, George J.	Assistant Keeper 1905-1906
Whymark, Alfred G.	Assistant Keeper 1906-1908
Jones, Robert S.	Assistant Keeper 1908-1910
Maltus, Percy	Assistant Keeper from 1910

By 1900 there were 45 coastal and harbour lights in commission throughout New Zealand.

Looking after the light

The Wellington Provincial Government was responsible for the light until 1874. The Marine Department then took over until 1923 when the responsibility was transferred to the Wellington Harbour Board. The light is still operational and is now run by the Wellington Regional Council.

Keepers were employed to operate the lighthouse from 1866 to 1924. The first keeper was William Lyall but the longest serving was William Achison (b. 1845). Except for a brief spell in the early 1880s he served on the island from 1871 to 1910. In the 1890s, wages to operate the light cost about £150 per annum. Principal Keepers and Assistant Keepers from 1866 to 1910 are listed in Table 1. Keepers, with their families, lived in a six-room cottage next to the lighthouse. Old photographs (Figures 1 and 2) show the lighthouse, the settlement, and the setting.

Supplies, including fuel, were landed in the bay below the lighthouse and a tramway was used to haul them up to the lighthouse. In 1924 the light was converted to use acetone acetylene as a fuel and was automated. After World War II it was converted to electricity.

What now remains?

The buildings of the lighthouse settlement were removed after the light was automated in 1924 but some traces still remain, including the terraces cut to provide level ground for the cottages and other buildings. The area was planted with native trees and shrubs during the 1980s so the terraces are now largely hidden from view.