



Lighthouses of New Zealand LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS

LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS

WHEN DUTY CALLS

*"Sail on!" it says: "sail on, ye stately ships!
And with your floating bridge the ocean span;
Be mine to guard this light from all eclipse.
Be yours to bring man nearer unto man."*
From 'The Lighthouse' by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

The New Zealand Lighthouse Service, the first government department responsible for our lighthouses and their keepers, was established seven years after the first light was built here. It was modelled closely on its Scottish equivalent. In 1886 a publication, *Instructions to Lighthouse Keepers* was issued, outlining everything from criteria for becoming a keeper, to how keepers were expected to run their homes on the lighthouse stations.

The requirements for entering the light service stipulated males between the ages of 21 and 31 with a 'Certificate of Character', and a certificate from a state school on the applicant's ability to read and write and their "fair" knowledge of arithmetic. Lighthouse keepers were expected to be "... *sober and industrious, cleanly in their persons and habits and orderly in their families. Any flagrant immorality will subject them to immediate dismissal.*"

Over the years these requirements altered only slightly. The final edition of the handbook stated men between 24 and 40, with at least two years secondary education could qualify, and "*an applicant should have above average handyman abilities.*"

Throughout the 150 years of lightkeeping in New Zealand, the policy remained in favour of married men joining the service. Single men could apply for positions as relieving keepers, but needed to be married before being appointed to a permanent station.

The instructions stated: "*It is essential for the applicant, his wife and family to be physically, mentally and dentally healthy, and that the husband does not have defect of vision nor colour-blindness.*"

Before electricity the lighthouses had to be staffed 24 hours a day, so most stations would have two or three keepers on shift work. While this usually equated to a standard 40 hour week, they were on call at all times, and could not leave the station for more than a few hours.

The keepers' main task was to keep the light in perfect working order. For the early keepers this included trimming the wick of the oil lamp and polishing the lenses daily.

While on duty the keepers were expected to remain awake to watch that the light did not go out, or stop revolving. Once revolving lights were introduced the mechanism had to be wound up every hour or two to keep the light turning. This produced each light's characteristic flashes. The revolving lenses are still used today but are electronically driven.

Peculiarly, the light which could be seen for miles by seafarers, was only just bright enough to read a book by inside the light room. It was not a comfortable job - keepers were allowed only hard, straight-backed chairs in the light room, and no radio which could distract them or send them to sleep. Meals were only to be eaten in the tower if it was absolutely necessary. The keepers were also responsible for maintenance of the light tower and the buildings and property on the light station.

Livestock were kept on most stations to provide families with fresh milk, butter, meat and eggs. Any vegetables had to be grown on the station. As stores usually only arrived at the stations on a 3 monthly (or less) basis, meals quickly became limited unless the keepers could add fresh provisions of their own.

The twentieth century brought new technology and new requirements for the keepers. With electrification, winding and trimming the light were no longer required and night watches ended. There were some new responsibilities however, such as sending weather reports by radio.

STORES AND SCHOOLING

Landing stores at the light stations could be a difficult task in itself. Delivery boats had to dodge around the rugged coastline to land supplies, which then had to be hauled up a cliff-face to the keepers' houses. Stores were supplied by the government steamers right up until the 1950s. These visits were often the only contact keepers and their families had with the outside world.

Every two years the Lighthouse Service rotated the keepers around the light stations. This way they all had their turn on the more isolated and bleak stations as well as on the more popular ones. It also allowed the keepers to progress through the ranks from assistant keeper to principal keeper, and helped prevent friction between light station families building up.

While there was a clear policy not to employ women in the lighthouse service, keepers' wives played an essential supportive role in keeping the lighthouses operational.

They were responsible for ordering all stores, and for educating their children by correspondence. In the 1920s the Education Department tried to provide schools for many of the stations where the families had a number of school-aged children. Unfortunately, because the keepers were rotated around the stations every two years, it was difficult to maintain the school rolls at the required levels. By the 1960s more and more of the light stations were connected to nearby communities - though often only by a dirt track - and families were urged to send their children to local schools. Otherwise children of lighthouse keepers had to either board in town or be educated by correspondence.



A WOMAN'S WORK

Although the first lighthouse keeper in New Zealand was a woman, at Pencarrow Head lighthouse, this was more by default after the accidental drowning of her husband. She was to be the only female employed in the 135 years of light keeping in New Zealand.

However, keepers' wives worked just as hard as their husbands on the light stations. They often paid dearly in terms of poor health given the harsh weather and living conditions, no accessible medical help, and in too many instances, the loss of a beloved child or children following illness or accident at the isolated stations.

HEALTH AND BUREAUCRACY

Lighthouse families also had to administer their own health care. If there was an accident and medical assistance was needed, the keepers would usually have to attract the attention of a passing vessel before help could be raised. Even with radio communications it could take hours before help arrived.

Accidents were not uncommon given that most keepers had small children, and the dangerous terrain surrounding the light stations. Unfortunately the isolation meant it could take days for help to arrive, and by then it was often too late.

Even after World War II, when district health nurses began visiting the lighthouses, most medical treatment was administered by the keepers or their wives.

Bureaucracy at times could be frustrating for lighthouse keepers. No matter what the request, it usually had to go through the Marine Department - even a visit to the doctor. All official correspondence to and from the light station had to be copied into a letter book, covering everything from ordering iron to fix a leaking roof, to complaints about another keeper. The letter book was available for anyone on the station to see, so any complaints usually resulted in a volley of counter-complaints.

For the men, lightkeeping did not merely require sitting and watching a light revolve, it required hard physical labour.

The Marine Department was aware of the health problems such conditions could produce, and in 1936 the following memo was sent to all stations:

"With a desire to maintain and improve the general health of residents at the lighthouse stations, more especially in the case of those who have not been accustomed to providing for themselves under isolated conditions, this department has sought the advice of the Department of Health." The two departments went on to produce the following publications, which were circulated to all lighthouses: *"Suggestions to parents: The hair and scalp of the school child; Common skin diseases in school children; Care of children's teeth; and Hints on diet."*

In some cases though, the isolated and rugged environment, together with enforced close families, was just too much for some keepers or their wives. For example, in 1932 a message was sent: *"....to request something be done about the transfer of the 2nd. Assistant's wife as we are all concerned for her nervous rundown condition and poor mental health..."*

and at East Cape, 1905: *"Sent urgent message for constable to come urgently. 2nd. Assistant extremely dangerous and violent. We have been compelled to lash him to protect our lives. 2 keepers up all night. Women and children locked in [principal keeper's] house for safety."*

More practically, just about every part of a keeper's life on a light station was touched by the far-reaching dictums of the Marine Department. For example: *"Liverpool lamp must not be used in keepers' houses, in the lighthouse only. Keepers must pay for excessive use of coal. Interior of houses will be painted French Grey. Coal sacks must be repaired before they are returned to the store. Some keepers are not repairing their sacks in the correct method."*

Finally: *"Chair legs must not be cut down. This is an improper practice and must be discontinued."* The success of automatic lights saw the gradual withdrawal of all lighthouse keepers, and by 1990 there were no longer any watched lights in New Zealand.

