

THE LIGHTHOUSE IN WAIROA.

Officially opened
on 10th June 1961 by
The Minister of Internal
Affairs, Hon. F.L.A. Gotz.

HOW IT CAME ABOUT:

An article published in the Wellington papers in 1959 stating that the old incandescent Portland Island lighthouse was to be dismantled, prompted a request to the Marine Department from the Mayor of Wairoa, Mr. R.E. Shortt, that the light be preserved. This request was granted, and Mr. Shortt's drive and enthusiasm so caught the imagination of others, that the re-erection of the lighthouse in Wairoa became a possibility.

The rebuilding of the light preserve an historic link with the wind-jammer era. Here is a functioning, vintage lighthouse complete with copper dome, stairs and crystal lenses, which has faithfully served the district for over 80 years, preserved for all to see. It is conservatively estimated that the lens assembly today would cost \$20,000.

What more appropriate a site on which to re-erect the light than on a bank of "The long water" where one of the seven great Maori canoes, the "Takitimu" made a landfall six hundred years ago.

That the light has been preserved is a tribute to the many people who so willingly gave of their time and money to bring the project to fruition.

HISTORICAL RECORD.

In the early 'seventies following several wrecks in the vicinity, Portland Island was selected as a prospective locality for a lighthouse and a suitable site for the structure was purchased from Native owners of the Island in 1875. This marked the beginnings of what was to be 80 years continuous service by "Old Faithful" as the light has become affectionately known.

It was more than one hundred years earlier when Captain Cook, who named the Island, sailed around it while navigating the East Coast of the North Island. According to his own journal he was impressed with the inlet, but, on seeing large numbers of canoe parties paddling towards his ship and brandishing their spears in typical warlike fashion, he did not anchor or go ashore.

The Maori name for the Island is "Waikawa" or sour water, as the only springs on the Island were tainted with salt. The Maoris used the Island as a base for fishing and whaling, and some of the old tripots are still to be seen near the boat landing at the northern end of the Island.

CONSTRUCTION:

Construction was commenced in 1876 and when the necessary buildings had been completed sufficiently to allow for the erection of the lantern on the tower Mr. John Mill, who had been brought from England to superintend the installation of the lighting apparatus, was landed on the Island. This was not until the 22nd October, 1877. By the end of January 1878 the light had been installed and after some days of preliminary trial was first exhibited on 28th February 1878. The first principal keeper at Portland Island was Mr. R. Cunningham, who had as his assistants Messrs. R.H. Wilson and C.W. Skill.

DESCRIPTION OF LIGHT:

Portland Island light was then described as a revolving white light of the second order dioptric, attaining its greatest brilliance every 30 seconds. It was shown from a wooden tower 28 feet high, and was 300 feet about sea level. On the tower floor of the lighthouse was an auxilliary light which showed a red ray in a north easterly direction over Bull Rock, four miles off the Island. The building was constructed of solid kauri by John Blackett in 1877.

The lantern for the light was made by James Milne and Sons and shipped from London to Napier on 18th April, 1876, on the Lutterworth. The optical apparatus was obtained from Barbier and Fenestre of Paris, and, with the machine for driving the revolving light, made by James Dove and Company, was shipped on the Waikato on 27th May, 1876 to Napier, the equipment weighing approximately two tons.

The burner operated on the usual kerosene burner principal, only on a much larger scale, the light being visible 24 miles under fine conditions.

MODIFICATIONS:

Shortly after the lighthouse was constructed it was found, during a very heavy gale, that the tower vibrated to such an extent that considerable difficulty was experienced in keeping the glasses on the lamps which were used before the present incandescent lights were installed. Consequently in March, 1879, the tower had to be strutted, to rectify an 80 year old error - the contractor had misread the original plans and poured three inches instead of three feet of concrete in the base. In 1920 the existing wick installation was replaced by an incandescent filament.

On its present site, the revolving lenses are driven by an electric motor through the original gear train. The light consists of a 1,000 watt incandescent lamp, with a similar lamp used for the auxiliary light which lit Bull Rock.

MARCH OF TIME:

Portland Island is an isolated locality. Nevertheless, the inhabitants have at times had their experiences both comical and tragic; the most interesting of which were the following:-

In March 1880, a large landslip occurred on the north-western end of the Island, completely burying seven Maori whares, also a large whaleboat and the lighthouse boat. Luckily the Maoris had left the Island a few days previously to make arrangements for lifting several tins of dried fish from the Island.

On September 18th. 1891, the Captain of the schooner Glencairn, which had anchored close to the Island, informed the principal lightkeeper that he had seen a sea serpent 18 miles off the lighthouse. It had been lying on the water close to the vessel for half an hour, the master stating that the portion visible was larger than the vessel and of the colour of slate. The head was rather small, whereas the body seemed to be about 16 feet across with a small fin along the back.

On the morning of 29th March, 1898, when an assistant keeper was coming off watch in the tower he observed the bull on the lighthouse reserve tossing something which he thought to be a sack, but, on getting closer was horrified to see that it was the body of the principal keeper. The bull was driven off but the keeper was dead. His body was buried on the lighthouse reserve and the grave marked by a neat tombstone and fence.

On one occasion trouble had been brewing for some time between the two assistant keepers on the one side, and the principal keeper on the other. It came to a head one day shortly after the periodical visit of the steamer with the keepers' stores, which in the case of the assistant keepers contained liquor. After the departure of the steamer the assistants turned the key on the principal while the latter was in the store and continued their celebrations, with the result that the wife of the principal keeper had to attend to the lighting up of the lamps and keep watch until a member of the family heard her father's calls and released him.

Although Portland Island is separated from the mainland by only a narrow passage of water, the lighthouse keepers were dependent on signals to passing ships for speedy communication with the outside world.

Though there have been casualties to vessels within sight of Portland Island light, principally in the vicinity of the entrance to the Wairoa and Mohaka rivers, only those directly connected with Portland Island itself and Bull Rock are given here:

- 28th January 1880 - Schooner, Sophia, 200 tons, struck Bull Rock.
- 21st September 1886 - Schooner, Cleopatro, 88 tons, supposed to have capsized off the Island with loss of all hands.
- 18th June 1894 - Barque, Alexander Newton, 309 tons, became unmanageable through loss of sails and was driven ashore at the N.E. end of the Island. The Master and two men were drowned.
- 16th April, ¹⁸⁹⁷ 1867 - Schooner, Pirate, 1960 tons was blown ashore and became a total wreck.
- 20th August, 1916 - s.s. Tongariro, 5220 tons, struck Bull Rock and became a total loss.
