

Portland Island Lighthouse in Wairoa



Background

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 Dept from the Mayor of Wairoa, 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 light was officially opened near its present site on 10 June 1961. After the effects of Cyclone Bola and the construction of a new bridge the lighthouse was moved to its present site in 1989.



The rebuilding of the light preserves 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 100 years, preserved for all to see. It is conservatively estimated that the lens assembly today would cost well over \$1 million.

What more appropriate site on which to re-erect the light than on the brink of "the long water" where one of the seven great Maori canoes "Takitimu" made landfall 600 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.



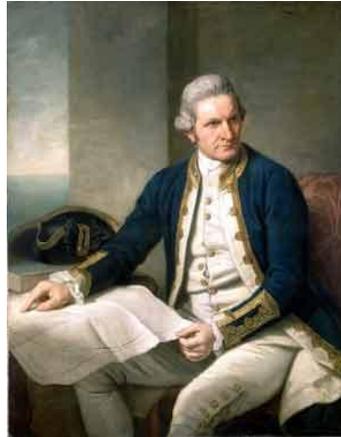
Historical Record

In the early 1870s, 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 the native landowners of the island in 1875. This marked the beginning of what was to be 80 years of continuous service by "Old Faithful", as the light has become affectionately known.



It was more than 100 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 are tainted with salt. The Maori used the island as a base for fishing and whaling and some of the old tripots are still to be seen on the northern end of the island.

Construction

Construction 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 22 October 1877. By the end of January 1878 the light had been installed and after some days of preliminary trials was first exhibited on 28 February 1878. The first principal keeper was Mr R Cunningham assisted by R H Wilson and C Skill.

Portland Island light was then described as a revolving white light of the second order dioptric, attaining its greatest brillane every 30 seconds. It was shown from a wooden tower 28 feet high, and was 300 feet above sea level. On the tower floor of the lighthouse was an auxiliary light which showed a red ray in the north easterly direction over Bull Rock, 4 miles off the island. It was constructed of solid kauri by John Blackett in 1877.

The lantern of the light was made by James Nilne & Sons and shipped from

London to Napier 18 April 1876, on the Lutterworth.



The optical apparatus was obtained from Carrier & Fenestre of Paris, and with the machine for driving and revolving the light made by James Dove & Co, was approximately 2 tons. The burner, operated on the usual kerosene burner principle, only on a much larger scale, the light is visible 24 miles under fine conditions.

Official No	K3970
Location	Poverty Bay Lat 39o18.3o Lon 177o52.0o
Year established	1878 (old tower) 1955 (new one)

Elevation of tower	97 metres
Height of tower	8 metres
Construction	White square tower
Range of light	22 miles
Light intensity	2,600 cd

Modifications

Shortly after the lighthouse was constructed it was found, during a 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 8 year old error- the contractor had misread the original plans and poured 3 inches instead of 3 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 lamp, with a similar lamp used for the auxiliary light which lit Bull Rock.

March of Time

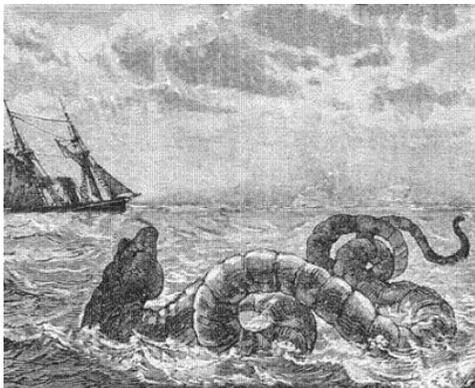
Portland Island is an isolated locality. Nevertheless the inhabitants have, at times, had their experiences, both comical and tragic, the most interesting of which are:

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



In September 1891, the Captain of the Schooner Glencairn, which had anchored close to the island, informed the principal

lighthouse keeper that he had seen a sea serpent 18 miles off the lighthouse. It had been lying in the water close to the vessel for half an hour. The master stated that a portion visible was larger than the vessel and the colour of slate. The head was rather small, whereas the body was very large.



On the morning of 29 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 was a sack, but, on getting closer was horrified to see it was the body of the principal keeper. The bull was driven off but the keeper was dead. His body was buried on the reserve and

the grave marked with a neat headstone and fence.

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

Casualties to vessels within sight of Portland Island include the following:

28/01/1894 Schooner "Sophia" 200 tons struck Bull Rock.

21/09/1894 Schooner "Cleopatra" 88 tons capsized off the island, all hands lost.

18/06/1894 Barque "Alexander Newton" driven ashore, Master and two men drowned.

16/04/1867 Schooner "Pirate" 1960 tons was blown ashore and was a total wreck.

20/08/1916 "S.S.Tongariro", 552 tons struck Bull Rock and was a total loss.