

LIGHTHOUSE HERITAGE IN NORTHERN WA

On 7 May 2003, Phil Griffiths introduced his subject by outlining the progressive need for, and the building of, lighthouses around the western Australian coast. He also spoke about the reason for his involvement with them. The Commonwealth is currently transferring ownership of WA lighthouses to the state and, as a heritage architect, Phil was part of a team of consultants surveying the built environment, archaeology and natural heritage values of 13 lighthouse sites in the state in 1999.

Prior to Federation, Australian navigational aids, like trade and defence, were controlled by the British Government but operated by the colonies. Rottnest Island was the site of the first WA lighthouse, completed in 1849, but the oldest remains of a lighthouse are on Breaksea Island, off Albany, where a prefabricated octagonal tower of cast iron, integrated with the keepers' quarters, was erected in 1858. A taller stone lighthouse on the site was completed in 1902 with separate quarters.

Between 1900 and 1911 seven new coastal lights came into operation in WA: Bathurst Point (1900), Cape Naturaliste (1904), Gantheaume Point (1905), Bedout Island (1909), Cape Inscription and Point Cloates (1910), and Cape Leveque (1911). The last four of those came into being after shipping companies alerted the government to the need for additional navigation aids along the North West coast.

In 1911 the Commonwealth Navigation Act was proclaimed, allowing the Commonwealth to take responsibility for coastal lights. Harbour lights remained the responsibility of the state. Before control of all WA coastal lights passed to the Commonwealth in 1915, three more were added: Vlamingh Head (1912) and Cape Bossut and Airlie Island (1913). At this time WA had one light to every 170 nautical miles of coast compared to every 33.8 miles in NSW. The Commonwealth built no more lights in WA until one was erected on Eclipse Island off Albany in 1926.

Until the early 1900s the lights were powered by kerosene lamps and all were manned. This was followed by acetylene, and Bedout Island was the first automatic light station. This light had a cast steel legged tower with clamped crossbars, which withstood a cyclone in 1910. It was followed by several unmanned lights using acetylene, which was finally superseded by solar power in 1985. Manned lights were converted to electricity from the mains where possible or from diesel generators.

The Gantheaume Point light first came into operation in 1905. It was built as a skeleton steel tower, 41 feet (12.4 m) high with a kerosene-operated light. The lone keeper also had to operate a light at Entrance Point 4.8 km to the south. A 1912 report recommended that the Entrance Point light be automated and remain under State control. The original Gantheaume Point light tower was demolished and

replaced with a new lattice steel tower in 1917, and the light was automated in 1922/23. The tower was again replaced in 1991 when a new open lattice stainless steel tower was erected.

Point Cloates (1908) was built of the local limestone on a hill near Ningaloo Station homestead. It was not well placed and is now in ruins having been replaced by a steel lattice tower in a better position.

Point Moore lighthouse at Geraldton (1878) was one of several prefabricated cast iron towers imported from England in kit form but the Cape Leveque light (1911) has the first cast iron tower designed by the Public Works Department and manufactured in Perth by Bela Makutz. As it was a kerosene-fuelled light, living quarters were provided for two keepers. Construction of the 43-foot (13.1 m) tower and the quarters commenced in 1909 and the light was commissioned on 9 August 1911. The lighthouse was modernised in the 1960s and new steel-framed quarters were built in 1964. In 1965 the facility was converted to electrical power driven by a diesel engine and it was fitted with a halogen tungsten light. It was converted to an automatic solar-powered light in 1985. The original light went to the WA Museum.

Adele Island (218 ha) is known as an important nesting site for seabirds and is currently wholly owned by the Commonwealth. The Australian Maritime Safety Authority proposes to surrender the island to the state, leasing back a small area immediately surrounding the lighthouse. The light tower (1951) is a six stage steel angle and plate construction with three small intermediate landings and a top landing connected by ladders. In 1967 the light was changed from acetylene gas to propane gas and in 1984 it was changed to solar powered operation. The Kimberley coast is still poorly served by navigational lights.

Phil left a copy of his reports on several of the lighthouses, with overhead projection sheets that illustrate the different types, with the Kimberley Society. The reports, based on field surveys done in 1999, were used by the Heritage Council to select appropriate sites for heritage listing.

An interesting addition to the evening's presentation occurred when the artist Laura Cole, who specialises in painting lighthouses, showed us an album of photographs of her paintings, which complemented the black and white photos of Phil's talk. Laura was soon to exhibit her work, and it is noted that an exhibition on lighthouses and the lives of keepers and their family (*Beacons by the Sea*) was to be on show at the new Maritime Museum in Fremantle until 13 July.

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