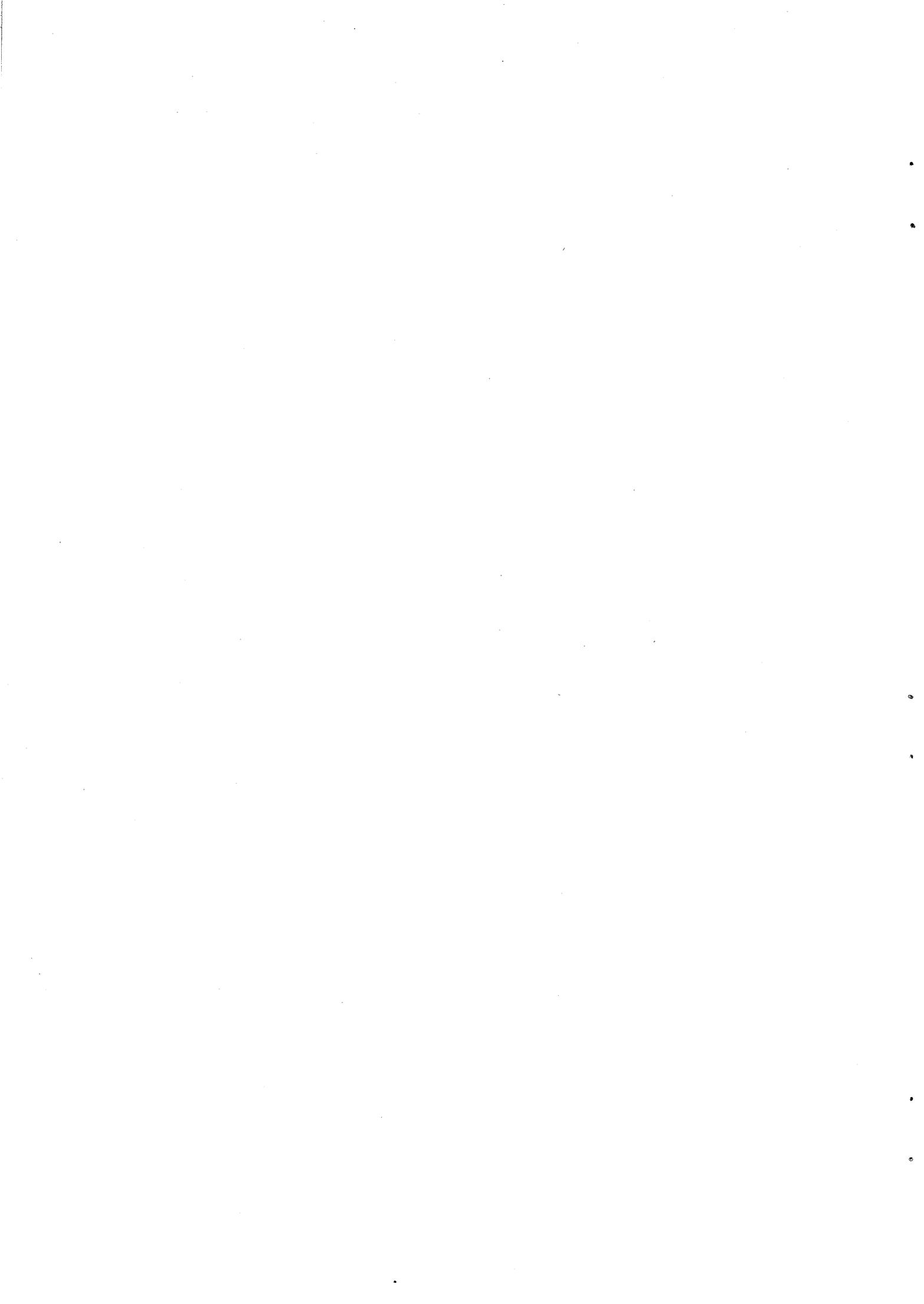


POINT CHARLES
LIGHTHOUSE AND
THE MILITARY
OCCUPATION OF
COX PENINSULA

By Mike Foley



Occasional Papers No. 4

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THE 1982 STATE REFERENCE LIBRARY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY HISTORY LECTURES

This paper is the outcome of a very successful set of lectures on the history of the Northern Territory held at the State Reference Library of the Northern Territory during July and August 1982.

Speakers covered different aspects of Territory history and illustrated the wide and varied nature of our history.

The transcripts of the lectures are being published individually in this series. No major editorial work has been undertaken, so that the lectures are presented as they were delivered by the speakers.

The Caledon Bay Killings

— Ted Egan (21 July 1982) — not to be published at the request of Mr Egan

The History of the Catholic Church in the Northern Territory

— Bishop O'Loughlin (28 July 1982)

Point Charles Lighthouse; and The Military Occupation of Cox Peninsula

— Mike Foley (4 August 1982)

The Queensland Road

— Peter Forrest (11 August 1982)

Chinese Contribution to Early Darwin

— Charles See-Kee (18 August 1982)

John Stokes and the Men of the Beagle: — Discoverers of Port Darwin

— Alan Powell (25 August 1982)

OCCASIONAL PAPERS

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POINT CHARLES LIGHTHOUSE

Throughout the 1880's mariners using the Port of Darwin and its approaches experienced many difficulties. Many ships were wrecked on the rocky, coral reefs and sandbars that made the route into the port a treacherous journey. An excerpt from Parliamentary paper No. 53 of 1888 details this concern.

'The time has come when the lighting of the approaches to the harbour should be undertaken. Any voyager coming from the eastward, and marking the careful and scientific manner in which the Queensland coast is lighted, and then going westward to Java and observing a complete lighthouse system of that coast, is astonished at the utter want of lights to Port Darwin. The full reports which have been forwarded from Captains Marsh (Harbour Master), Carrington (s.s. Palmerston), Maclear, R.N. (H.M.S. Flying Fish), Hoskyn R.N. (H.M.S. Myrmidon), and Captains of steamships in the Australia and China trade, have been considered by the Marine Board, and that body recommended lights should be erected at Capes Fourcroy and Don and Points Emery and Charles. No doubt, for safe navigation night and day, all these are required; but there is a concensus opinion from the ship masters that the most pressing want is a first class light on Point Emery. This would be visible for nearly thirty miles¹, and, if built, would be the best commencement of the lighting system for the Northern Territory. The other lighthouses could be erected as the trade of the port increased, although lights at Capes Fourcroy and Don are much needed. Lights are now regarded as an essential of civilised nations, and the reduction in the insurance rates, and the saving of time which they ensure make the payment of light dues an economy instead of an expenditure. The tonnage of vessels entered inward for Port Darwin for 1887 was 115,416 tons²; entered outwards 118,140 tons³. The total value of exports was £94,647.0⁴ odd, of imports, £110,047.0⁵ odd. As lighthouses are really reproductive works and of permanent value, the first cost is fairly chargeable to Loan Account.

I hope one result of the visit of the Hon. the Minister to the Northern Territory, will be the speedy commencement of the Point Emery Lighthouse.'

One man who had taken particular interest in the project, was Captain the Hon Foley C P Vereker and after obtaining the leave of the Commander in Chief, Rear Admiral Fairfax, he left for the Territory to make a careful examination of Point Charles and other positions which had been under consideration for some years. At the same time, HMS *Myrmidon* was carrying out a survey of the northern coastline and it is from this vessel that Captain Vereker sent the following report:

H.M.S. Myrmidon, September 2nd, 1888, Port Darwin. Sir — I have the honour to make the following report in reply to your telegram of July 26th last:—

The sites proposed are Cape Don, Cape Fourcroy, Charles Point, and a leading harbour light on Point Emery.

In addition to locality, the questions of water, and the attitudes of the natives, have to be considered.

At Cape Don the proposed site would be healthy, water is easily obtainable and the natives are not actively hostile, but from its low altitude (only 130 feet⁶) it would be difficult to obtain the range necessary to make it a thoroughly useful coastal light.

1-48 km 2-115 416 tonnes 3-118 140 tonnes 4-\$189 294 approx 5-\$220 094 6-39 m

At Cape Fourcroy, or in any locality on Melville Island, besides the difficulty of obtaining a sure supply of water, the natives are intensely hostile, and a lighthouse staff would be virtually in a constant state of siege. The vicinity has not been sufficiently surveyed to warrant close approach, but it is clear that off-lying dangers extend off the coast, rendering it inadvisable to make the land in that neighbourhood from the westward. If a light was to be erected on Cape Fourcroy vessels would, in my opinion, be tempted to an injudicious closing of the land of Melville Island to 'make the light', and find themselves very probably in a position of danger, of which the lead would give but little warning.

Charles Point is very low; a few hundred yards to the north—westward of the present beacon is a very suitable place for the light. Water is easily procurable by digging and the natives are friendly, the lead would give ample warning of place of the land, and safe anchorage could be obtained, if by reason of thick weather it was considered injudicious to continue under weigh.

I would suggest:

- 1. That a lighthouse about 90 feet high⁷, which would be visible twenty miles⁸, be erected on Cape Don, giving the navigator a guide either through Dundas Strait or along the north shore of Melville Island.*
- 2. That a lighthouse about 90 feet high⁹ be erected close to the existing beacon near Charles Point. It would be visible eighteen miles¹⁰ and could be seen over the land off Point Charles by a vessel making for Bynoe Harbour.*
- 3. A small light, about 15 feet high¹¹, which would be visible eight miles¹², be erected on Emery Point having either danger rays or obscured sectors over the 'middle ground' banks and the shoal north of West Point.*

These three lights would, I consider, meet all the necessities of local navigation for a considerable time to come.

I have etc.

FOLEY C.P. VEREKER, Commander

Rear Admiral Henry Fairfax C.B. etc Commander-in-Chief, Sydney.

It is gratifying to know that the necessary amount for at least one lighthouse has been authorised on loan, and that instructions have been given for the preparation of specifications by the Engineer-in-Chief.

And what a far-sighted man Vereker was, for indeed Charles Point and the other lights are still in operation, almost 100 years after his survey and report.

There is record of numerous memos, minutes and addendums and also telegrams, back and forth from the Treasurer, the Chief Engineer and the Commissioner of Public Works, all doing their bit to ensure that bureaucratic red tape, (even in those days) was maintained and that the work and the procurement of monies for the projects was achieved as quickly as possible (even though it seemed to take an age). Some of the details are sketchy but it appears, on the information provided by the

7-27 m 8-32 km 9-27 m 10-28.8 km 11-4.5 m 12-12.8 km

Department of Transport, Adelaide, to the author, that the funds for the construction of the Point Charles lighthouse were provided by the Public Purposes Loan Act No. 449 of 1818. The amount provided was £12,600¹³ which included the cost of the Pt Emery light. The Point Charles lighthouse was built in conjunction with the South Australian Marine Board and the Minister for Education and the Northern Territory, Mr James Bath. The contract for the manufacture of the light went to Chance Bros of Birmingham, England who packed the lighthouse in crates and shipped it to Adelaide in 1891.

Mr J G Thompson signed the contract for the erection of the light, and the contents of the crates which had remained unopened in Adelaide were shipped aboard SS *Inaminka* to Port Darwin. There they lay unopened for a short period in the locomotive carriage shed at Palmerston. They were then shipped by SS *Airie* to Point Charles for erection. Construction of the light commenced almost immediately as the contract for the work was to expire on 8 September 1892. It seems however, that due to the very rusty condition of the lighthouse as it was unpacked on the site, there was a delay in its completion, as much extra work was spent on cutting out seriously affected areas and generally cleaning and oiling the rest. The lighthouse was duly completed and opened on 1 February 1893 by the Government Resident of the day, Mr Justice C J Dashwood.

The following is the text of a telegram sent to the Honourable the Treasurer on 2 February 1893 by the Administrator: —

'Lighthouse successfully opened yesterday. The sea was too rough however to permit of the ladies landing. Machinery worked tolerably well though it seems to have been landed here in a disgraceful condition as regards rust. It is a fine light and should prove of great convenience to mariners. C.J. Dashwood.'

A simple telegram with a simple message but which ultimately proved to be of some consequence. The line describing 'the disgraceful condition' of the lighthouse, seems to have set off a departmental rumble which reverberated up and down the line and even back to the manufacturers in England. The incident and the ensuing results are quite amusing because it appears that bureaucratic 'buck-passing' (or is it the system?) hasn't really changed in 100 years and here's how the witch-hunt transpired.

Before we go any further, it is important to remember that the lighthouse had been erected and was operating OK, BEFORE the Hon the Treasurer received the Government Resident's telegram.

Upon receipt of the telegram, the Treasurer sent a minute to the Engineer-in-Chief on 6 February, requesting him to make a statement as to the condition of the machinery as noted in the Resident's telegram.

On 8 February, Mr W Slade, (seemingly an important public servant but without any apparent title) returned to the Engineer-in-Chief, this report: —

'The machinery for the Pt Charles lighthouse was packed by Messers Chance Bros. England. The cases on arrival at Port Adelaide were stored and then shipped to the

13- \$25 200 approx

Northern Territory without being opened. As this machinery is reported to be very rusty, I would recommend that the Pt Emery Lantern, now in the port store, be examined and if necessary, cleaned.'

The report was passed back up the line but was apparently not satisfactory, for the following came back and then things started to happen:

'Returned to the Secretary of Public Works.

Were the cases examined when they were landed and did they show any signs of damage? Is the machinery now in good order, none the worse for the rust, or is it permanently injured? 18/2/93, E Stephens, NT.'

On 21 February, this query was received by one Mr J Mann who returned it to the Engineer-in-Chief, for reply. On 22 February, one Mr Slade received the query and forwarded it to a Mr Tilley for report. Then on 1 March, Mr Tilley returned to Mr Slade, the following report: —

'The cases did not show externally any appearance of rust. They were stored in the locomotive carriage shed, Palmerston, when I saw them and were kept dry and under cover until they were opened at the site. The material that was damaged has been thoroughly cleaned and placed in good working order. It was not advisable to cut out all the marks of rust on account of reducing the material too much but it has been painted where possible and the other portions cleaned and well oiled. The brass work was very much stained with wet packing and was not damaged beyond its appearance. It has been cleaned with acid and the keepers will no doubt be able to make it bright after a few weeks cleaning.'

After having received this report, Mr Slade added his tuppence worth: —

'Returning to the Engineer-in-Chief with report from Mr Tilley on the condition of the cases when he received same at the Northern Territory. As the lantern was received at Port Adelaide by the Chief Storekeeper, he will be in a better position to report on the condition of same when he received them here.'

The Chief Engineer then sent the by now rapidly growing minutes to the Chief Storekeeper, requesting a statement in answer to the first query of the Hon The Treasurer in his minute of 6.2.93.

At this point, the system falls apart for the minutes lay unattended in the Chief Storekeeper's office for three and a half months. The Chief Storekeeper's system had it that they would eventually be found and attended to. When he did find them, it doesn't take much to imagine his reaction. His eventual reply was: —

'Returned to the Engineer-in-Chief. This docket has been inadvertently overlooked, otherwise your minute of 3.3.93 would have been replied to earlier. The cases were examined on arrival and reported in good condition. The 'contents' of the cases were not examined. J.C. Chief Storeman, 21.6.93.'

Things got moving again and of course in the meantime, the light is going just great, the lighthouse keepers getting stuck into the task of maintaining it with that brand of 'tender loving care' that only lighthouse keepers can provide to lighthouses. This is

getting a little drawn out but it is important to see that the 'fiddle-de-de, pish, pish and tush, pho, stuff, rubbish, rot, bosh and nonsense', all in the name of 'red tape' that we often run into today, was also a part of the system in those days. And is quite amusing, isn't it?

However, on 24 June 1893, the Engineer-in-Chief returned to the Honourable, the Commissioner for Public Works for the Honourable the Treasurer's attention, this reply: —

The cases referred to, were examined when they were landed and did not show any sign of damage. The machinery is now in good order; it was not permanently injured and Messrs Chance Bros have been fully written to on the subject, the letter being forwarded through the Agent General.'

And the last word in the saga of the 'rusty lighthouse', was a further minute forwarded by the Engineer-in-Chief to the Honourable the Commissioner of Public Works for the attention of the Honourable the Treasurer and it is:

'Mr Tilley, who went to the Northern Territory to erect this light, has now returned and he informs me that a large portion of the machinery was found to be very badly rusted when the cases were opened. It appears as if the said cases had been submerged in salt water and although the machinery had been placed inside zinc lining, that lining had been perforated in various places.

This is certainly most unsatisfactory and after the correspondence has been noted by the Honourable the Treasurer, I would ask that communication be entered into with Messrs Chance Bros upon their method of packaging.

In order to ensure the safety of the lantern which is now in store at Port Adelaide, I endorse Mr Slade's recommendation of 8.2.93.'

The report was forwarded to the Under Treasurer who passed it onto the Honourable Treasurer from whom it can be reasonably assumed came the demand to ensure that Chance Bros received the appropriate communique.

However, for all of the kerfuffle, Chance Bros could possibly have had the last laugh as the reader will soon find out.

The estimated cost of the lighthouse, completed was £10 773¹⁴ but the actual completed cost was £10 597/12/9¹⁵.

The technical details of the lighthouse at that time are:

Situated 15 miles¹⁶ west of Port Darwin in the latitude of 12°—24/ south; longitude 130°—38/ east. The character was one white light with red and green sectors; Dioptric 1st order 100 000 candle-power and revolved every 30 seconds. The illuminant was vaporised kerosene and was exhibited from atop an iron lighthouse tower, some 92 feet¹⁷ in height. It was visible in clear weather for 17 nautical miles¹⁸.

The light functioned beautifully for nigh on forty years and then in 1932, a decision was made to change the illuminant of the lamp from vapourised kerosene to

14-\$21 546 approx 15-\$21 159.28 approx 16-24 km 17-27.6 m 18-31 484 m

acetylene gas. This also meant the end of an era for the lighthouse keepers. With the change over to gas, which meant the virtual automation of the light itself, came the end of the occupancy of the houses and the termination of the lighthouse keeper's employment at Point Charles.

By 1933, the light had been converted to gas and the task of getting the huge bottles to the site proved to be a difficult one. Once a year, about 30 bottles, weighing around 240 pounds¹⁹ each, were rowed ashore to the base of the cliffs. On top of the cliffs, a davit had been erected and, with the aid of a block and tackle, the bottles were winched to the top. There a cart, not unlike a rickshaw, was loaded with six bottles and a couple of the men having been harnessed into the cart, then dragged the bottles to the base of the lighthouse. When the bottles had all been assembled, 15 of them were then linked up together and connected to the main pipe of the lamp. Then once every six months the men would come back and change the bottles over. Occasionally the little pilot light would be blown out, necessitating someone coming out to the lighthouse and relighting it. The light functioned without trouble other than the pilot light going out, until 1971.

In that year, the Department of Transport decided that the lighthouse had seen its day and had become obsolete. The light was subsequently extinguished and the structure became a day marker for navigation purposes. The principal reason for the light's obsolescence was because of the erection of the tall transmission masts in Radio Australia's transmission area and the installation of powerful lamps atop these masts. These proved to be most suitable and provided the mariners of the day with an excellent light which could be seen for almost twenty-two miles²⁰ on a clear night. However, they were not to imagine the wrath of Cyclone Tracy and their time too, was numbered.

But let's go back to the early days of the lighthouse's operation and look at some of the problems and the solutions to same.

As you might well imagine, communication in those days was not always easy. They did, in fact, employ the services of some of the local Aborigines from time to time, to carry mail and unimportant messages down to West Point where several people were engaged in growing crops. The messages were passed on to these folks who took them to town when they themselves deemed it necessary. In cases of emergency, which thankfully weren't all that often, the keepers developed a simple but most effective means of communication with Palmerson.

At 8.00 pm every night, the head Gaoler at Fannie Bay Jail had to get out his telescope and look at the light which he could see quite clearly to the west. If he saw, passing through his range of vision, a red light, (this was the red sector of the light) he knew everything was OK. If however, there was an emergency, mechanical or health, the keepers simply took out the red pane of glass and the Gaoler would see a white light flashing through his range of vision and then he advised the appropriate authorities that assistance was required at the lighthouse. This was put under way as soon as a boat had been procured and in fact it happened only twice between 1893 and 1912.

The light in the early days of its operation proved to be most encouraging and in a report which was presented by the head Lighthouse Keeper, Mr Hugh Watson

Christie, to Mr Justice Dashwood for inclusion in his report of the year ending 1894, were the following details:

Throughout the year, the light has consumed 979 gallons²¹ and 1½ pints²² of oil. We have had some difficulties with the original burners and have requested new ones. The old burners attracted millions of insects and the burners could not cope with their presence. The arrival of the new 'Trinity' burners eliminated the insect problem and enabled us to exhibit a first order, 100,000 candlepower light. The oil however, is of such heavy nature, that a great consumption of wicks is unavoidable. Everything is in good order, operating smoothly and correct to time. The paintwork is standing up to the task; the dinghy, the houses and the underground tanks are all in good order.'

Up until this time, flags or morse lamps for signal purposes had not been provided and it was recommended by the sub-Collector of Customs at Port Darwin that considering the very limited facilities at the Port, steamer attendance, signal flags and morse lamp be provided. Flag signals, hoisted by halyards rove through block, secured to a spar rigged out from the gallery of the skeleton iron tower, would render a flagstaff unnecessary. On 31 January 1896, Mr Christie reported that the lighthouse had been subjected to two severe earth tremors. The tower was seen to have oscillated considerably but no damage sustained.

Then in 1897, the town of Palmerston, the Port of Darwin and the area in which the lighthouse stood, was subjected to a devastating cyclone. The town itself was subjected to a vast amount of damage as was the Port and the environs but the lighthouse stood firm and strong. Chance Bros had made her to last.

Four years after the light had been converted to gas, in 1937, another cyclone hit the area. Although the intensity of the 'blow' was not as severe as the 1897 cyclone, extensive damage was caused in the town, the Port and the environs and in fact, a large proportion of the pearling fleet which had been at anchor in the harbour, was destroyed. And still the Lighthouse remained unscathed.

On 19 February 1942 the Japanese arrived in the skies over Darwin and for eighteen long months and some 64 raids, they continued to unload their bomb-bays of death and destruction upon us. From time to time they made a target of the lighthouse area, not necessarily because it was a light but more especially because the Army had established a small camp in the area from which they patrolled the beaches in the area, and the Air Forces of the United States of America and Australia had established a Radio Direction Finding Beacon on Point Charles itself. Subsequently, on several occasions, the Japanese attacked the area but never once succeeded in causing any damage to the light itself. She was obviously there to stay.

After the war, the area returned to the peaceful, tranquil place it had always been and nothing much, save the birds and the animals that roamed the area and the occasional human who came to tend the light, disturbed the peace and tranquility.

That was, at least, until 1965, when it was decided to construct Radio Australia's two stations on the Peninsula. Construction workers camped beneath the light and fished from the sea-shore below and I suppose also shared the seclusion and the natural beauty that was and still is Point Charles.

As the transmitter booster complex was completed, so also was the term of the lighthouse's important function. As was stated earlier, the light had been deemed to be obsolete and was extinguished in 1971.

But Chance Bros hadn't built the lighthouse to be subjected to such ignominy . . . as time was soon to prove. On Christmas Eve, 1974, the unbelievable happened. The most devastating, horrific cyclone swept through the city and the countryside, devastating all in its path. Little or nothing escaped the wrath of the most monstrous of natural phenomenon, Cyclone Tracy, except . . . the lighthouse.

Radio Australia sustained extensive damage and the tall transmission antennae with the fancy lamps atop, crashed to the ground. It was obvious that a light was needed urgently and of course the Department of Works had to look no further than the lighthouse they had just a few short years before condemned as obsolete. Within a month, a small, low-powered lamp had been installed, operating on single cell batteries, similar to a torch battery but of a much larger size of course.

It was at this point that Chance Bros were to have the last laugh. They built their lighthouse strong and had built her to last. And I am sure, she will not be cast off with such indifference again.

In May 1982, the Department of Transport came to the site and installed standby diesel powered alternators in anticipation of the light being converted to electricity in July, 1982.

At that time, they will also be installing a very powerful lamp, somewhere in the vicinity of 1 000 000 candlepower and the significance of Point Charles Lighthouse for mariners at least will again be appreciated.

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THE MILITARY OCCUPATION OF COX PENINSULA (WEST POINT/WAUGITE BEACH)

For some years prior to the actual event, military advisors to the government managed to convince them of the value of installing some artillery, at least to provide some sort of protection for the town of Darwin in the unlikely event of an aggressor invading Australia through its back door. And so, in 1933, two old six inch¹ naval guns, which had been converted to shore use, were established at East Point and a further two at Emery Point.

Then, as Hitler invaded his neighbours and then the Lowlands of Europe, dragging England into a conflict which was to be more devastating than 'The War to end all Wars' of 1914/18, Australia, once again, found herself involved. And all the signs were that this was not a conflict that could be compared in any way to the First World War. In fact, the automation and mechanisation of the German armies was staggering as their speed and displays of crushing defeat solemnly demonstrated. If this was any indication, then nothing, anywhere, was safe from the tentacles of this terrible event.

This prompted the military authorities to erect an anti-submarine boom net across the entrance to Darwin Harbour. The installation of this net was completed in late 1939 and was the longest net in the world, stretching from Dudley Point on the Darwin side to West Point on Cox Peninsula, a distance of some 6.5 kilometres.

*In early 1941, two special units were formed from Royal Australian Artillery volunteers to man heavy coastal guns to be established in the Pacific Island areas, north of Australia. These units were 'L' Special Force which went to Rabaul and 'M' Special force which was intended for the Nauru Ocean Island Group. A third battery was later formed and went to Ambon.

The troop transport, TSS *Zealandia* embarked the First Independent Commando Company, bound for Kavieng, 'M' Battery for Nauru Ocean Island Group and some Department of Main Roads employees who were to be employed in the construction of roads and airstrips to the south of Darwin. Having delivered the First Independent to Kavieng, *Zealandia* retraced her course because the ship bringing the big guns to Nauru and Ocean Island from England had been sunk. 'M' Battery was ordered to Darwin and in August, 1941, after calling into Rabaul and Thursday Island, *Zealandia* docked in Darwin. Upon arrival at Darwin though, 'M' Battery refused to disembark until they had a guarantee that they would be one of the first units to be sent back north. They took off their equipment and shirts and sat down on the deck, refusing to move for over two hours.

However, once off the *Zealandia* the Army split up 'M' Battery and the majority of the men were entrucked and sent around the harbour, a journey of almost 100 miles², to West Point, Cox Peninsula.

Now the Japanese entered the war with an incredibly crushing attack on the Americans at Pearl Harbour and began their rapid advance down through South East Asia. The threat of an invasion of Australia was no longer a far off 'maybe'. It was now a definite possibility, a threat that could no longer be ignored.

1 — 15 centimetres 2 — 160 kilometres

*Information provided by Mr Bill Nicholls, a member of 'M' Battery

In Darwin, the evacuation of civilians started and the establishment of further artillery and anti-aircraft units was undertaken. The town prepared itself for invasion. Upon arriving at West Point, the soldiers found nothing with the exception of the western anchorage of the anti-submarine boom net and a small group of soldiers which included the 2nd/2nd Pioneers and 2nd/12th Field Engineers who packed up and left shortly after.

There were no barracks for the new arrivals at West Point and until the camp, or at least the barracks, had been constructed, they slept out-of-doors on mosquito enshrouded, wooden bunks. There were two 4 inch³ guns, converted to shore use which had come from HMAS *Adelaide* during a refit and had been placed in position on huge concrete platforms, presumably by the previous occupants of West Point. The principal task of these guns was to cover and protect the boom net. On the outside of the net, shipping was stopped for inspection by Customs and Naval Authorities. These inspections were made to ensure that illegal or prohibited cargoes, saboteurs or infiltrators were not aboard.

Under the command of Captain Blackmore, the camp at West Point quickly took shape. Barracks, mess-rooms, cookhouses, latrines, store rooms, equipment sheds, fuel and ammunition dumps, all of the buildings necessary for the smooth functioning of such a camp, went up. At the same time, the camp's defences were established. Anti-aircraft guns, machine gun posts, barbed wire entanglements, search light battery, blast shelters and observation towers, were all installed. Then one morning, probably not much different than the previous one and many before, the battery was shocked into action. Although it had been anticipated that the Japanese would come, it was considered that the thrust of an attack would come in the form of a seaborne invasion. Sure, on several occasions previously lone Japanese reconnaissance planes had flown over the town and harbour and there had been several false alarms. But no-one had really imagined that the Japanese would come the way they did . . . even after the lesson of Pearl Harbour . . . even after the warning signs that had built up over the previous days. And yet here they were.

It was 19 February 1942.

It was the day on which the greatest single tragedy in Australian history (to date) was perpetrated.

It was the day on which the various units of the military received their baptism of fire.

It was the day of reckoning.

Indeed, the extent of the tragedy can be portrayed with these few statistics.

5 merchant ships sunk

3 naval ships sunk

13 other ships beached and/or badly damaged

23 allied aircraft destroyed

243 civilian and military personnel killed, several hundreds wounded, more than 200 seriously.

Outside the harbour, two other ships were attacked, one being sunk and the other bombed and set on fire precipitating its demise. It was a ravaging attack, masterfully planned and executed by the Japanese. And the cost to them that day was the loss of 5 aircraft.

Among the vessels destroyed by the Japanese that fateful morning was the TSS *Zealandia*, bombed, burnt and sunk with the loss of three lives. The West Point troops watched in stunned awe at the destruction unfurling before them.

It was a day they would never forget.

A rock-crusher was sent to West Point and a small group of the garrison was employed on upgrading the dirt tracks that existed in the area, including the road to Point Charles Lighthouse and the one to the Delissaville Mission. A new road was to be constructed from West Point to Waugite Point where another battery was to be established. There was talk that the Waugite Battery was going to be built as a decoy, complete with dummy 6 inch⁴ guns. It has not been proven to me otherwise, although a plan detailing the layout of the camp and the position of the guns was made available to me by Colonel Jack Heydon, (Ret) a resident of Darwin. There are still standing today several concrete bunkers on the beachfront which had been part of the construction of the camp, and, a little further back, the concrete communications bunker which was underneath the huge observation tower which was unfortunately destroyed in Cyclone Tracy. Apart from that, there is absolutely no evidence, such as the concrete platforms upon which the 4 inch⁵ guns were mounted at West Point, in the Waugite area to suggest that real 6 inch⁶ guns had been installed. Construction work was carried out by the West Point soldiers in the Waugite Beach area and they also built a waterline which ran from a large soak hole behind Waugite, to West Point, providing the camp with fresh water. The work of that gang was back-breaking, having only shovels, axes and picks as tools. Roll-call was held in the morning in the feeble glow of a hurricane lamp, then work commenced at daybreak, and ceased at sunset. Such was their determination.

The battery at West Point was kept very busy during the 18 months that the Japanese continued to raid, and apart from the actions of the anti-aircraft installations, patrols were regularly sent out to reconnoitre the beaches and the dunes and bushland back from them. On numerous occasions, they were detailed to search for aircraft and crews which had been shot down on the Peninsula and on these missions, it was usual to employ the services of one of the local Aborigines as a tracker. Such patrols found the Kittyhawk which crashed at Two Fella Creek, another on the beach 5 miles⁷ from the lighthouse,* and also the remains of the Japanese 'Betty Bomber', shot down on 20 June 1943.

Between 5 and 25 April 1942 a Radio Direction Finding Beacon was established at Point Charles. This also brought about the establishment of a small training camp in the area. A patrol from West Point was at the RDF Unit at the time of a Japanese raid and they recall hearing instructions being given over the radio to Kittyhawk pilots who had missed the bombers on their run into the target. The Kittyhawk pilots were told to form up at a height which was directly above Point Charles. They went outside and watched the battle and recall:

4 — 15 centimetres 5 — 10 centimetres 6 — 15 centimetres 7 — 8 kilometres

*This was Lt Martin's aircraft, forced down 27 April 1942

'The bombers dropped their bombs and turned for home on a line that would take them out over Point Charles where the fighters were waiting for them. The result was never in doubt as nine bombers were shot down.'

By now it was obvious that the possibility of an invasion by Japan would not become a reality. The Japanese were being sorely tested by the combined operations of Army, Navy and Air Force actions to the north. Japanese air raids became fewer and fewer and life on West Point began to get dull and boring.

The 200 or so men stationed on Cox Peninsula continued to be serviced and replenished with a large assortment of supplies, equipment and ammunition by the 'Water Transport' division. They employed a strange assortment of vessels. Among them were the *Mataranka*, the *Pius* and the *Irak*. But of course they served the purpose well and continued to maintain the units.

After the Japanese met with their first major defeat at the hands of the Australian Artillery and Infantry divisions in New Guinea, operations, particularly Naval and Air Force, from Darwin, were stepped up. By November 1943, the last of the Japanese air raids had been carried out on Darwin, the last of them being more retaliatory than aggressive. And then Darwin began to breathe again. Flights and flights of heavily laden bombers took off monotonously as the push, driving the Japanese back ultimately to their homeland and unconditional surrender, took its course.

And life on Cox Peninsula for the Army detachments became a humdrum, boring affair.

Apart from the usual drill, maintenance of guns and equipment and continued patrols, a lot more time was being allocated to sports, fishing and relaxation. In fact, some of the men who managed to make it away from West Point drew the following comparisons. In Darwin, the armies, airforces and navies of the allies were continually passing through on their way to campaigns in the north. All sorts of things were happening; football, cricket, baseball matches, boxing matches, movies, parties and so on. Whereas, if a man had committed a misdemeanor worthy of some sort of punishment, he was banished to West Point till . . .

Eventually the defeat of Germany brought the realisation of a resolution to the conflict with Japan a little closer. Then the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and it was all over.

Demobilisation finally came for the units on Cox Peninsula and gradually the countryside slipped back into its old routine of peace and tranquility.

Season by season the installations aged and without daily maintenance the establishments began to crumble. Some of the buildings were moved to where Mandorah stands today and were utilised as a weekend camp for some of the residents of Darwin. Others became the victims of white ants and those that still remained prior to Cyclone Tracy's arrival on Christmas Eve, 1974, were simply blown away.

The two huge concrete platforms upon which the 4 inch⁸ guns were mounted were

8 — 10 centimetres

undermined by the huge seas whipped up by the cyclone, and with the associated erosion collapsed onto the new level of beach. And with these gone, the only remains left to remind us of those desperate days are the concrete floors and foundations of the buildings, the old searchlight enclosure and a small part of a tower, all now victims of time, litterbugs and vandalism.

In respect of 'M' Battery, the Waugite Battery, in fact all of the units and detachments involved, had a role to play in the scheme of things and they acquitted themselves with distinction. There were some extremely anxious times early on when it was not certain whether the Japanese would or would not invade. Desperate measures such as husbands giving their wives rifles and handguns with orders to commit suicide in the event of such an event, are evidence enough.

Units such as 'M' Battery, ordered to operate with out-of-date equipment and a shortage of supplies and equipment, in an area where isolation was an enemy in itself, were given a most unenviable task. They took the job in both hands and the battle scars that Japanese survivors took back with them to their bases provided ample evidence that an invasion onto Australian soil by Japanese Forces would be nothing short of disastrous.

To have been able to write this lecture on the information which was not only sketchy but did not correlate, would not have been possible without the first hand evidence provided to me by Mr Bill Nicholls of Balwyn, Victoria.

Bill sent to me fifty-nine fantastic photos of the establishment of the camp on West Point from the time of his arrival there.

The photographs have been reprinted in my book and are now in the tender loving care of the 'Northern Australia Collection' section of the State Reference Library where they will be retained for generations to come.