

The Bunbury Lighthouse

A Brief History compiled by Nicole Azzalini

The Lighthouses

The lighthouse in Bunbury that we see today is relatively new. There have been multiple styles and alterations to the previous lighthouses that were used in Bunbury to guide the ships safely into Koombana Bay. The original and rudimentary guiding device, a wooden keg with a storm lantern, was replaced by a square wooden lighthouse. The wooden lighthouse was replaced in 1901 with a temporary skeletal tower. In 1903 the provisional tower was superseded by a cast iron beacon. In 1959 the cast iron tower was raised in height with a cylindrical extension and new lantern; these parts were then incorporated into the present lighthouse when it was built in 1970. (<http://www.unc.edu/~rowlett/lighthouse/wau.htm>)

The first navigational aid is described as nothing more than a wooden keg with a storm lantern, also more commonly known as an oil lamp. Thomas Paisley remarked of the beacon,

When vessels arrived from England their arrival was announced by a flag flown from where the present lighthouse now stands, or by a beacon fire. Letters from relatives and friends in the dear Mother Country as it came to be called were anxiously awaited in this land of exile as I fear many grew to think of it (Barnes, P. 2001 p.86).

Local historian Phyllis Barnes noted in her book that in 1841 a Captain John Lort Stokes marked a 'Signal Hill' to the northeast of Ommanney's Mount Bunbury. An 1864 map created by Taylor (Figure 1) marks a flagstaff on Marlston Hill and a flagstaff on a lesser to the northeast (Barnes, P. 2001 p.87).

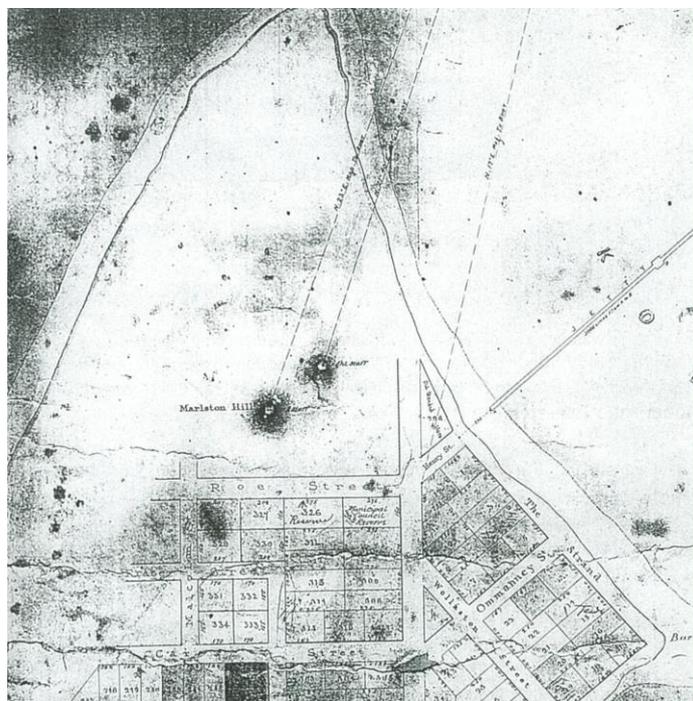


Figure 1

The flagstaff may not have been adequate navigational apparatus and probably led to the construction of the sequential lighthouse. According to a newspaper report in the *Inquirer* and

Commercial News on the 21st of October 1898 the shipping community was not very satisfied with the situation;

The niggardly conduct of the government in not erecting the flagstaff on Lighthouse Hill led to a steamer being put to considerable inconvenience on Monday. The steamer Tangier arrived off the bay to discharge 400 tons of coal. She had not been into harbor since construction of the breakwater and consequently was evidently afraid, although, as a matter of fact, the water in the harbor was quite calm. Had the flagstaff been in position the agent could have signalled that the bay was quite safe (The Inquirer and Commercial News 1898 p.1).

Koombana Bay was a notoriously treacherous harbour in rough weather and many boats were wrecked there, thus the inefficiency of the navigational system created many problems.

What is considered the first lighthouse was built on Marlston Hill, (400 yards- 120 metres) South of Casuarina Point), roughly in the same location that the Apex Lookout Tower is now constructed. The Lighthouse was built in 1870 but not properly installed until 1880. The structure consisted of a square wooden tower, coloured grey, with its light set at 117? (122ft?) feet (35.5 metres) above the water level (Figure 2). The Inquirer and Commercial News reported on Wednesday the 28th of September 1870 that a Mr Charles Utton the enterprising person who set up the Bunbury Rope Works was also responsible for the design of the Lighthouse that was both simple, cheap and useful (Inquirer and Commercial News 1870 p.3).



Figure 2

The Newspaper's Correspondent commended the overseer of construction, Mr Josiah Woodrow,

...the officer in charge of Bunbury Depot whose efforts to serve the public, as far as his duties permit, cannot be too highly spoken of. To Mr Woodrow's practical knowledge and clever management of his men be attributed the success with which he has carried out Mr. Utton's design; and the public of Bunbury cannot be pleased to bear testimony to Mr. Woodrow's many excellent and valuable qualities (19th of September Inquirer and Commercial News 1870 p.3).

The new lighthouse failed to impress the seafarers. Below is an excerpt from *The Inquirer and Commercial News*, May 1882.

The Port of Bunbury is certainly increasing in importance judging from the number of teams coming into town daily with timber etc... But it is grievous to find that as the place is advancing in its commercial aspect the means of anchorage are receding, in fact accommodation in this respect has almost entirely disappeared. At present time there is not a mooring buoy to which the smallest trading craft here can make fast and the lighthouse is the most miserable apology that could be imagined and has often been passed by ships bound for the port, the lookout being unable to distinguish it from a star (*Inquirer and Commercial News* May 1882).

Bunbury resident H. Johansen remembered that a yardarm on the lighthouse would be attached to a white flag to alert that a sailing ship was in sight or a black steel ball if it was a steamship (Bunbury... I Remember When 1999 Book 5 pp.74-75).

The wooden lighthouse was replaced in 1901 with a temporary skeletal tower. In 1903 the temporary structure was exchanged with a steel structure (Figure 3). According to a newspaper article in the *Western Mail* 24th October 1903 the lamp that was used was imported from a company named the Clarence Bros, however, The Bunbury Port Authority retain a plaque in their collection that suggests otherwise. The plaque in their possession clearly states that Chance Brother and Co. Lighthouse Engineers 1873 (Figure 4) were the providers of the lamp. The below excerpt is from the *Western Mail* Saturday the 24th October 1903;

This morning the Colonial Secretary, Mr W. Kingsmill, M.L.C., formally opened the new lighthouse that has been erected at Bunbury. The lamp, which is one of the Clarence Bros. was in use for many years in the lighthouse on Arthur's Head, Fremantle. It has an elevation of 122ft. above sea level and throws a seven-thousand candle-power light with a range of 20 miles (*Western Mail* 1903 p.42).

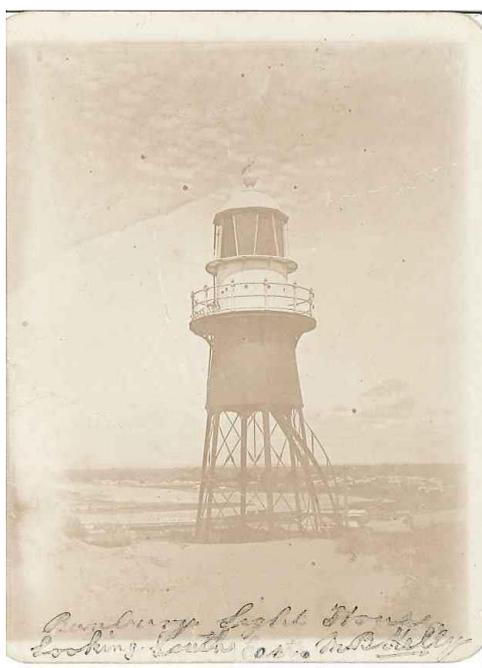


Figure 3

Sir James Timmins Chance pioneered placing lighthouse lamps inside a cage surrounded by fresnel lenses so as to increase the available light output; these cages, known as optics, revolutionised lighthouse design. Another important innovation from Chance Brothers was the introduction of rotating optics, allowing adjacent lighthouses to be distinguished from each other by the number of times per revolution that the light flashes (<http://www.chancebrothers.com/fresnel-lenses.html>)

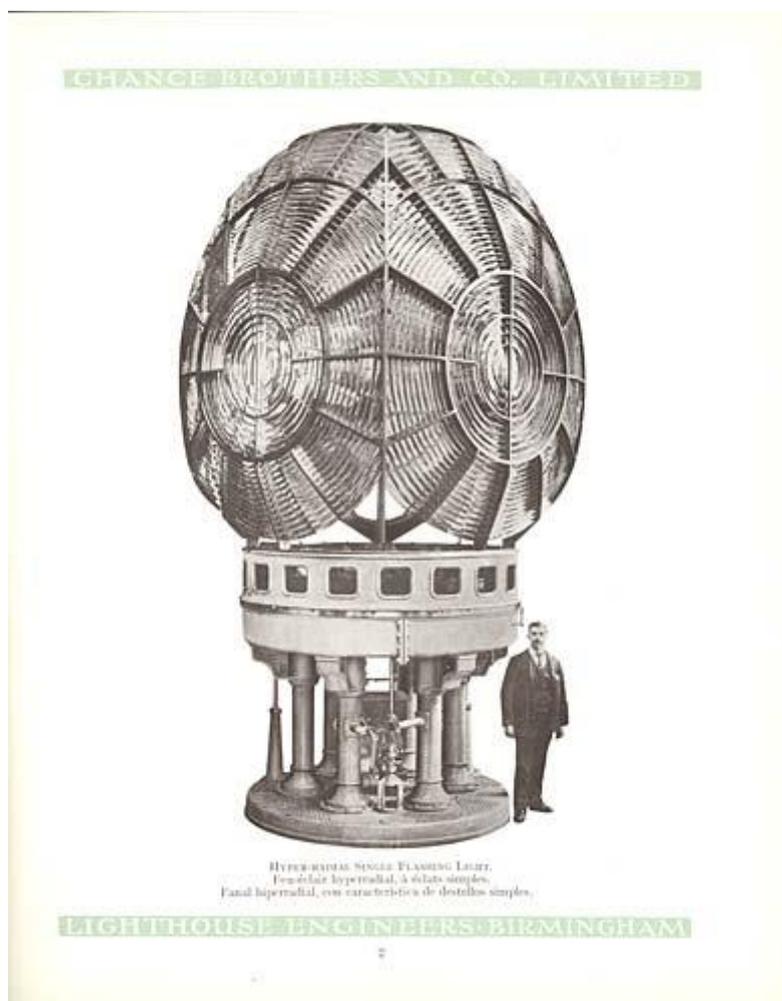


Figure 4

In 1960 the lighthouse was raised in height by twenty feet because of the building of the BP fuel tank installations- the longest being 72 feet in diameter and 65 feet high that obscured the visibility of the light. An extract from the South Western Times, January 21, 1960 describes the event,

To make it more visible, the cone containing the light mechanism was lifted by the largest crane in the state and three cylinders-each about seven feet high- were added to the tower before the cone was replaced. The work was completed in 10 days and cost 8000 pounds (South Western Times 1960)

In 1971 the lighthouse (Figure 5) was moved to the ocean beach with the lower section replaced by a new structure. The height of the lighthouse is now 37 metres above sea level and is visible for

twenty kilometres in clear weather. It is a fixed light, electric third order dioptric (Willinge, J. Full 2009 pp32-33).



Figure 5

A key player in the decision to move the lighthouse was Harbour Master/ Pilot, Captain Robert (Bob) Allsop (Figure 6). The following notes are taken from a conversation between Kim Fee (Information Services Librarian) and Captain Allsop,

The old lighthouse sat upon a pedestal and was situated further up the hill from its position today and was located next to a tank farm. When a new tank was built on the seaward side of the lighthouse Captain Allsop noticed that although the light was visible at night, during the day when approaching from a certain angle the lighthouse was obscured by a large tank. During these times there were no satellite navigation systems; all navigation was done using maps, sextons and line of sight. Coastlines were verified using a book of lighthouses. Each lighthouse was recorded by colour, height, angle of approach etc... (TRIM Reference 4545).

Captain Allsop contacted his superiors in the Department of Harbours and Lights in Fremantle to report his concerns and they came down to verify his claim. Allsop's claim was substantiated and the lighthouse was moved seaward away from the tanks. Allsop also was instrumental in calculating a new height and new bearings for the lighthouse. Allsop also suggested the black and white chequered pattern that is on the current lighthouse after looking up the book of lighthouses to

confirm that the pattern was unique. When asked why black and white, Allsop responded, 'They were his two favourite colours because he liked Black and White Whisky and black and white Scotch Terriers. The top of the old lighthouse had a solid cupola (In architecture, a cupola is a small, most often dome-like, structure on top of a building. Often used to provide a lookout or to admit light and air, it usually crowns a larger roof or dome) on top, Captain Allsop insisted that this was to be kept on top in order to give the lighthouse extra height (TRIM Reference 4545).

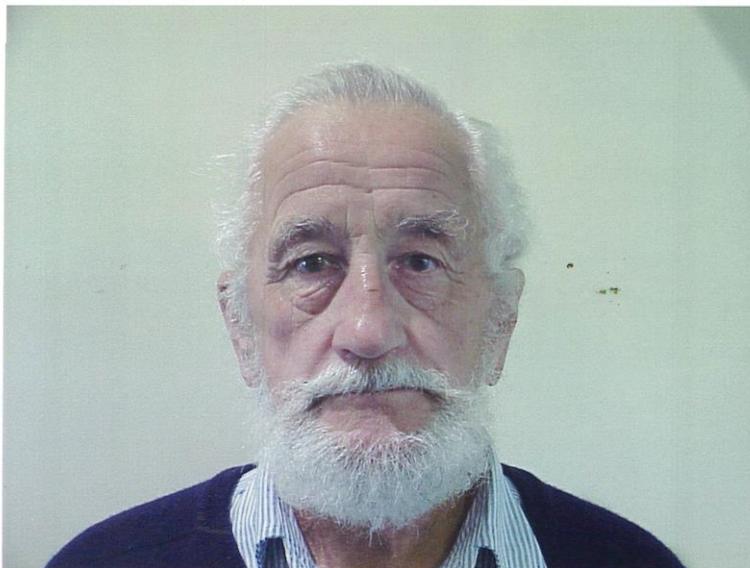


Figure 6

The Keepers

There have been a number of lighthouse keepers, the earliest known was John Sinclair who arrived in Fremantle on the 'Dolphin', a Barque carrying 14 passengers, on the 18th of January 1860 and later came to Bunbury.

In 1901 Captain John George Abrahamson (Figure 7) is listed as the position of Harbour-master to the Port of Bunbury. Captain Abrahamson was commended for his work in Twentieth Century Impressions 1901,

John George Abrahamson (captain) occupies the important position of harbour-master to the port of Bunbury. To his lot falls the entire working of the jetty, the piloting of ships in and out, and everything in connection with the harbour. Captain Abrahamson is a mariner of long and varied experience (Twentieth Century Impressions 1901 p.548).



Figure 7

There is a brief reference to a Mr. Ramage being the keeper in 1909. George Ramage was also lighthouse keeper on Rottnest Island according to an article in the West Australian the 19th of April 1902. The Public Service General Division Pay Classification by the Commissioner, published in the West Australian in 1908, states that Ramage's annual salary was 139 Pounds (29th August 1908).

Charles 'Mac' McCarthy served in Western Australia's Harbour and Lights Department for 44 years. In 1934 McCarthy was transferred from Albany to Bunbury to act as the Coxswain on the pilot boat 'The Petrel'. One of his main duties was to climb Lighthouse Hill each morning and evening to light and extinguish the Lighthouses' light. In later years the light was connected to electricity and he had the comfort of doing the chore from his house. He was also responsible for signalling with the flagstaff that a vessel was in sight. McCarthy lived with his family in Brewery Lane; his wife Ada and three daughters Eileen (Mrs George Thompson), Connie (Mrs Bill Kelman) and Dorothy (Mrs Harold Smith, (Bunbury... I Remember When Book 2 1999 p.40).

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Figures

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