

# Flinders Chase National Park

## Cape du Coedic historical information

The French exploration of 1802 surveyed the south side of Kangaroo Island under the command of Captain Nicolas Baudin with the ships *Le Geographe* and *Le Casuarina*. Cape du Couedic was named after Charles Louis Chevalier du Couedic de Kergoualer (1740 – 1780), a famous French sea captain. Two small rocky islands just south of the Cape were named the Casuarina Islands. They are also known as 'The Brothers'.

The lighthouse marks a section of the coast that has been responsible for a great loss of life. Construction of the lighthouse was long advocated by the Marine Board, but shelved from time to time. A great deal of the credit for its installation was due to the then Premier of South Australia Mr Price.

Mr J B Labatt (Assistant Engineer of Harbours) prepared the plans and the whole station was erected under his direction with the assistance of Mr Lucas. The inaccessibility of the site from the landward side was a great drawback to the work. All the original material and equipment had to be landed from small boats upon the beach just below the cliffs at Weirs Cove, 60 metres in height and carried up a zigzag pathway that was hewn out of the face, until a flying fox was erected.

The first landing was made on 4 October 1907 with Inspector G Wisdom as first-in-charge of the construction works, which were finalised by Mr T Reynolds. All stone for the works was quarried locally and prepared on the spot. A small rock cleft running to the sea was dammed to provide a supply of water for construction purposes and can be seen today on the Cape du Couedic Hike. The building of this lighthouse fully tested the resourcefulness of its planners in a battle against the weather and the seas, as the site is directly exposed to the full force of the Southern Ocean.

The light was first exhibited on Sunday 27 June 1909, with the final cost of construction at 16,000 pounds, including 5,000 pounds for the lights.

The position of head lighthouse keeper was given to Mr G G Duthie, formerly a head keeper at Troubridge Shoals. Mr G E Lockett was appointed the second keeper, while Mr G Marant was made the third keeper. Mr Lockett was a veteran of the South African wars and in 1890 had been shipwrecked in the steamer *You Yangs* off Cape Willoughby and heroically swam out to the capsized lifeboat and rescued the master (Captain Veitch) from a perilous position. The Humane Society later awarded him a bravery medal for this act.

One day while visiting Mr Charles May (pastoralist) at Rocky River Homestead, Mr Lockett noticed a sea chest in the room, and said to Mr May, 'Excuse me sir, but that sea chest belongs to me'. Mr May replied, 'No, that could not be, I got that from the wreck of the *You Yangs*'. Lockett said, 'All the more reason why it is mine, I was a sailor on that ship when she was wrecked'. Mr Lockett agreed to give Mr May a new chest, and an exchange was agreed upon.

## Weirs Cove

Being a cliff bound cape, with poor overland accessibility, much ingenuity was needed to enable supplies, equipment and personnel to access the isolated community at Cape du Couedic. Weir Cove, one mile from the light, was chosen as the site to construct a jetty 60 metres long, a flying fox for carrying materials and stores up the perpendicular cliffs (62 metres) and a large store room and water tank at the top. These were built the same time as the light (1907 – 1908). A gully had to be gouged out of the cliff side for this to operate properly, and a track with steps cut in on the steeper sections was constructed to give foot access to the jetty. The flying fox was originally hauled by a pair of horses and later by a motor-powered winch.

One story goes that a sharp tongued and unpopular keeper's wife was being ferried from the cliff top to the jetty in the flying fox when the motor broke down. It took a couple of hours to be repaired, with the basket (and contents) swinging in the breeze half way down the cliff.



Photo credit: Mortlock library

## The lighthouse

### 1907

The Board, accompanied by an assistant engineer, visited Cape du Couedic in January and selected a site for the proposed lighthouse. The coast is very rocky and precipitous and landing is difficult. A small cove to which



the Board named Weir Cove one mile north-east selected for suitable site of jetty.

The need for a lighthouse in that area had been a great one for many years, as the treacherous waters already boasted a number of casualties. The *Loch Sloy* (Maupertuis Bay 24 April 1899), *Loch Vennachar* (West Bay September 1905), and *Montebello* (Stunsailboom 18 November 1906) were only a few of the unfortunate vessels claimed. One of the worst tragedies was the *Emily Smith* (Maupertuis Bay 15 May 1877), which was washed onto a submerged rock during a storm, capsized and sank with only three survivors from a crew of fourteen and twenty five passengers.

From what is known of these terrible catastrophes it is reasonable to assume they would have been avoided had there been a lighthouse at Cape du Couedic.

In October 1907, operations for a new lighthouse at Cape du Couedic commenced. Preliminary, it was necessary to construct a jetty for landing of stores and building materials. Weirs Cove was selected as a suitable site, one-mile NE of the light, and a flying fox was erected to haul equipment up the 300 foot cliffs.

#### 1908

A telephone line was constructed across Kangaroo Island tapping Kingscote and Cape Borda lines. This was the only communication available for the isolated Cape du Couedic.

#### 1909

On Sunday evening 27 June 1909 Cape du Couedic lighthouse was first exhibited to shipping on the southwest extremity of Kangaroo Island overlooking two small islands known as The Casuarinas.

The occasion, historic in the history of the state, was to have been fittingly celebrated by the presence of the President and Wardens of the Marine Board, who left in the steamer *Governor Musgrave* for that purpose on Saturday afternoon. Half a gale, with exceedingly heavy seas, was however blowing on Sunday afternoon and to the keen disappointment of all concerned, the steamer was unable to enter the little cove at the base of the cliffs near Cape du Couedic. It may be taken as an indication of the weather conditions that this was the first time in 20 months during which the work of construction has been proceeding that the *Governor Musgrave* has not been able to call at Weirs Cove. In close vicinity to the cape, the lighthouse keepers were signalled from the steamer to light up. The request was promptly obeyed, and the lantern put into operation.

In the heavy weather and the impenetrable thick pale of cloud that enveloped the land, the light was not seen to the best advantage while the *Governor Musgrave* was steaming away from the point. But it is satisfactory to know from a telegram the President of the Marine Board received from the Head Keeper on Monday, that the light

and machinery worked satisfactorily during the night. Mr Searcy directed that the light shall be maintained regularly, and in a few days' time he and some of the wardens of the Marine Board will make another trip to the south side of Kangaroo Island to inspect the station and view the light from the seaward.

The new lighthouse consisted of a 58 foot circular stone tower, painted red and white, with a focal plane of 339 feet and a visibility of 25 miles. The head lighthouse keeper and his two assistants lived below, each in a stone cottage, containing four rooms.

#### 1957

Lighthouse de-staffed and automated with the kerosene equipment being replaced with acetylene gas. The cottages were passed onto the Flinders Chase National Park Authority.

The lighthouse keepers at Cape Borda did maintenance checks on the lighthouse once a week; they would take it in turns to drive down to the lighthouse using the West Bay track.

#### 1974

Lighthouse converted to electricity in November.

#### 1991

The light keepers' cottages were restored in 1991 to make them available for rental to park visitors. They are now listed on both the state and national heritage registers.

## The lighthouse keepers



Photo credit: Mortlock library

Being the southwest tip of Kangaroo Island, Cape du Couedic is quite remote, and in fact it was only in 1940 that the first motor vehicle visited there. The lighthouse was constructed between 1906 and 1909. The three cottages (now known as Troubridge, Karatta and Parndana named after boats serving Kangaroo Island) were built to house the three lighthouse keepers and their families.

The following stories by former keepers are fascinating accounts of their lifestyle in times when modern day



conveniences were not available and Cape du Couedic was not nearly as accessible as it is now.

Don Uden was the son of a light keeper stationed here in 1933, and Syd Perrin a light keeper from 1946 – 1949.

<b>Cape du Couedic</b>	Head Keeper	Laver
<b>1933/34</b>		
	Light Keepers	Brinkworth
		Uden

"We lived in the cottage nearest to the lighthouse of the two together [Parndana Lodge]. My mother and father lived there with three children including myself – aged ten. Head Keeper Mr Laver, a bachelor, occupied the cottage on the other side [Troubridge Lodge].

We only received dry and perishable stores with the mail every three months. The stores came by truck from Kingscote. Because the track was so rough it took the truck twelve hours to travel ninety miles. At times caterpillar tracks had to be fitted to the tyres so the truck could ride over the rocks on the road.

Our fresh meat arrived every three months and only lasted about two weeks. For the rest of the time we lived on wallaby, which we snared, young goat or kangaroos shot by our father. Fish and crayfish were caught off the rocks or at the small jetty. The jetty and flying fox were used before we arrived when stores were brought by ship every three months. This was before the rough track was made so a truck could get through. The fish we caught were mainly rock cod and sweep, but I remember Mr Brinkworth catching a big groper off the rocks. We had big fish meals for the next week or so.

My brother and I used to have great fun setting the wallaby snares at dusk and going around first thing in the morning to collect our catch. Wallaby meat was good to eat. It tasted similar to veal. My father used to make slippers out of the wallaby skins. We would often go down to the cliff to a large rocky area in the bay to watch the seals basking on the rocks.

There were many snakes, goannas and wild pigs. We would often have to kill black [tiger] and [pygmy] copperhead snakes on our verandah. They would come there for the warmth. One experience stands out in my mind. My father had been signalling a ship and was walking down the slope from the signal box to the house – he was carrying his telescope. I ran down the narrow track and as I passed him I trod on a snake, which sprang and wound itself around my foot. On the next step it fell off. My mother at the bottom of the slope was watching what happened and screamed. I looked back and Dad was killing it with his telescope. It all happened so quickly that I was not even aware I had trodden on the snake.

One day my brother and I were outside kicking the football when suddenly my mother came running and screaming with fright from the cottage. She had gone to the cupboard to get out some clean sheets and as she lifted the sheets out a three-foot [1 metre] tiger snake was curled up beneath. Dad had to clean out every cupboard in the house before Mum would go inside again.



The contractor Mr Sheridan was a practical joker. One day when he was carrying stores from the truck through the little gate in the front veranda fence, a big black snake was hanging from the roof and its head was about his head level within 18 inches [45 centimetres] from his face. He thought we had hung a dead snake there to frighten him and we thought it was one of his jokes on us, so we all smartly ignored the snake, not falling for the joke. You can imagine the fright we all got some half-hour later when the snake moved. It was very much alive. Dad finally killed it.

At one stage the truck bringing out the mail and stores broke down and only got as far as the homestead at Rocky River, some nine miles [15 kilometres] away where the ranger in charge of flora and fauna lived. My father, my brother and self with Mr Brinkworth had to hike through the bush to Rocky River to get the mail. It was a hazardous track, as on two occasions we had to quickly climb trees when wild pigs attacked us. We had to stay up the trees until the pigs went away.

My brother and I did our schooling by correspondence. We would get assignments of work every three months and three months later our work would come back from Adelaide marked by the correspondence school. My father supervised my schooling and my mother supervised my brother. I think schooling was harder on our parents than it was on us because Mum and Dad had to study our geography, history, English books etc. so they could test us.

Our only form of outside entertainment was a crystal set on which we could occasionally pick up Adelaide, but only one person could hear at a time.

The light keepers had to send daily weather reports through by a hand phone line to Rocky River. The ranger at Rocky River would then phone through to Kingscote and Kingscote would pass to Adelaide. This was the only way weather reports could be made available to shipping. When anyone was sick we would have to ring Rocky River; Rocky River would pass on details to the doctor in Kingscote; then the doctor would have to phone back Rocky River with details of treatment and then Rocky River would advise us. I remember my mother being sick with pleurisy at one stage and at ten years of age I had to do the cooking for about three weeks. From her bedside she taught me how to cook vegetables and wallaby. It was fun for me.



Dad had to make our bread; before he got skilful at the task we would have to put up with a lot of dampers – that is bread that only rose about 2 inches [5 centimetres] high. The dough would sit by the fire all night with the tub wrapped in a blanket so the yeast would work. The next morning he would knead it into loaves and bake in the oven.

Hundreds of kangaroos would feed on the green grassy areas near the lighthouse every night and we would see them as the beam of the light came around. Dad had to take the weather conditions at 10 pm each night. To do this he had to leave the cottage and walk to the weather box near the light carrying the kerosene lantern. One night as he left the cottage a huge old man kangaroo was feeding by the wood heap. When he saw Dad he took a leap towards him and Dad rushed back to the cottage. He tried several times to go out and take the weather but each time he attempted the old roo would jump towards him. We were peering through the window watching the proceedings. Finally Dad gave up – the weather was not taken that night. Mum used to hate lying in bed at night hearing the kangaroos rub their backs up against the wall outside her bedroom. There were quite wide gaps between the skirting boards and wall of the cottage rooms; on cold windy nights we used to stuff newspaper behind the skirting boards to keep the wind out.

The toilet was a little outhouse box some thirty paces from the cottage and next to it was the clothesline. Dad and I used to chase the wild goats away before Mum could hang out the washing. Mum got a fright one day as she went out to the toilet and opened the door to find a big billy goat in there eating the paper. The job my brother and I had every Saturday morning was taking the bucket out of the toilet and burying the contents in a hole in the scrub.



The only visitor except the contractor every three months was the odd fisherman. The occasional fishing cutter would shelter in the bay near the jetty [Weir Cove]. The men would come up and have a meal with us. I remember the fishing cutter *Magic* one-day; Johnny Mullison, one of the fishermen, was carving up a shark for cray pot bait. The knife slipped and he cut his foot severely, it needed stitches, so he started sewing the gash with string and a bag needle. When he got to the end he had some surplus flesh on one side of the wound – he cut it off, then bound it in cloth. No wonder I suddenly got very seasick.

The same fisherman one day was sailing the cutter in a circular motion laying cray pots in the bay. They had a tiller tied down so the rudder was keeping the cutter circling, as a joke Johnny pushed his mate Spoggy Ward overboard – as he was standing at the gunwhale laughing, suddenly the boom on the main sail swung over with a wind change and knocked him overboard. There was the cutter sailing in a

circle with no one on board and the crew swimming in the ocean. It took about one hour before one of them was able to swim in the path of the cutter and clamour aboard. No one witnessed the scene so they would have perished if one were not able to eventually get aboard. They were really tough guys.

I will never forget when Mr Brinkworth and my father had an argument over some matter and they would not speak to each other. It went on for about three weeks. They would not let the wives speak to each other and the children were not allowed to play together or speak to each other. Thinking back it was an incredible situation with two families living in such isolation. The head keeper was a bachelor and it took three weeks before he got Dad and Mr Brinkworth to bury the hatchet so to speak. Mr Brinkworth was an old sailor who came out from England on a three-masted barque as a boy. He played a piano accordion and we used to have sing-songs, but all he could play or sing were sea-shanties.

We could not swim as there was no accessible beach at Cape du Couedic and the sea was too rough and dangerous off the rocks. One day my father, My Brinkworth, his two boys, my brother and I went to Seal Bay [Weir Cove] to swim in the rock pools at low tide. We did not have bathers and swam nude. A fishing cutter was anchored in the bay and we heard gunfire and bullets were ricocheting off the rocks around us. My father and Mr Brinkworth furiously waved towels in the air. The firing stopped. When the fishermen came ashore that night they told us they thought we were seals. That was their story, but Dad could not remember ever sighting pink seals!!!

We were at Cape du Couedic lighthouse when the Japanese freighter *Portland Maru* was sunk. It was loaded with grain bound for Japan. It was steaming between the two Casuarina Islands off the coast. My father signalled the Captain not to steam between the Islands because at low tide he had observed a submerged rock in the middle of the passage. This submerged rock was uncharted – my father had advised the Marine Branch in Adelaide of this rock about two months previously but it was not as yet recorded on navigational charts. When my father warned the Japanese Captain of the danger he ignored him by saying "I have sailed these waters many times before." As we watched the ship sailing between the Casuarinas, it suddenly hit the uncharted rock, which tore a huge hole in the bow. The ship turned in an endeavour to head back to Adelaide, but it took in so much water that the ship had to be beached a few miles around from the lighthouse. A tugboat came from Adelaide to rescue the crew from the beach. As the ship was carrying grain cargo, the water caused it to swell up so much that the ship broke apart; with all this grain food in the sea the area became an excellent fishing ground for many years thereafter."

Don Uden





<b>Cape du Couedic 1946/49</b>	Head Keeper	Bert Cain, 1946
		Bert Winter, 1947
		Fred Schroder, 1948
	Light Keepers	George Tanner
		Alex Roberts
		Syd Perrin

"The lifestyle here was somewhat similar to the 1930s, but in many ways I guess with improved conditions.

The store truck came from Kingscote every month bringing in stores brought from Port Adelaide by the *Karatta*, both perishable and dry stores plus our much looked forward to mail and magazines etc. It was the early part of our stay here, my wife and son (three years old) were with me, we were given kerosene refrigerators in each cottage, this was a wonderful 'mod con' and it saved a great deal of corning and preserving meat. Of course most of the vegetables and fruit were preserved in 'Fowlers' bottles. Flour was a very important commodity, as we had to make our own bread and buns as we did at Neptune [Island]. We became so good at this that later on we considered shop bread as 'second class'. After we got the yeast plant going from a 'store' (from the neighbour) it became just another chore. To deviate a little, when on watch at night, we would unofficially go down to the kitchen warmth and mix up bread dough, which would then rise in the warmth of blankets wrapped around, to be punched down again in the morning and cut into loaves and placed in greased tins to be left to rise again and then into the oven to cook.

The watches were sunset to 10 pm, head keeper's watch 10 pm to 3 am, then 3 am to sunrise when the light was put out. These two late shifts were alternated by the two keepers: 10 pm to 3 am one night, next night 3 am to sunrise, seven nights a week. The duties on shift were to see the light kept flashing by keeping the weights wound up – weights on a cable came down the tunnel in centre of the lighthouse to the base on the log room. All structures were different – depending on machine speed and height of tower. If allowed to come right down to the bottom, momentum would unwind, cable light would stop and an unpardonable offence would be committed. The light must not stop.

The machine was a marvellous piece of clockwork. The lens sits on a mercury bath and is very easy to rotate.

The timing has to be almost split second, as all lights have different flashes, which are charted for all shipping. The

importance of this now is not there because of modern methods, radar, etc.

The weather readings (wind, cloud and type etc.) were taken every six hours and the head keeper phoned them through to Kingscote; from there to Adelaide. The keeper on the last shift would extinguish the light and put up the curtains around the lens. The lens is a magnificent part weighing, I believe, about half a ton. The duties during the day were maintenance, cleaning lens and clockwork machine and all brass work Navy-style. Once a week painting in tower and cottages was needed. The windows outside the light were cleaned every week. Contractors once a year would bring each cottage their supply of wood and saw it up – it was each one's responsibility to make it last the year. After it was cut up each one would stack his supply up in a tidy block.

Water could not be wasted. Each cottage had their tank and this was pumped by hand to over-head tanks for kitchen use and also bathroom. The toilet was still the bucket and shovel.

At our house, the furthest from the tower of the two [Karatta Lodge], we spent a lot of spare time planting a buffalo lawn around the house and watered it with bathroom and kitchen water. We had to dig up the slabs of grass mostly down towards the old jetty, and cart them home in an old wheelbarrow – that was our recreation. We had quite a good lawn but then of course, it had to be cut, the tool a sharp knife. Further recreation was mainly a little fishing from the rocks. Usually on Saturday nights, the ladies and one keeper would go to the head keeper's house to play bridge and have supper. A dress-up night for the ladies and men.

The children when of age would have correspondence lessons by mail each month and previous months' lessons would be sent back. Lessons were supervised by the patient mothers.

The road in from Flinders Chase was very rough and took, I think from memory, about two and a half hours to travel the nine miles [15 kilometres] or so. There were not many kangaroos or wallabies in close proximity to the station. Some people moved further out and set snares. Sometimes herds of feral goats would come in close for food.

It was mostly a very happy group, the three families had group outings in the way of walks, picnics etc. arranged and thoroughly enjoyed.

There were a number of large black tiger snakes in the area. I killed a number in the yard. The house was fairly snake proof. One needed to be healthy out there on the light, because of distance and not very accessible tracks to reach the station. If needed the mail contractor would make the trip to take the patient in. This was not needed during our stay. Shipping was hardly ever seen from there;



just occasionally a steamer's smoke could be seen far below the Casuarinas. Fishing cutters were often about in the bays; sometimes they would come ashore for bread.

The keepers had to practice signals – Morse code, semaphore and with the Aldis lamp.

Head keeper Bert Winter was studying and practicing for his amateur radio licence. I spent a lot of time giving him reading practice on the key.

The life was lonely more so for the women and children. One had to make one's own enjoyment. To keep track of outside news we had our own radios or wireless, the term those days. It worked on a 6 volt 19 plate wet battery. We needed two batteries, one going away to be recharged as the other was brought back."

*Syd and Aileen Perrin*

## The contractor

"A tender has been accepted for the conveyance of stores overland to the various lighthouses on Kangaroo Island, and the successful tender (Mr W M Cameron) had arrived at Kingscote with his six wheeled motor truck. Mr Cameron will make his first trip on March 10 [year unknown, circa 1930s]. He has many difficulties to overcome on the Cape Borda road and also near Bunker Hill, between Rocky River and Cape du Couedic. The latter hill is said to be impassable for motor traffic, but Mr Cameron seems optimistic concerning his contract."

"Several weeks ago we mentioned that Mr W M Cameron had brought a six wheeled Morris motor truck to Kingscote for the purpose of conveying stores overland to the lighthouses. Since then, Mr Cameron had made trips to the different lighthouses. A sand hill between Rocky River and Cape du Couedic, which was considered impassable by motor vehicles, was conquered on the first attempt. This hill is known as Bunker Hill and its grade is one in three foot, being composed of loose sand. Mr Cameron considered his worst trouble was stumps and overhanging trees between Rocky River and Bunker Hill and the rough stones for three miles on the other side of the hill. He set to work and grubbed out most of the stumps and cut back the trees and then knocked down the worst of the stones. He also carted about twenty loads of stone from Rocky River and put on Bunker Hill. The trip to Cape Borda is often made from Kingscote by motor vehicle, but is very boggy in the winter and Mr Cameron intends to go via the South Coast as far as Rocky River, then along the telephone line to the Cape Borda road, which is about sixteen miles [26 kilometres] from the lighthouse and the remainder of the road is passable."

## For more information

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Kangaroo Island



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