

# Friends of Cape Brett Newsletter

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## Introduction

The Cape Brett Lighthouse guided shipping around Northland's east coast from 1910 to 1978 and was home to over 100 lighthouse families. The lighthouse site is managed by the Department of Conservation which has established the Friends of Cape Brett to enable the community to become more involved in its future.

The community group consists of people with an interest in or personal relationship with this magnificent lighthouse and the surrounding area. To join, see the information provided in the link below or utilise the contacts provided at the end of the newsletter.

- For more information about the lighthouse's history
- For the community pack
- For previous newsletters

see the Department of Conservation website at:  
<http://www.doc.govt.nz/templates/page.aspx?id=34087>



## Inside This Issue

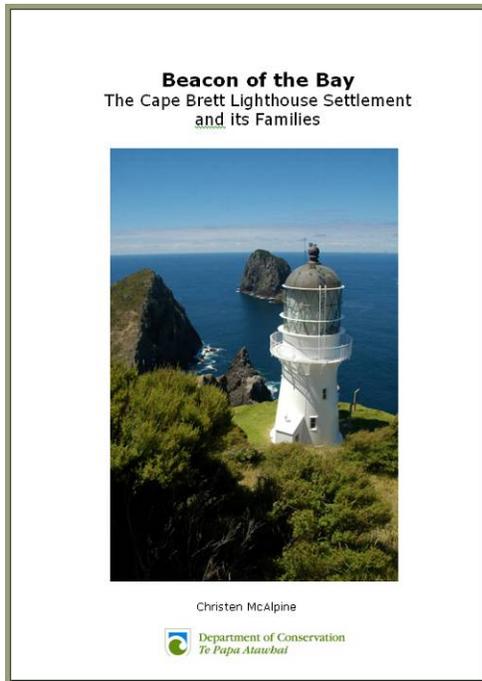
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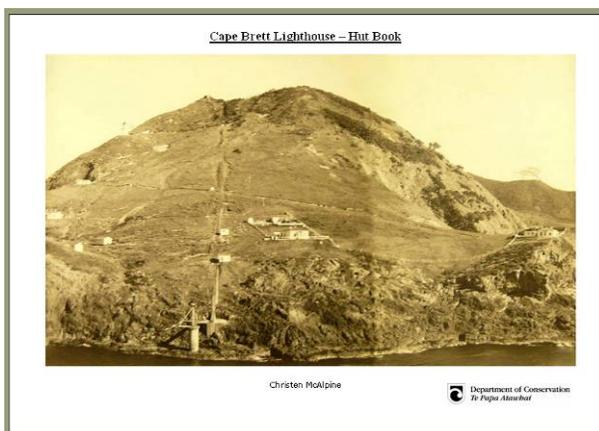
# An Update from DOC

## The Books

Christen McAlpine has now written two terrific books about the Cape. One is the large research book, the other is an A3-sized, 20 page book. Both books have been completed and are currently at the printers in Kerikeri. The second book is the Cape Brett 'hut book,' offering quick facts, engaging stories and lots of pictures for its readers.



**The Cape Brett Research book, entitled:  
'Beacon of the Bay: The Cape Brett Lighthouse Settlement and its Families.'**



**The A3 Cape Brett Hut Book.**



## Caution at Cape Brett landing

By Catherine Perry

What a blow!

The Bay of Islands' historic Cape Brett Lighthouse gantry – the concrete landing leading up to the lighthouse – has been severely damaged by the winter storms.

“We knew the winter winds had been breezy,” says the Department of Conservation's Bay of Islands Area historic ranger, Andrew Blanshard, “and wind gusts in the Bay were reported at 126 kilometres during July, but we have been surprised at the extent of the damage to the gantry.

“It looks as if the huge easterly swells have funnelled up under the structure and blown out the concrete platform. What's even more impressive is that there is no sign of the concrete that's been blasted out – it's all at sea!”

Andrew said the department's engineer would assess the damage and structural safety as soon as possible, and a decision would then be made as to full repair or a tidy-up.

“In the meantime a sign warns visitors of the rather large gap in the gantry, but we do ask people to take care if they want to use the gantry to get up to the lighthouse.”

The Cape Brett Lighthouse and settlement has been the focus of a major upgrade for the last two years, beginning with the repainting of the 1909 lighthouse. Its history has also been written by historic ranger Christen McAlpine, whose book will be published later this year.

In a chapter headed 'The Wild Weather of the Cape' Christen says the Marine Department established a storm damage file in 1916 to manage all the reported damage caused by the weather.

“The first crane was severely damaged in 1916 by a strong gale that whipped up the ocean below the landing. In 1924 a storm washed the crane right off the landing it was bolted to,” Christen says.

The largest reported wave was in 1951. It reached 43 metres above sea level and washed over the roof of the principal keeper's house.



As you approach you see the barriers are missing.



Then you get closer and see the hole.



.....It's just a small hole, thinks Ranger Grant Oakes



Even the tramway wasn't spared.



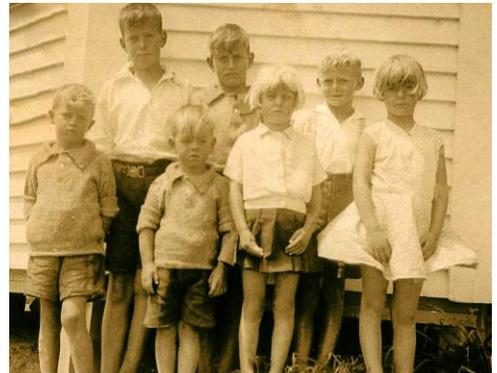
## More Photos

There was a reasonable response to the last newsletter with two more families sharing their photos with us. Ennis Francis and Linnea Jull shared their mother's photos, Dawn Falkner shared some of her family's photos and Barbara Webley shared more of her family's photos.

Ennis Francis and Linnea Jull's mother was a teacher at Cape Brett during 1932-33. Joyce Quarrie (nee Dunbar) had a small album of photos that included some class photos, some of the Sinclair family and others that showed interesting sections of the station.

Dawn Falkner (nee Naulls) shared photos that show her family while they lived at Cape Brett and the Webley photos included more great photos of the Cape.

George Sinclair (on the right) 11<sup>th</sup> Principal Keeper of the Cape Brett Lighthouse (1930-33).



The 1932 School Photo.



# The Cape

By Allan McDonald

During the late 1960-70's Cape Brett was a popular long weekend hike for sections of Scouts and leaders from Whangarei — thanks especially to the very warm hospitality of Noel and Joy Proebstel.

Leaving Whangarei early on a Saturday (often led by Gerrard Schenau) we would drive to Rawhiti via the ferry, then hike around the inland bays to the start of the southern arm of Deep Water Cove, before following the old telephone line clearings up to the main ridge, passing along it to lunch about the top of the intermediate peak Wehiwehi. (It is disconcerting to look back from there and see Kamo Mountain behind Whangarei standing out amazingly close, after all that travel!). Finally it was onwards over Rakaumangamanga, the highest point, and on to the light itself, turning it on to save Noel the task. A trip that encompassed majestic scenery, bird life, visual history, good exercise, and many opportunities for practical scouting.

Memories over the years include: the amazing number of compass directions one can stumble on the lighthouse dam; the incredible deep water flows when hiking on the peninsula in extended heavy downpours; the way two opposite travelling parties of Scouts could pass each other on the narrow ridge above the light, totally oblivious to the other; how the trip could be shortened by skirting Rakaumangamanga rather than climbing over it, and so a series of almost unseen venetian-blind patches was laid. However, ready-reckoning proved rather faulty that day, and the end of the trail is embarrassingly circular and close to the start! We hope it does not fool future hikers.

At the light itself were other memories; the great seascape, the tower and its optics; the overloading of a gaggle of Scouts staying at No. 3 could put on the early power system, and the licking sound of the electrics in the concrete shed, which when slept in prevented sleep till about midnight (at which stage the noise would stop, awakening all again). Or another incident when a foreign liner was expected to pass between Piercy and the Cape — Noel had laboriously practised his lamp Morse in anticipation of sending them greetings as they passed. There was no response so Noel repeated his message a couple of times. Then returned an explosion of dits-and-dahs so fast no one had a show of comprehending it! Also the relaxing rejuvenating atmosphere on the Sunday, so far from business and city life. Conversely that great sadness we all felt when Jim Scapens lost his life at the Cape. The fishing. And the yeast that flourished at that locality!



A close-up of the first house during the early 1930s.



Joyce Quarrie revisiting Cape Brett in the 1970s — accompanied by Cliff Proebstel.



Robert and Dawn Naulls with their catch of the day.



Sunrise over Rakaumangamanga from Waitangi, 2008.

Monday always started with the lighthouse alarm clock — a cruel contraption that started with a gentle discordant beat, increasing in urgency every few seconds to end in a frantic display of loud wrath that demanded urgent rising to avoid deafness. Then it was up and away, around the inner cliff face to rise up the ‘gutbuser’ to Charlie’s Kidd’s track, down to water’s edge at Deep Water Cove, before rising up again to rejoin the main ridge and back to Rawhiti — knowing all too well ‘the Cape’ had that magic charisma that draws one back again.

We were fortunate to have had the opportunity at a time when the light was manned by such helpful hosts, and the trip was relatively inexpensive — and warmly commend those of you dedicated to keeping the experience available to future generations.



## The Lighthouse Stevensons

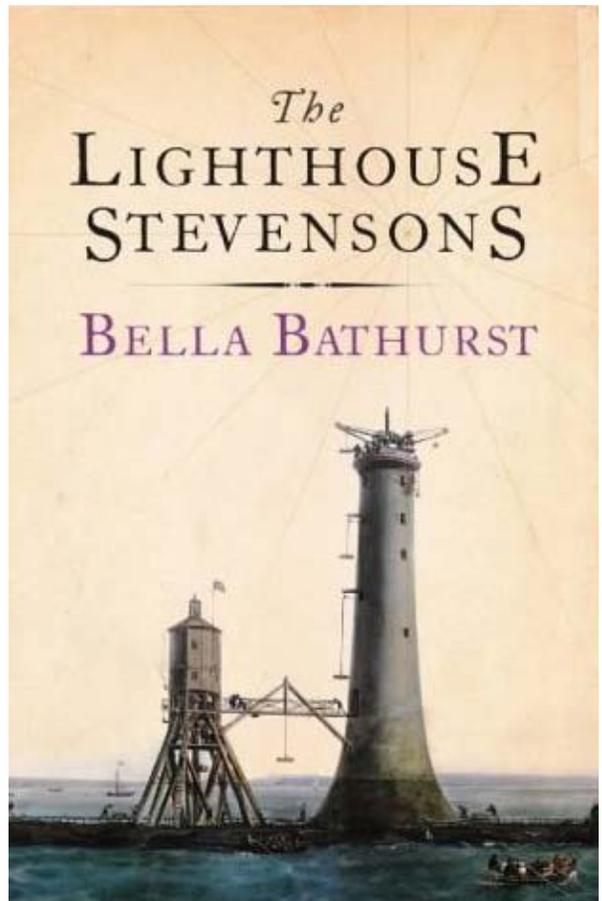
By John Smith

*‘The extraordinary story of the building of the Scottish lighthouses by the ancestors of Robert Louis Stevenson’*

*By Bella Bathurst*

### Introduction

Robert Louis Stevenson is renowned as the author of *Kidnapped*, *Treasure Island*, and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. However what is not as well known is that his grandfather Robert, father, uncles and cousins were famous engineers who designed and built many lighthouses around the Scottish coast for the Northern Lighthouse Board. Robert Louis was himself apprenticed as an engineer but against his father’s wishes became an author. Four generations were responsible from 1790 to 1940 for the construction of some 97 lighthouses. In addition to the structural design and construction they were at the forefront of improved optical systems



“The Lighthouse Stevensons” by Bella Bathurst is a fascinating story of their achievements, but it also records the strength, endurance and skills of the men who worked in dangerous and arduous conditions without the help of modern equipment to construct the lighthouses in extremely difficult conditions.

### History

The early lighthouses were primitive structures and consisted typically of some form of fire on top of a hill or tower. Early lighthouses such as the Isle of May had a coal-fired brazier with a winch to lift up the coal.

Shipwrecks were common and in 1799, seventy vessels were wrecked on the Firth of Tay coast alone. Around the UK coast loss of life numbered many hundreds each year and loss of vessels exceeded a thousand. Wreckers were numerous and they had a vested interest in looting wrecks and bitterly resisted any interference in their trade. Clearly there was a need to improve navigational safety by the construction of lighthouses

Bell Rock, Skerryvore, Muckle Flugga and Dhu Heartach Lighthouses

In a short article it is difficult to cover in detail what the Stevensons achieved, but some of the most noteworthy lighthouses are Bell Rock (1811), Skerryvore (1844), Muckle Flugga (1854) and Dhu Heartach (1872). These lighthouses were remarkable achievements, constructed under very difficult conditions and designed to resist the destructive forces of the sea. They illustrate the Stevensons' skills and abilities.

Bell Rock was covered by 2 m of water at high tide, Skerryvore was constructed on a broken rock just above high-water and the other two were on steep rock outcrops often awash with breaking waves.

The lighthouses were constructed of stones quarried off-site like pieces of a jigsaw. The stones were wedge-shaped and fitted to close tolerances and weighed in the order of a tonne. They had to be transported to site by boat and landed with great difficulty and lifted into place.

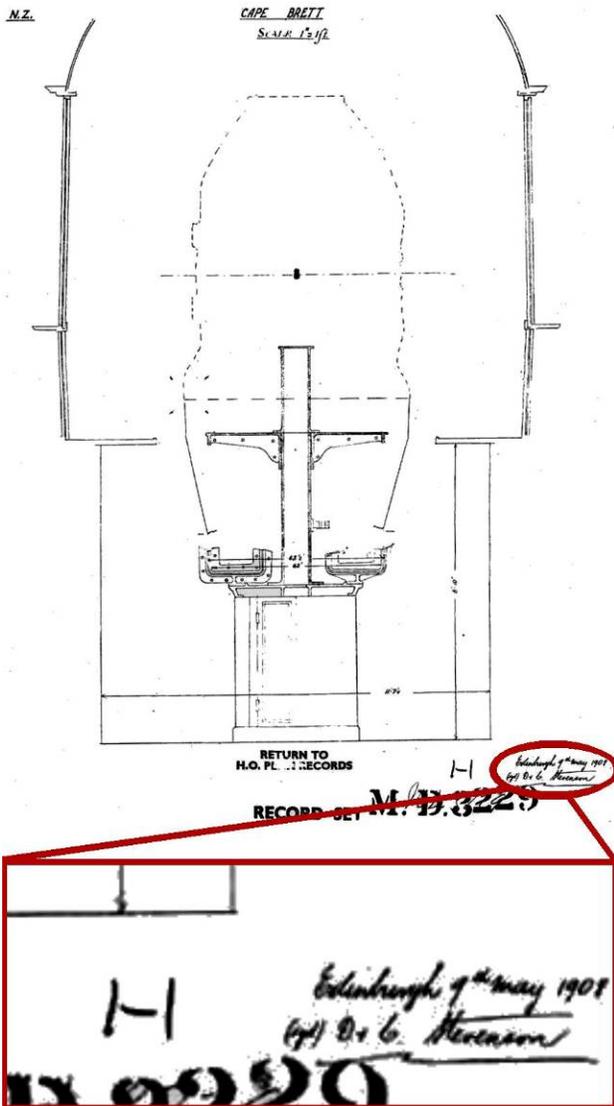
Much of the work in excavation of foundations was done with hand tools, and explosives only became available on the two later lighthouses. Initially the men lived on an anchored boat until temporary quarters were constructed. The work was often disrupted by violent storms and at times their lives were in danger. They worked long hours, seven days a week.

Optics

The early lights were oil, later paraffin burners with parabolic mirrors. The Stevensons liaised with the French Fresnel brothers, and introduced lenses to later lighthouses. In 1858 Faraday developed electric lights for lighthouses but because of budget restraints the first system was not introduced into Scottish lights till 1883. These electric lights were capable of three million candlepower against some of the early lights of 1000 candlepower.

Cape Brett

Cape Brett lighthouse was designed by the Stevensons firm in 1908 when the company was officially run by Charles Stevenson (1855 –1950).



The Cape Brett light designs signed by 'D + C Stevenson'



**Left:**  
David A. Stevenson (1854-1938).  
In charge of the Company during the Cape Brett designing during 1908.



**Right:**  
Charles Stevenson (1855-1950).  
Ran the company while brother David was ill.

## Future Plans

### **Open Days**

Are delayed at this stage due to the damaged landing.

### **The Lighthouse Interior**

Will be cleaned in the coming months, though this is heavily dependant on the weather.



### Future Newsletters

Could we please have your email addresses so we can send the newsletter electronically – Thanks. ☺  
We would love to receive input from you for future newsletters – so send in anything you wish to share about the Cape Brett Lighthouse, it could be photos, stories. – we don't mind.  
Send your contributions to Christen at the address below. ☺

## Credits



**Written by** Christen McAlpine

**Contributions by** Catherine Perry, John Smith and Allan McDonald.

### Photo Credits:

**Page 1** – Andrew Blanshard.

**Page 3** – Landing Pics from Andrew Blanshard;  
Historic Photos from Quarrie Family Collection

**Page 4** - Historic Photos from Quarrie and Naulls Family Collections.

**Page 5** – Sunrise Photo by David Heller; Book cover from Amazon.com.

**Page 6** – Stevenson Photos from  
<http://www.bellrock.org.uk/stevensons/> ;  
Lighthouse designs from Marine Department files.

**Pages 7-8** – DOC photos.

## Contact Details

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