

## LIGHT HOUSES OF NEW ZEALAND

# CUVIER ISLAND K3886



**Latitude: 36°26' South**  
**Longitude: 175°47' East**

The light was lit for the first time on 22 September 1889, and the keepers withdrawn in 1982. The light shines from a 15 metre high white metal tower, and is 119 metres above sea level. Its white light flashes every 15 seconds, and can be seen for 19 nautical miles (35 kilometres).

Cuvier Island Lighthouse guards the approach to Auckland Harbour and the Hauraki Gulf. The light marks the first sight of land for ships coming in from the Pacific.

Cuvier was the first cast iron tower to be built in New Zealand. The hilly terrain of the island and the steep cliffs up from the sea made the construction of tramways essential before building could begin. As there was no beach near the site, the materials had to be hauled nearly 100 metres up the steep hill as soon as they were taken from the boats.

The light was first lit in September 1889. Originally powered by oil illumination, the lighthouse station was converted from oil to diesel-generated electricity in 1939.

There were always three keepers and their families living on the rugged and exposed light station, from the time it was first built up until the 1970s. They lived in houses sited in a small sheltered valley at sea level near the landing place. To tend the light the keepers had to climb the slope using a nearly vertical zigzag track. On a stormy night this could be treacherous, as the principal keeper wrote in

1892: "I have to inform you that the cause of illness of keepers at this station is through the hill work at night...[climbing the slope the keeper] gets into a state of perspiration and coming into a lightroom where there is such a draught causes him to get a chill which makes him not fit for his work." The isolation was also a cause of irritation for most keepers. Although this was a feature of all lighthouses, on the island stations this was taken to the extreme.

In 1901 the principal keeper wrote: "This is the worst station I was ever at. There is no convenience. Just fancy yourself on an island for three months without communication. Should any of us have met with an accident how would it fare with us should we happen to want medical aid [sic]. This cannot be allowed to go on and the sooner something is done the better." Mail and supplies were brought by boat every three months. In the early years the station had a high turnover of keepers because of the isolation.

From 1899 until 1911, trained carrier pigeons were used to carry communications to Auckland, although with little success. They were later replaced with more reliable radio communications.

Cuvier is the most distant of the offshore lighthouses, and the sense of isolation is intensified by the heavy fog that often surrounds it. Because of the fog and storms the lighthouse was equipped with rockets for use in an emergency, but were rarely used.

In 1982 the station was automated and the last keepers left the island. The light is now monitored electronically from Wellington. It was solarised in 1996 due to the high cost of refuelling and maintaining diesel generators. It now has a small rotating lantern powered by solar panels.