

LIGHT HOUSES OF NEW ZEALAND

FAREWELL SPIT K4182



Latitude: 40°33'South
Longitude: 173°00' East

The light was lit for the first time on 17 June 1870, and the last keeper withdrawn in 1984. There are two light sectors, white and red, on the 27 metre-high tower which stands 30 metres above sea level. The white light can be seen for 19 nautical miles (35 kilometres) and the red light for 15 nautical miles (27 kilometres). The light flashes every 15 seconds.

Farewell Spit is a 25-kilometre long sand spit situated at the top of the South Island. It is a wildlife sanctuary and home to Farewell Spit Lighthouse. Construction of the light station began in 1869. Because the ground was almost at sea level, the tower had to be built higher than those on cliffs or headlands, so it could be seen easily by seafarers. Many ships had been wrecked upon the spit, and it had been feared by mariners for years. The light was first lit in June 1870, a lantern on top of wooden stilts. In 1891 it was found that the hardwood used for the tower was rapidly

decaying because of the weather and abrasive sand. The tower was replaced with a steel latticework construction and the new light was ready in January 1897.

Building lighthouses was never an easy task, and sandy Farewell Spit offered a unique set of challenges. The light station stood on a very windy beach and one night the stormy weather whipped up the sand, completely covering a pile of bricks. Workers spent most of the next day plunging crow bars into the sand, searching for the bricks. They were never found, and a new lot had to be shipped to the station.

The lack of shingle on the site made it difficult to make concrete, so shells were used instead, although these too were in short supply.

Farewell Spit was not a popular station among keepers as the site was completely bare of vegetation and sand got into everything, leaving keepers with the never ending job of shoveling sand away from their cottages.

The first attempts to grow any kind of vegetation proved unsuccessful until just before the turn of the century, when the keeper organised loads of soil to be brought to the station with the mail. He planted a windbreak of macrocarpa pines, which protected the station from the sand and became a well known landmark for passing ships. Farewell Spit was converted from oil to diesel generated electricity in the 1930s. It was made very clear to the keepers that the electricity was strictly for the lighthouse, and not for domestic purposes. In 1957 the generators were finally

allowed to be used one day a week for washing and to run the radio for the children's correspondence school.

A year later, however, it was felt that this privilege was being abused. The keepers were reminded not to leave the generators running to make morning tea with the electric jug, or try to do extra washing before the sun came up and the lighthouse switched off. This ceased to be a problem when the light was connected to mains electricity a few years later.

The lighthouse was fully automated in 1984, and the last keeper withdrawn. The tower now stands in a nature reserve, and the light is monitored electronically from Wellington.