

LIGHT HOUSES OF NEW ZEALAND

MOKOHINAU ISLANDS K3734



Latitude: 35°54' South
Longitude: 175°07' East

The light was lit for the first time on 18 June 1883, and the keepers withdrawn in 1980. The light shines from a 14 metre-high white stone tower, and is 122 metres above sea level. Its white light flashes once every 10 seconds, and can be seen for 19 nautical miles (35 kilometres).

The Mokohinau Islands lighthouse is situated on Burgess Island the middle of the three islands of the Mokohinau group. It is one of the most distant lighthouses from the mainland, located at the northern approach to the Hauraki Gulf. The site was chosen because it provides seafarers with a good landfall position when arriving from the Pacific Ocean.

The light arrived from England in 1876, but was not put to use for another seven years as there was some debate as to whether Mokohinau was the best situation for a lighthouse. Some members of the shipping community considered the Hen

and Chickens group of islands off Whangarei, or Bream Head at the entrance to Whangarei Harbour, to be better locations.

Construction of the lighthouse finally began on the original site chosen on Burgess Island, and the Mokohinau light was lit in June 1883. The light originally used oil to power the illumination, but was converted to diesel-generated electricity in 1939.

Its isolation from the mainland caused significant personal hardship for the early keepers and their families. There was no communication with the mainland, and mail and stores arrived only three times a year. This was a constant worry for keepers, as many times the boats were delayed. After four months the food supplies would be very limited, and keepers would have to live on whatever they could find on the island to survive.

Only a few years after the light was established, the keepers felt this problem had gone far enough and wrote directly to a Cabinet Minister:

"My family is reduced to a state of starvation. All such stores as flour, oatmeal, tea, coffee, cocoa, potatoes, preserved meat, butter, rice, etc are entirely exhausted. With the exception of about a pound each of sugar and salt and a few pounds of tobacco, I have no provisions whatever. Distress signals have been flying for several days but no vessel has come within signalling distance...hence my appeal to you in the hope that a shorter and more regular service will be established."

In 1908 the keepers were still in the same situation, so Kiwi

ingenuity was called upon to help. One of the keepers made a tin boat with tin sails. He cut a hatchway on the deck and placed three letters in it, one to the Marine Department, one to the nearest general store, and the other to a friend. Painted on the deck were instructions to whoever found it to send the letters on. When the wind was right, the boat set sail.

The boat made it to the mainland and was picked up on a beach, and within nine days of the boat leaving Mokohinau, a stores ship was sent to the island. The Auckland Museum still has the tin boat on display - known as the 'smallest mailboat in the world'. As the twentieth century progressed, the stations were fitted with radios, ending the light station's isolation. Despite this, Mokohinau was not a favourite with keepers. The island was described as:

"Austere, rigorous, demanding, bounded on all sides by sea and sky, and she kept a strict dominance on those who inhabited her."

In 1980 the light was automated and the keepers withdrawn. The light is now monitored electronically from Wellington.