

LIGHT HOUSES OF NEW ZEALAND

STEPHENS ISLAND K4236



Latitude: 40°40' South
Longitude: 174°00' East

The light was lit for the first time on 20 January 1894, and the last two keepers were withdrawn in 1989. The light shines from a 15 metre-high white cast iron tower, and is 183 metres above sea level. The lighthouse was converted from oil to electric power provided by diesel generators in 1938. It flashes once every 6 seconds, and can be seen for 18 nautical miles (33 kilometres).

The Stephens Island lighthouse marks the north western approach to Cook Strait. In January 1894, the light was lit for the first time. The original light used oil to fuel the illumination, in 1938 it was converted to electric power provided by diesel generators. Shipmasters were reported to be pleased and relieved when the light appeared. The tower is the highest above sea level in New Zealand and the original light was also the most powerful - but at a cost. At £9,349, the total cost of the lighthouse was twice that of many other lights in the colony.

Until the introduction of helicopters to service the lighthouses, access to Stephens Island was extremely difficult.



Following a journey over the turbulent seas of Cook Strait, the way ashore was via a basket swung on the end of the station's crane, which would winch passengers and goods up from the deck of the servicing ship. Keepers and their families were then faced with the long walk up the 180 metre-high hill to their homes.

On Stephens Island the keepers were also honorary wildlife rangers, keeping an eye on all vegetation, the tuataras and the dove petrels which also inhabit the island. Keepers were often paid an honorarium by the Wildlife Service to keep a check on visitors, maintain fences and provide reports on wildlife matters.

Stephens Island station was a lonely and difficult post. Right up until its automation in 1989, the only communication with the mainland was by means of a radio telephone - to be used for lighthouse duties only. However, it was this seclusion that was often the attraction to those living on light stations.

In 1980, one of the last keepers at Stephens Island told the Weekend Star newspaper that life on the station:

"...makes you realise much about yourself and your own capabilities. Out here you end up being true to yourself. You have no outside pressures coming in. We live life to the full here, the way we want to live."

The light is now monitored electronically from Wellington.