



REEFS, WRECKS & *Daring Sailors*

Rottnest Island's reefs are a blessing and a curse for boat owners – they bring fun but they bring danger. This article explores the history surrounding this impending danger for unwary sailors.

There's a free tour that runs on Rottnest Island called Reefs, Wrecks and Daring Sailors. It's the perfect title for this second article on Rottnest's contribution to Western Australia's maritime history because it encapsulates so much of the activity that has been found in the waters off the Island.

The reefs and sandbars around the Island have been a blessing and a curse for people in boats since Europeans started to frequent it more than one hundred years ago.

If you think of it from a more recent perspective - any of us who have fished around the Island have sacrificed our share of tackle to the reef in the hope of some fun, or anyone who has taken their boat around the coast of the Island knows the dangers the reefs bring. There aren't many bays you can work your way into without having an understanding of and keeping your eye out for the markers indicating the correct way to make a safe passage through.

On the other hand if it wasn't for the reefs, and a bit of daring in the people (read: sailors) who frequent them, we there wouldn't be the amount of stories there are on the annual salmon season at the 'Chicken Run', dodging breakers and icy temperatures for winter skippy and tailor and getting into the caverns for crayfish through summer.

But when you take these dangers back one hundred years, before we had charts, sounders and an intimate knowledge of the area there is an incredible amount of history surrounding the infrastructure and services that have been set up on the Island to help the safe navigation of these waters around the Island.

SHIPWRECKS

The first recorded shipwreck since the settlement of Western Australia took place in May 1842 when a 124 tonne schooner sailing from Bunbury to Fremantle rounded the north-eastern tip of Rottnest Island and became stranded on the reef. The schooner

was called 'Transit' and the memory of the shipwreck remains in the name of the reef you often see breaking on the right when you come into Thomson Bay, Transit Reef.

The boat was sailing up around the top of the Island as this was considered the safest passage compared to negotiating the way through the Stragglers area. The schooner was just coming around the top of the Island and beginning to steer its way into the Gage Roads Anchorage when it hit the reef and began to take water.

No lives were lost in the event but little was salvaged from the wreck. The captain managed to save his chronometer and 120 gold sovereigns but apart from that not even the type of cargo is known.

This was the first of many ships to be wrecked on the reefs and rocks of Rottnest Island. Following Transit's demise around twelve boats have met the same fate. The 'Gem' went down in 1876 with the loss of ten lives; the 'Macedon', a 500-tonne iron steamer,

went down in 1883; the 'Janet' and the 'Denton Holme' all went down before the close of the 1800s and all on the same area of reef as the Transit.

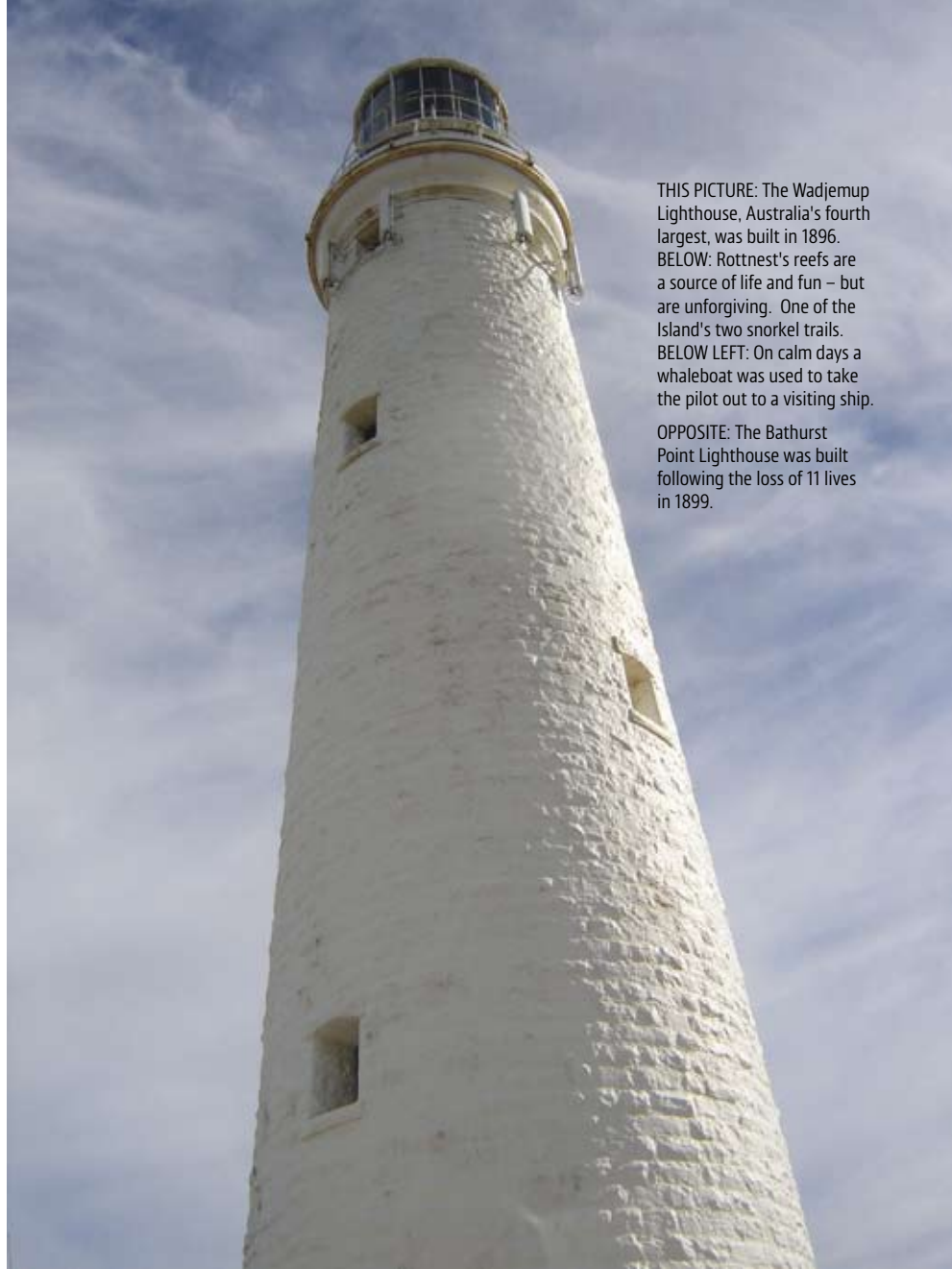
Over the years this corner of the Island has catered for half of all the shipwrecks around Rottneest. Three others occurred near Parker Point and the remaining three from City of York Bay (named after the City of York ship wrecked there) down to the West End.

The realisation of the risks involved in navigating the Island brought a change to the infrastructure and the services found on Rottneest.

PILOT BOATS

It was decided that a pilot boat station should be set up in order to help the safe passage of vessels around the Island and its obstacles to Gage Roads where the boats could then be unloaded or taken into the Fremantle Harbour.

In 1846 the first boathouse was set up and from 1848 the operation commenced. Over a span of 55 years the pilot station operated from Rottneest before being moved to the mainland in 1903. The process during this time generally involved communication between the incoming ship and the lighthouse keeper via flags or flares depending the time of day. This process established where the ship was going and whether a pilot was needed. The lighthouse keeper



THIS PICTURE: The Wadjemup Lighthouse, Australia's fourth largest, was built in 1896.

BELOW: Rottneest's reefs are a source of life and fun – but are unforgiving. One of the Island's two snorkel trails.

BELOW LEFT: On calm days a whaleboat was used to take the pilot out to a visiting ship.

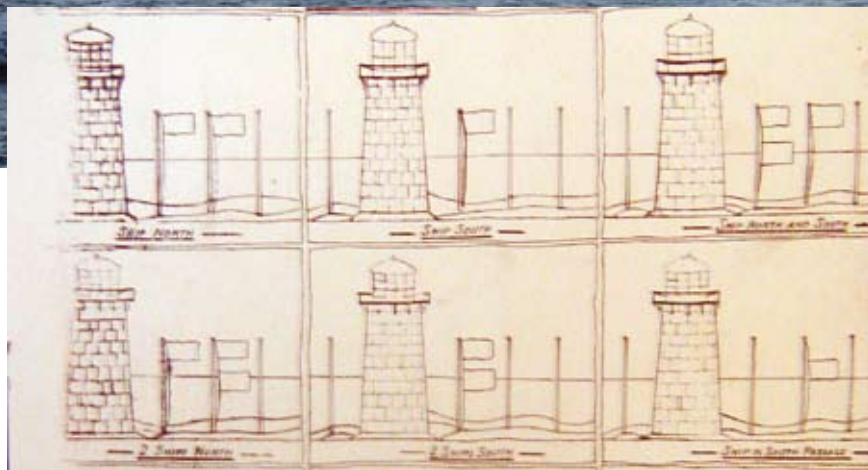
OPPOSITE: The Bathurst Point Lighthouse was built following the loss of 11 lives in 1899.



Time continues to grow the number of Rottnest's reefs, wrecks and daring sailors.



THIS PICTURE: Radar Reef – not much to see at low tide. Even less at high tide!
BELOW: An example of how signaling between lighthouse and pilot station worked.



negotiation. This would aid sailors by showing the breadth of the area to be avoided at night rather than indicating the general vicinity of the Island.

Unlike the Wadjemup lighthouse the Bathurst is only half the size and projects light in a half circle rather than the full rotation.

HISTORY TODAY

There's no shortage of information around Rottnest Island explaining these historical moments. From commemorative plaques, informative signage or anchors and other relics you don't need to look for it, it finds you. There is also the museum around the back of the mall, the pilot boat house in Thomson Bay just north of the ferry pier and a range of tours (some free and some not) which can take you to the lighthouse, through the settlement discussing the Island's maritime evolution or just with general information on the Island's history.

These past two months have helped illustrate Rottnest Island's significant contribution to Western Australia's maritime history. There are the shipwrecks, pilot boats, lighthouses and the tales of tragedy that go with them. There is the Island's place in Fortress Fremantle and then there's the history we create each time we visit it. PBs are broken, new dive spots are found, surf breaks are discovered, sunburn records are broken or, occasionally, people still manage to damage or sink their boat on its reefs each summer.

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then communicated back to the settlement (or to Fremantle after 1903) the details of the situation at hand.

Once it was determined that a pilot was needed, a range of boats were available to take him out to the ship. For rough days a lugger was sailed out. On calmer days a whaleboat was generally rowed out.

In 1903 the pilot station was moved from the Island to Fremantle. The system was now somewhat more advanced than flags and flares and saw the first signal station set up near the Bathurst Lighthouse on Rottnest's north-eastern tip before moving it twelve months later to the Wadjemup Lighthouse in the middle of the Island.

Now when a ship was sighted from the Lighthouse it was telephoned through to Fremantle and a steam-powered pilot boat was sent out to meet it. This system stayed in place until 1949 and at that point the signal station on Rottnest Island was no longer required.

LIGHTHOUSES

The first lighthouse to be built went up in the middle of the Island in 1842. It turned out to be too small for the Island's requirements so a second was built next door on the same hill. This

lighthouse, the Wadjemup (meaning 'across the water'), was built fifty years later in 1896 and was constructed with two purposes in mind. Firstly as a warning that the Island was there and secondly as a navigational aid to help provide the approach to the Fremantle Port.

The lighthouse is the fourth largest in Australia and its beams are visible on a clear night 20 nautical miles out to sea. If you're not familiar with the way lighthouse beams work it's not one single beam rotating around 360 degrees to warn sailors of danger but rather a system of mirrors provides a number of beams rotating in order to provide more regular visibility of the light. As a side note, if you're ever staying on the Island it is well worth the effort to get to the base of the lighthouse on a clear night and look up to see these beams in action. It's a mesmerizing experience.

In 1899 the City of York struck a reef towards the western end of the Island after communication difficulties with the lighthouse which eventually saw the loss of 11 lives. This event prompted the authorities to build a second operational lighthouse on Bathurst Point on the eastern end of the Island to assist sailors with their