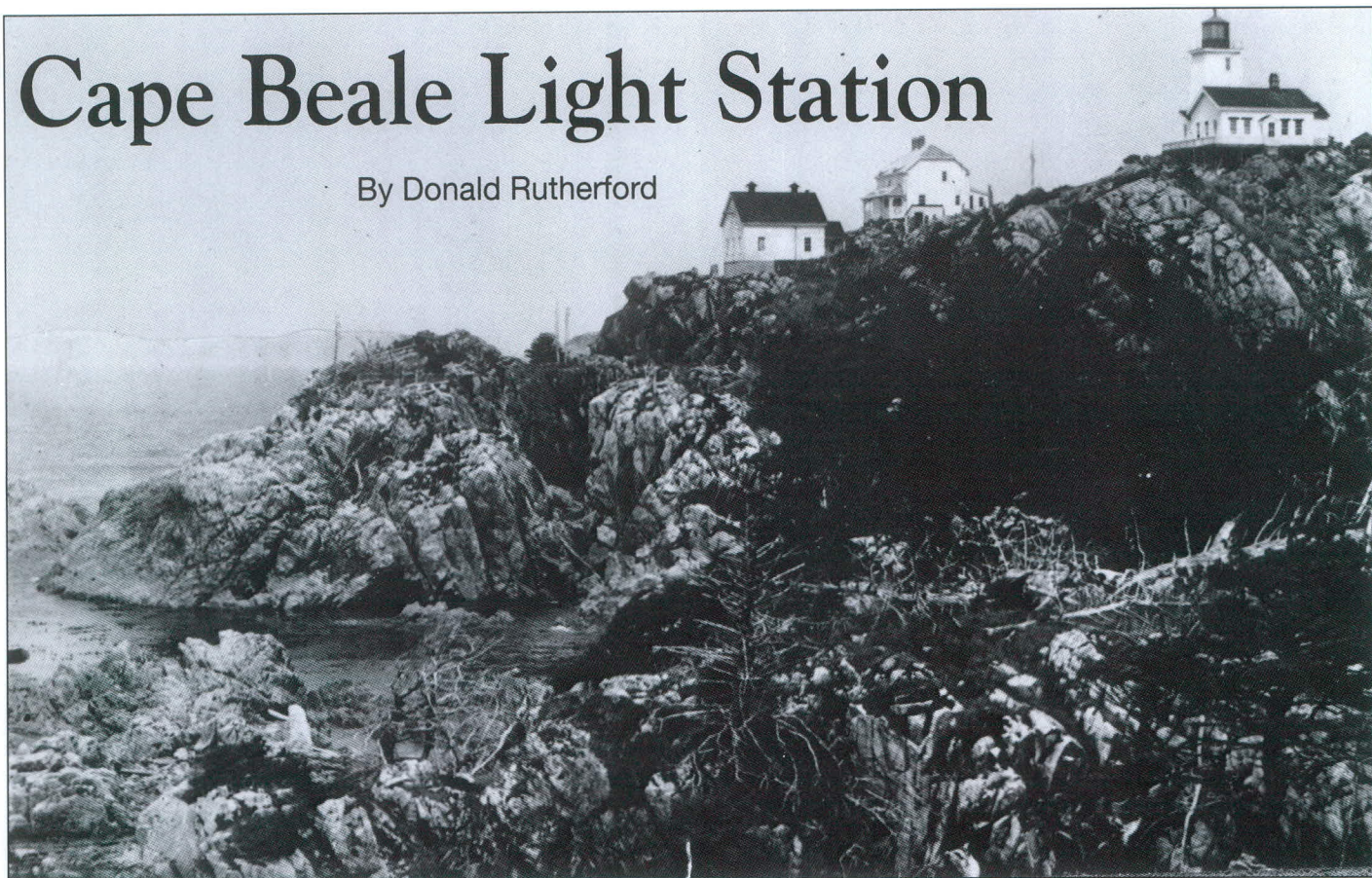


# Cape Beale Light Station

By Donald Rutherford



About forty miles north of Cape Flattery, rectangular Barkley Sound cuts into the west coast of Vancouver Island. From one corner of the island-studded sound, Alberni Inlet trends northeast, almost cutting Vancouver Island in two. Today, Port Alberni, a logging town and port, sits at the head of the inlet. During the years immediately following Confederation in 1867, people hoped that Port Alberni would become the western terminus of the transcontinental railway.

In 1872, Benjamin W. Pearse, the assistant surveyor-general of the province, and several civil engineers sought a suitable site for a lighthouse at the entrance to Barkley Sound. Arriving off Cape Beale at the southern entrance to the sound, they embarked in a work boat but were unable to land below the cliffs of Cape Beale.

The following year, 1873, Pearse and Sir Joseph William Trutch landed on Cape Beale from a Royal Navy sloop, H.M.S. *Tenedos*. Trutch was the lieutenant-governor of British Columbia. They agreed that the lighthouse would

be built on Cape Beale, a rocky island connected to the mainland by a tidal beach.

Later that year, Charles Hayward of Hayward and Jenkinson, the contractor, and a construction crew embarked on the schooner *Surprise*. Building materials for the lighthouse and keepers' house and supplies for the workers were stowed in the holds. They would cut lumber for the tower and dwelling from the trees on the cape.

The *Surprise* anchored at Dodger Cove, and Ohiat Indian Village and Trading Post on Diana Island at the entrance to Barkley Sound. Hayward hired some Indians to raft the materials and supplies to Cape Beale. After landing through the surf, they hauled everything up a steep incline to the site.

By the following spring, a thirty-one foot high, square, tapered tower and a keepers' house stood on the cape. Both were painted white. The black lantern was 167 feet above the water. When the workers installed the second order Fresnel lens, lamp and operating mechanism, they found that glass chimneys for the

lamp were missing. They had to be reordered from San Francisco, delaying operation of the light.

On July 1, 1874, Robert Westmoreland, the first keeper, lit the lamp. On a clear night, the light could be seen nineteen miles away. Westmoreland remained at the lighthouse less than four years. He had found that the bills of lading did not agree with the supplies unloaded from the lighthouse tender. Westmoreland speculated about the fate of the missing coal and oil to anyone who would listen. Captain James Cooper, the marine agent in Victoria responsible for British Columbia lighthouses, sued him for slander and won. The investigation resulting from Westmoreland's charges eventually led to Cooper's arrest. Cooper skipped bail and fled the country.

Westmoreland's successor was Emmanuel Cox, the keeper of the Berens Island Light at the entrance to Victoria Harbour. In 1878, Mr. and Mrs. Cox, their three daughters, Frances (the oldest), Annie and Pattie, and their two sons, Gus and Ernest, boarded the pad-

dle wheel tug *Alexander* in Victoria. With the bark *Brierly* in tow, the tug headed for the entrance to Juan de Fuca Strait, where the bark was cast loose to continue her voyage. Then the tug landed the Coxes at the trading post at Dodger Cove.

Bad weather kept them there for nearly a week. Then Ohiat Indians paddled the Coxes and their possessions in canoes to a pebble beach below the lighthouse. During part of the five mile trip, a pod of orcas (killer whales) escorted the canoes. When the orcas came close to the canoes, shrieks of terror erupted from the children. The shrieks

gave way to laughter when the Indians carried them through the surf. Two Indians had to carry the 200 pound Cox. The Indians then landed the Coxes' possessions and carried them up the steep cliff to the family's new home.

**T**hough only one hundred miles from Victoria by sea, the Cox family might as well have been a thousand miles from civilization. Their only communication with the outside world was by canoe or occasional ship. Two or three times a year, a lighthouse tender brought their mail and supplies.

The government hired an Indian

named John Mack for \$5 per month to provide assistance to the light station. For more than fifty years, he delivered mail and supplies. His main duty, however, was to watch for a Union Jack flying at the light station. The flag signalled that the light had failed or the Coxes were in distress. When saw it, he would paddle over to the light station.

Once when Cox was in Victoria, the clockwork mechanism that turned the lens failed. Mrs. Cox hoisted the flag to signal John Mack. When he arrived, she gave him provisions and a letter for the marine agent in Victoria. John Mack set in his canoe and arrived in Victoria two days later. Emmanuel Cox got the replacement parts and, with John Mack and his canoe, sailed aboard the *Sir James Douglas* for Cape Beale.

In the meantime, the light had to flash its warning. And the flashes had to be precisely timed. For ten nights, the family took turns cranking the lens at a constant speed. The three girls took the early shift. Gus and his mother cranked it from midnight to dawn. Ernest was still too young to be allowed up in the tower.

While the Department of Marine and Fisheries often took its keepers for granted, Cox's efforts were appreciated by others. An entry by a visitor in the log for December 28, 1883 reads,

This is to certify that, for the last two years I have been off and on Cape Beale light and from my own personal knowledge can say that I know of no better light north of San Francisco than the above light. . . . and I believe Mr. Cox the keeper is entitled to the highest credit for the manner in which he has taken care of the light. I have heard hundreds of shipmasters make the same statement.

Captain W.H. Stevens, a Puget Sound pilot from Pilot Boat No. 8, signed the entry.

Eventually a telegraph wire was strung on trees along the coast to connect Cape Beale with Victoria. Pattie Cox, the youngest daughter, became the telegraph operator at the light. One day in 1890 she sighted a full-rigged ship lying becalmed near the breakers. She



Opposite page—The first light station constructed on Cape Beale in 1874 remained in service until 1958. Photo courtesy Canadian Department of Transportation.

Above—The present lighthouse on Cape Beale is a steel-frame tower with an aluminum lantern and an enclosed stairwell. The slats on the tower serve as a daymark. Photo by Jim Ryan.

telegraphed Victoria for a tug to aid the ship, the *Old Kensington*. A signal came back that the vessel had no agent in Victoria to guarantee the fee of \$500. Pattie replied that she had the money in her savings account and would guarantee the towing costs. The tug arrived in time to tow the ship to safety. Before casting off, the tug's skipper told the captain of the *Old Kensington* that he owed his rescue to the lighthouse keeper's daughter.

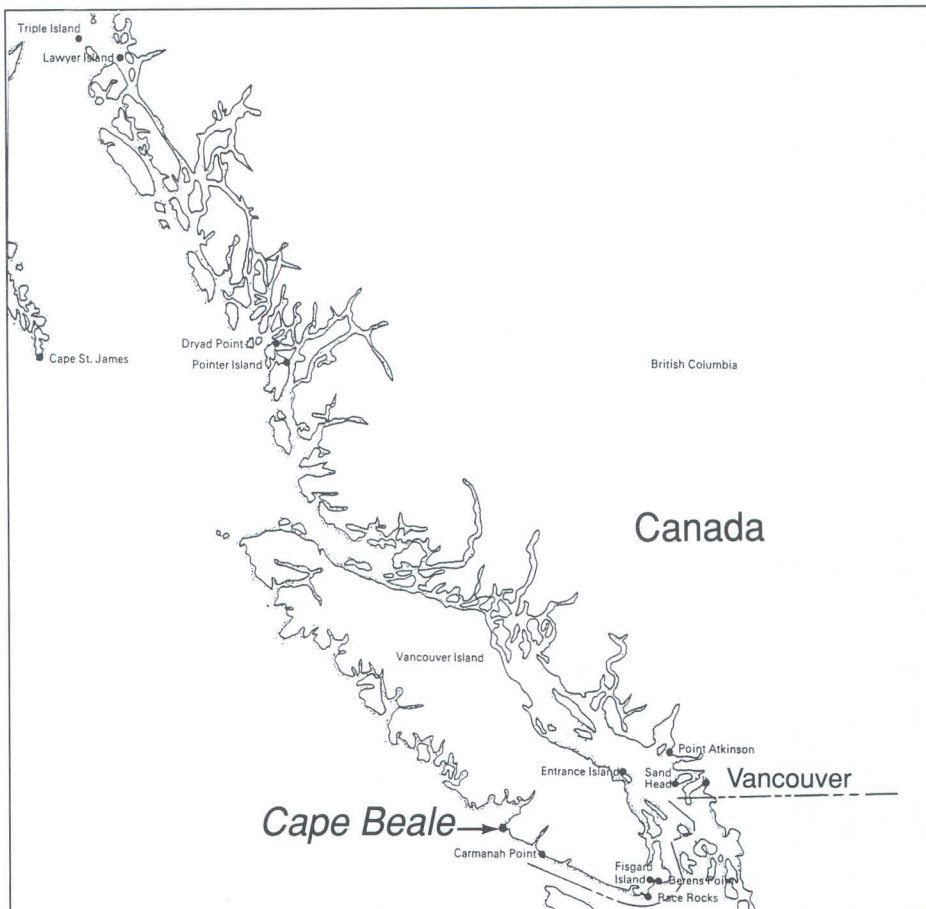
A year later, Pattie received a package from China. The captain had sent her a silk shawl, a daguerreotype of the ship under sail and five pounds of tea. After five years as operator, Pattie married and moved to Port Alberni. There she pounded the key for another forty-five years. Her family undoubtedly missed her hunting ability. She had become a crack shot and kept them supplied with fresh meat.

On several occasions, the Coxes shared their home and food with shipwrecked sailors. In 1880, the coal laden ship *Glen Fruin* sprang a leak at sea. To keep the bark afloat, the crew manned the pumps for several weeks while making for the Columbia River. A storm blew the *Glen Fruin* north and the crew abandoned ship off Vancouver Island. Emmanuel Cox's log for December 13 reads,

Captain Lang and 4 seaman from barque *Glen Fruin* of Greenock at 6 of pm. All in exhausted state, wet, cold and hungry. Captain Lang left 8 men at Dodger Cove until weather moderated sufficiently to get them here. . . .

The rest of the crew straggled in three days later. By the time the schooner *Favourite* took them to Victoria, two weeks later, they had made a large dent in the Coxes' provisions. In appreciation, the sailors had chopped a winter supply of firewood and helped to paint and polish the station and make repairs. One sailor gave Frances a handwoven rug with the Cross of St. George as the centerpiece.

On the morning of May 16, 1894, John Mack saw the Union Jack flying at the light station. When he reached the station, he found that his old friend Emmanuel Cox had died of a heart



attack. The telegraph line was down so John Mack set off on a forty-mile paddle to Alberni. At two in the morning, he pounded on Pattie's door. Then he paddled Pattie and her son Tom back to Cape Beale.

The government denied Mrs. Cox's request to be appointed keeper. Like most British Columbia lighthouse widows, she received nothing for her years of service as her husband's unpaid assistant. The government didn't give pensions to assistant keepers, and twenty years of payments by Cox into the pension fund brought nothing to his widow.

**T**homas Patterson succeeded Emmanuel Cox as keeper of the Cape Beale Light. For twelve years Patterson and his wife Minnie tended the light. Then, their lives changed. At sundown on December 6, 1906, Patterson lit the lamp and cranked up the weights of the clockwork mechanism that turned the lens. During the night, a gale battered the light and spray from surging waves blew across the headland. At dawn, he spied a ship offshore

and awakened Minnie. They took turns watching through a telescope as the dismasted vessel drifted closer. Her decks were awash and a group of seamen clung to the stump of mizzenmast.

Patterson tried to raise Victoria on the telegraph but the line was down. The only way to help the sailors was to get word to the lighthouse tender *Quadra*, at anchor off Bamfield. He couldn't leave the light by night or the foghorn by day, so Minnie went out into the storm.

Rain and hail pelted her as she waded through frigid, waist deep water to the mainland. Then she ran and slogged her way through forests, climbing over deadfalls, and along beaches for almost four miles to the head of Bamfield Inlet. The rowboat usually moored there was gone. Exhausted, dishevelled and bruised, Minnie walked along the shore. When her way was blocked and the water was shallow, she crawled under the overhangs. If the water was too deep, she forced her way through the dense salal underbrush.

At last Minnie stumbled up the steps of Annie Cox McKay's home. Annie's husband, James McKay, was away repairing the telegraph line. Without waiting for a cup of tea or a change of clothes for Minnie, the two women launched the family skiff. Then they rowed through the rain to the *Quadra*. Ten minutes later, the lighthouse tender was steaming out of the inlet, working up to full speed.

Back on shore, Annie and Minnie climbed up to the cable station. On seeing Minnie's appearance, the two operators shut down their transmissions and put on the kettle. After gulping down a cup of hot tea, Minnie announced, "Now I must get back to my baby." The operators tried to get her to rest, but, as her baby was not weaned, Minnie was adamant. Accompanied by the two men, she hiked back to Cape Beale.

By the time *Quadra* arrived, the dismasted vessel was in bad shape. Waves broke over the deck and the bow had split open. *Quadra's* second officer and some of the crew launched a longboat. Just as they took off the last of the stranded sailors, the vessel struck the reef and broke up.

Minnie Patterson became known as "Canada's own Grace Darling." (Grace Darling, daughter of the keeper of Longstone Light in England, had helped rescue the crew of the steamer *Forfarshire* in 1838.) Minnie's part in rescuing the crew of the *Coloma* appeared in many papers. She received several awards, but they couldn't mend her health, shattered along the trail to Bamfield. Weakened, the mother of five children became tubercular and died five years later.

**T**he light changed over the years. The oil lamp gave way to electricity provided by generators and an electric motor was installed to turn the lens. No longer did the keepers have to wind up the heavy weights several times a night. In 1908, a diaphone was installed. By 1958, dry rot had riddled the old wooden light tower at Cape Beale. It was replaced by a steel skeleton tower and an aluminum lantern, both painted red, with an overall height of thirty-two feet. The aero-beacon in the lantern was 167 feet above the sea. The

lantern was reached by an enclosed stairway in the center of the new tower. The light also served as a daymark, so white slats were installed on three sides of the tower. The old keepers' dwelling was replaced with three single-family houses. In 1968, two Airchime fog horns replaced the diaphone. The station is staffed by two keepers who live there with their families.

## Visiting Cape Beale Light

Bamfield, the jump-off point for Cape Beale, can be reached by car or ship from Port Alberni. If driving the 55-mile gravel logging road from Port Alberni to Bamfield, stop at the Tourist Information Center as you drive into Port Alberni for information. Ask for the East Section MacMillan Bloedel Recreation and Logging Road Guide. The center also can provide information on the M.V. *Lady Rose* which makes a three-hour cruise down Alberni Inlet to Bamfield. The *Lady Rose* serves Bamfield on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday year round and on Sunday from July 1 to September 30. During the summer, this is a popular trip so make reservations in advance. The phone number is (604) 723-8313.

Bamfield is a small village situated on both sides of Bamfield Inlet. The logging road ends in East Bamfield on one side of the inlet. West Bamfield on the other side has no roads, only paths and a wooden boardwalk. Water taxis provide transportation between the two sides of the village. The *Lady Rose* docks first in West Bamfield and then in East Bamfield. Accommodations are in East Bamfield and are limited so be sure to have reservations.

A visit to the lighthouse is not a casual walk and demands careful planning. Plan to visit when the tide table for Tofino shows tides of 6 feet or less (allow for daylight savings time when in effect). Be sure to leave the lighthouse before the incoming tide floods the beach connecting Cape Beale to the shore. Though the trail was rebuilt in 1988, the 3.7 mile hike to the lighthouse

can be fairly strenuous. Allow at least two hours for travel in each direction. Wear good shoes and be prepared for west coast weather.

The trail head to Cape Beale is at the foot of Bamfield Inlet. Take a water taxi or the gravel road from East Bamfield. About twenty minutes down the trail, bear right at the fork. Five minutes further along, keep right at a fork near a bog. Half a mile beyond the bog, is crescent-shaped Tapaltos Beach.

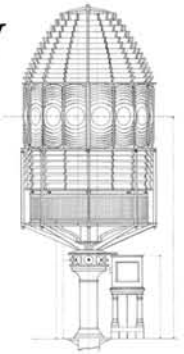
Walk south along the beach to where the trail resumes, about 250 feet from the south end. From there it's up and down hill to the lighthouse. At the end of the trail, cross the beach and climb up the steep paved walkway to the lighthouse. Cape Beale may be remote, but the visitors log contains names from all over the world.



This article is excerpted from a soon to be published guidebook to the lighthouses of British Columbia. Author Donald Rutherford, one of the original members of our Society's Board of Commissioners, was an editor for Sunset Books. He has a vast knowledge of the sea, and has published numerous lighthouse articles in many nationally syndicated magazines. He and his wife Vicky now reside in Vancouver, BC, Canada.



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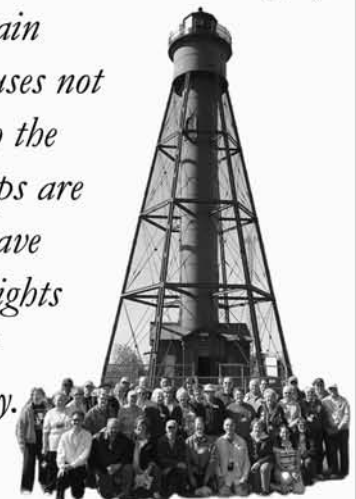
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