

## YOUR VIRTUAL DISCOVERY VISIT – 48 TO THE HERITAGE STORIES OF ROTTNEST ISLAND



*The Virtual Visit series was initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic when Rottneest Island was closed to the public due to social distancing restrictions and periods of use for quarantine from March to June 2020.*

*Now that the Island is again open to visitors, these Virtual Visits are continuing in 2021 to enable a further enjoyment of stories introduced at the Wadjemup Museum, the Chapman Archives or sites around the Island.*

*Enjoy, reflect and share.*

### SITE EVOLUTION – WADJEMUP HILL SIGNAL STATION



When the last pilot left Rottneest Island in 1903, a continuous record of more than 55 years of piloting ended. A new system was established with a signal station set up near Bathurst Lighthouse for the Fremantle Harbour Trust. The intent was for this station to observe requests for pilots from incoming vessels. Once a vessel was sighted, the news was telephoned to the lighthouse in Fremantle and the new, steam-powered pilot boat dispatched from there.

*Time Ball and Lighthouse at Arthur Head, Fremantle*

The Bathurst location proved adequate for vessels approaching from the North, but the topography of the Island prevented adequate observation for vessels approaching from the South. This was shown on the evening of 21 November 1903 when the barque *River Indus* stood off the Island by the South Passage. In the morning, when no pilot had appeared, the *River Indus* proceeded through the South Passage without a pilot. She struck a reef but without serious damage and docked at Fremantle.

As a result of this incident, the Signal Station was dismantled in 1904 and re-erected near Wadjemup lighthouse in a location which offered 360 degree visibility.



The relocated Signal Station had an interesting role in the evolution of telephone and radio communications and related technologies in Western Australia. The full details are contained in chapters in John Moynihan's book, ***All the News in a Flash***. Connie and Lyle Pym, favourite characters from *Twilight Tales* and *Mysteries, Myths and Legends* make frequent appearances in the narrative as do the sometime conflicting needs of the Commonwealth, the Fremantle Harbour Trust, and the Rottneest Board of Control.



Between 1937 -1939, the old Signal Station was replaced with a larger structure with additional facilities. It was this structure that would serve as the Fremantle Port War

Signal Station (RAN Station 141) during World War Two. The profile of Signal Ridge or Wadjemup Hill was also altered during the war, by the construction of the Fortress Observation Post building creating with one deletion the silhouette familiar to visitors today.



1 – Water tank 2 – Oil storage 3 – Main Lighthouse 4 – Lighthouse Cottage (removed to Settlement 1952) 5 – Telephone pole in foreground 6 – Signal Station 7 – Fortress Observation Post

The story of **RAN Station 141** and the role of the Women's Royal Australian Navy Service (WRANS) will be the subject of a future Virtual Visit. The contribution of the WRANS and individual stories are well documented in the Chapman Archives in text, photos, and oral histories.



The Signal Station remained in operation until 1949 when compulsory pilotage was abolished, effectively making the signal station on Rottneest Island redundant. It was variously used by the University of Western Australia and the Fisheries Department to support their research programs on Rottneest. This use ceased in 1980 as the Station continued to deteriorate. Tourism funding of \$128,000 in 1992 facilitated conservation.

The works included a replica water tank matching the original as well as structural stabilisation and weatherproofing. Twenty years later, the Signal Station remains in good condition although safety considerations still do not permit general public access.



(L – R) Signal Station, WRANS' Quarters, Battery Observation Post



WRANS operating the signal lamp on tower adjacent to Signal Station.

## The Fog Signal



Recent bush fires have reminded us how disorienting smoke haze can be. Smoke haze can be similarly disorienting when it drifts out to sea particularly when approaching a harbour or coastline. The same is equally true for sea fog. A traditional hazard warning to mariners in such visibility conditions was a fog signal. First suggested in 1899, one was installed on Rottneest.

From a cabin at the base of a 12 metre mast, a signalman hoisted an 225 gram powder charge which was automatically detonated by electricity when it reached mast top. The resulting sound alerted shipping to an approaching landfall. Detecting distances over water can be variable, but the signal could usually be heard in Fremantle, 21 km away. Charges were set off every 7 or 15 minutes.



The fog signal ceased operations at the end of 1949. The remains of the fog signal now lie abandoned down the slope below the Signal Station. Perhaps with scaffolding and contractors available on site at the Lighthouse, some arrangement could be made for the mast to be re-erected as a further interpretive aid to tell the diverse stories of Signal Ridge/Wadjemup Hill?