

YOUR VIRTUAL DISCOVERY VISIT – 57 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.

The Rottneest-Fremantle Link

The underlying nature of the link between Rottneest and Fremantle can be found in Major Edmund Lockyer's 1827 diary written when he was establishing the British colonial outpost in Albany to forestall French claims after the expeditions of Nicolas Baudin on the Western Australian coasts between 1801 and 1803. In his diary Lockyer mentions that he had been told by sealers that "*there was a bar across the entrance to the Swan River and no vessels could get in; that the anchorage outside was bad and the only shelter for a ship was at the north end of the Island of Rottenest*". It was the need for safe transit from the ocean approach off northern tip of Rottneest to the coast at the mouth of the Swan River gave significance to links between Rottneest and Fremantle.



Nicholas Baudin



Edmund Lockyer

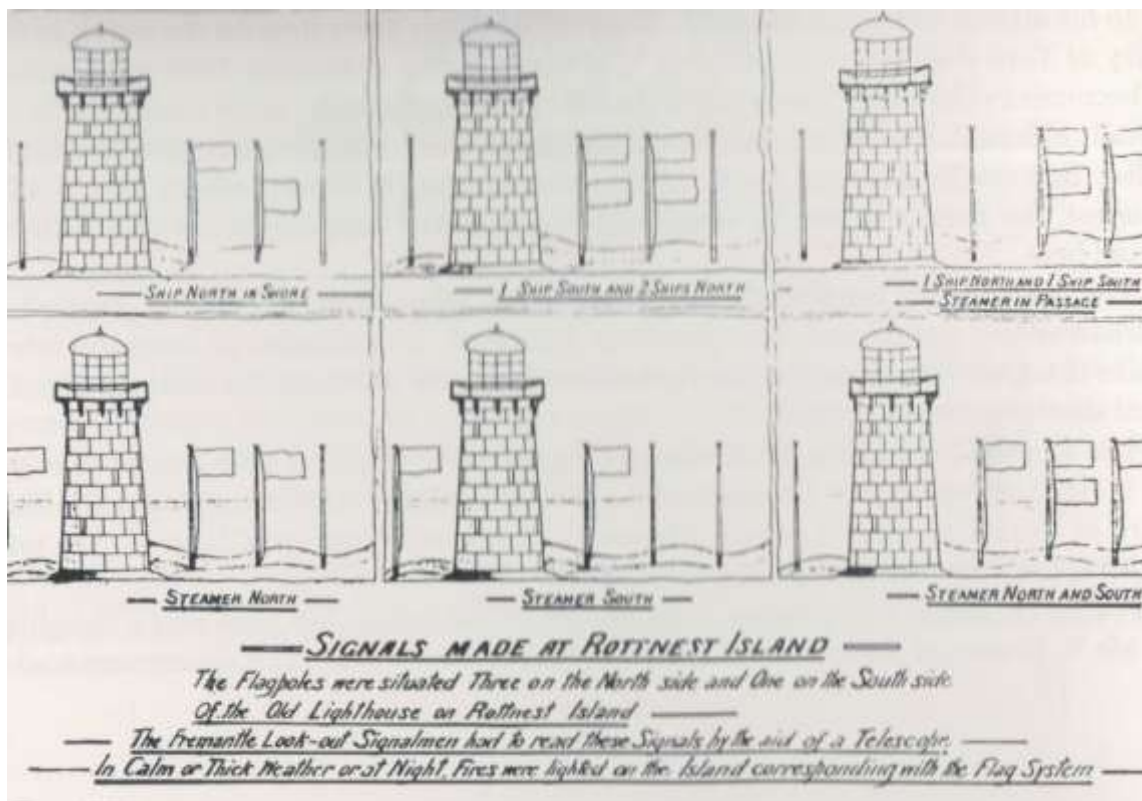


John Septimus Roe

Whatever its limitations, Fremantle was de facto harbour for the Swan River Colony and was managed as such. Evidence of this is the direction given by Surveyor General, Septimus Roe, to the Deputy Harbour Master Daniel Scott to transport the surveyor, Benjamin Smythe to Rottneest, a task which resulted in the gazetting of Kingstown.

The inadequacy of intermittent boat journeys as a reliable means of communication were highlighted by the adventures of Constable Welch in 1838. Lawrence Welch had departed Garden Island with aboriginal prisoners with instructions to prepare accommodation, Rottnest having just been gazetted as an Aboriginal Prison, conveniently known as the Rottnest establishment. Five prisoners subsequently escaped by boat and Welch signalled by fire in vain for three days. No definitive signal code had been arranged and Welch's efforts to raise attention were confused with similar signals which had been used to alert the whaling station of whales entering the bay.

The evolution of visual signalling systems between Rottnest and Fremantle over the next century is covered in detail in John Moynihan's book, *All the News in a Flash: Rottnest Communications 1829 – 1979 (Telecom Australia/Institution of Engineers, 1988)* in chapters 2 and 3. Until 1879, the methods used were flag, fires, lamps, boat rockets and guns. The heliograph was introduced in 1879 providing (when conditions were suitable) much greater flexibility in message content. The signalling points on Rottnest were variously Wadjemup Hill (Lighthouse and Signal Station), Bathurst Point (Signal Station) and Signal Hill overlooking Thomson Bay. The primary station on the mainland as at Arthur Head (Lighthouse and Signal Station).



Signals emanating from Rottnest had to be bi-directional. Seaward they needed to provide navigation and pilotage instructions to vessels intending to enter Fremantle port. Similarly, once ships were sighted, their approach direction had to be communicated between lookouts and to the pilot service and its vessel(s). This could at various times be between the Lighthouse and the Bathurst signal station, the pilot vessel at sea or Arthur Head. Approaching vessels might be relying on Admiralty or Board of Trade instructions and charts which might be out of date or at variance with what was actually in place locally. Additional instructions were contained in the *Australian Directory* and the *WA Government Gazette*. These disconnects were to lead to a significant tragedy with the *City of York*,



Evolution of the Arthur Head Signal Station and Lighthouse



In addition to alerting the pilot boat, the isolated citizenry of the Swan River Colony eagerly awaited the news of ship arrivals dependent as they were on imported goods but as important, news, mails and official despatches. The business advantage to be gained by timely notice of ship arrivals was also appreciated in Perth. As early as 1858, it was reported that a Rottnest signal of ship arrival was seen in Perth from Mount Eliza. It was proposed that a path be cleared from My Eliza to the coast to assist intervisibility.

Basic signalling between Rottnest and Fremantle for the purposes of pilotage, shipping arrivals and administration operated in parallel with the heliograph installed in 1879 at the insistence of Governor Ord. Nevertheless, when the threat of hostilities with Russia arose in 1885, instructions were issued for fire, smoke and flag signals to flash the news of sighting of foreign warships. As it was no Russian warships were sighted and this emergency system was never put to the test.

Defence links between Fremantle and Rottnest were again featured with the Commonwealth funding of construction of Fort Arthur Head and Fort Forrest for the defence of the newly establish port facilities at Fremantle. Fort Arthur Head remained part of Fremantle Fortress along with Rottnest fortifications (Oliver Hill and Bickley) until the 6 inch guns at Fort Arthur Head were withdrawn and relocated to Leighton Battery in Mosman Park in 1942.



Signalling from Fremantle continued to Gage Roads if not to Rottnest, from the Port War Signal Station atop the Grain Silos on the North Mole until 1945.

A sampling of links for enjoyable follow up and serendipitous exploration:

<https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-the-voyage-of-nicolas-baudin-and-art-in-the-service-of-science-62038>

https://search.sl.nsw.gov.au/primo-explore/search?vid=SLNSW&tab=default_tab&highlight=true&query=any,contains,Edmund%20Lockyer&primoQueryTemp=Edmund%20Lockyer&search_scope=E&form_build_id=form-8-MPAI6NB-5VTXIZAWYqvaxKn4BvC5wV1eBtqAeHmuc&form_id=slnsw_sitewide_primo_search_form&op=%3Cspan%20class%3D%22sr-only%22%3ESearch%3C%2Fspan%3E%3Ci%20class%3D%22slnsw-icon%20slnsw-icon-ZoomOL2%22%3E%3C%2Fi%3E

<https://fremantlestuff.info/arthurhead/fort.html>

https://purl.slwa.wa.gov.au/slwa_b5985889_2

<https://archives.rvga.asn.au/2015/02/01/the-west-australian-burning-question/>

<https://archives.rvga.asn.au/1986/09/01/arthur-head-as-a-communication-facility-from-seminar/>

<https://fremantlestuff.info/fhs/fs/3/Bizzaca.html>

http://www.artillerywa.org.au/archives/2000_3.pdf

<https://thewest.com.au/news/wa/perth-our-city-of-the-future-ng-b88553561z>