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With Federal budgets tightening on coastlines, lighthouse keepers find themselves



ST SENTRIES

in the crosshairs. But what really lies behind the beam of light?

BY GORD MORRISON PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRAIG WARDLE





Back and forth: Both the view of the Lennard Light and the view from the light to the waters below are equally stunning. The view from the light also offers a strong reminder of how treacherous these waters can be for transient mariners.



The bright beam from the light station at Lennard Island guided us toward safe anchorage for the night. We were three fishermen tired from a long day of fighting seas and salmon aboard *Orion Sea*. It was a summer evening 20 years ago and I recall being rocked to sleep by the gentle movements of the protected water. Tucked in behind the lighthouse near Tofino on British Columbia's rugged west coast, we were among fourteen other boats anchored for the night. I slept soundly knowing that Lennard Island would be our guardian, taking the brunt of the waves and swells approaching from the open ocean.

PRIDE OF THE PACIFIC COAST

The Pacific Ocean has been smashing against the rocks at Lennard Island long before seafarers explored these waters. Built in 1860 near Victoria, nearby Fisgard served as the first light on B.C.'s west coast with the light station at Lennard Island going up in 1904. Many more would follow, as lighthouses were built all along B.C.'s coastline in the early 1900s to guide and protect the many mariners in the area.

Despite their rich history, these light stations were among the many Canadian lighthouses declared "surplus." Federal Fisheries and Oceans is following the United States by selling off lighthouses, and automating many of the remaining ones. As a mariner myself, I am saddened by the prospect of automation. From a marine safety point of view, I question the wisdom of decommissioning light stations for the sake of appeasing accountants. Unlike in the U.S., Canada's marine rescue and observational capabilities aren't as broad due to a smaller coast guard. In the farthest, most isolated regions of Canada's coastlines, manned lighthouses must provide search and rescue services. The ultimate goal of placing human response capability in such isolated regions is to benefit mariners, both commercial and otherwise.

When I was trawling along B.C.'s west coast, I was most aware of the lighthouses at night. Their slow consistent beams of light continuously helped orient me. My mind would occasionally drift to the light station itself as I wondered what life would be like amidst such isolation. I was very curious about the lifestyle and day-to-day routine of a light keeper. Who are these people and what exactly do they do? I knew they kept the light shining and turning, they had advanced communication equipment, and they enjoyed unparalleled views of the Pacific. Beyond that, I didn't know much else.

Fortunately, wonderment turned to opportunity when I discovered that one of my friends, Russ Greenall, had a brother who was the head light keeper at Lennard Island. I asked the obvious question, "Could we go visit him?" So, at the invitation of current light keeper, Tony Greenall, I tagged along with Russ and Craig Wardle, another friend and photographer. To say the least, it was illuminating!

KEEPER OF THE LIGHT

The light at Lennard Island is situated south of Clayoquot Sound off the southwest coast of Vancouver Island, just 2½ miles from the beautiful resort town of Tofino. Despite being in service for over 110 years, the Lennard Island light station was one of those rumoured to be on the budgetary chopping block. Vast advances in GPS, weather tracking, and navigational systems have led some people to feel that lighthouses are relics of a bygone era. While many other countries have turned to automated lights, Canada may have a strong argument to keep with tradition.

With more than 12,000 miles of uninhabited coastline, much of which is only accessible by boat or aircraft, British Columbia

has a strong argument for manning these remote outposts. When asked for his opinion of de-staffing lighthouses, Tony offers the same answer he gave Canadian Senator Nancy Greene-Raine in 2010: "It's penny wise and pound foolish." As an active light keeper caught in the middle of a simmering political firestorm, he understandably declines further comment.

According to the December 2010 Senate Report, the same that Tony is quoted in, user groups in the Pacific, Newfoundland, and Labrador Regions, all echoed Tony's sentiments saying lightkeepers are indispensable and automated equipment cannot compare with the certainty and reliability of a lightkeeper's watchful eyes on



Above: Lightkeeper Tony Greenall looks out to sea from within the light enclosure. Below: The fruit and vegetable garden, guest/contractor house, and head lightkeeper's house.



LIGHTHOUSE FACTS

- > The first recorded lighthouse in history was built in Egypt around 280 BC. The Pharos of Alexandria lighthouse is one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World
- > Canada has the world's longest coastline, at more than 243,000 kilometres (150,660 miles). Each year, over 80 million tons of oil are shipped from Canada's east and west coasts. Daily, up to 180 SOLAS (ships with over 500 tons gross tonnage that operate internationally) operate within Canada's Exclusive Economic Zone (200 nautical miles from shore).
- > Between 2013 and 2014, The safety board recorded a total of 541 commercial shipping occurrences in western Canada alone. This included 150 incidents, 95 shipping accidents, and 22 accidents aboard ships.
- > In 2010 the Canadian Government passed The Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act (HLPA). This allows for de-commissioned lighthouses to be reclassified as heritage properties.
- > It is estimated there are 17,800 lighthouses around the world in 250 countries. Of these only 111 are still manned.

Fully Automated Lighthouses (since)	Manned Lighthouses
New Zealand 1990	Italy 62
Australia 1996	Canada 37
Ireland 1997	Holland 2
UK 1998	USA 1
Japan 2006	
Norway 2002	

- > The United States has one remaining manned lighthouse. The Boston Light (the first built in America in 1716) was manned until 1998, and now has volunteer "keepers" who serve as tour guides.

the skies and on the water. Technology also cannot replace the knowledge and judgment of an experienced lightkeeper.

Unlike Tony, automated lights cannot communicate with or assist a mariner in distress, something that Tony has done many times. I'm not sure what that's worth in monetary terms but when I was cruising along the coast in all kinds of weather, manned lighthouses played a fundamental role in my own sense of security. As the B.C. coastline is one of the most remote and treacherous in the world, I felt better knowing there was someone out there, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to lend a hand or a calm voice if something went wrong.

The Senate report continued to draw upon the significance of having a human presence at these outstations. "Fishermen and recreational boaters, including kayakers, place a very high value on staffed facilities undoubtedly because of the assistance they might one day receive themselves from a lightkeeper," stated the report.

The most crucial highlight, of course, being, "Lightkeepers contribute to saving lives; we heard this over and over, especially in British Columbia."



Lightkeeper Tony Greenall operating the winch that transports the on-site infatible from ocean to elevated boat house.

There's an urban legend that tells the tale of a navy vessel having a radio conversation with what was believed to be another ship. As the two appeared to be on a collision course, the naval vessel demands that the other alter course, while the other calmly suggests that the naval vessel take evasive action. Eventually, the exasperated captain of the navy ship identifies himself and with stern military authority demands a course alteration by the other vessel. The response was simple: "I'm a lighthouse. It's your call." Tony recognizes that the ocean delivers odd situations regularly and sometimes a human being is required to do some thinking to accurately assess a situation and respond accordingly.

So who are these people, like Tony, who've been plying their trade as lighthouse keepers for years at light stations all along the coast? Their stories and life journeys to their lights are all different but according to Tony, the brotherhood of light keepers has a thread of similarity running through them. When Tony describes himself and his colleagues, I keep hearing the words passionate, independent, self-sufficient, nature-loving, slower-paced, curious, caring, and helpful.

Most significant perhaps is each keeper's connection to the natural world and to the environment. Tony has a pride and admiration for his fellow lighthouse keepers which is palpable. He came to the lights after an 18-year career in light rapid transit.



As Tony describes it, he was "unhappy and unhealthy," and wanted a more sensible pace for his life. The lights had intrigued him since childhood visits with his father, who knew many keepers, and then later visits on his own. Not only was he intrigued by the work and lifestyle of the light keepers, Tony says there's a unique draw about the ocean. Tony recently hiked the West Coast Trail, which is



a 45-plus-mile section of uninhabited coastline on the southwestern shore of Vancouver Island. He did this during time off from his light to visit others at their lights. He dropped in on his colleagues at Pachena and Carmanah light stations. He glowingly told the story of his visit at Carmanah. On a dark, clear summer evening, they observed the rings of Saturn through a powerful telescope.

Tony's life on the light station is a kaleidoscope of changing weather and sea conditions forming an altering backdrop for his daily reporting and maintenance duties.

On occasion a distress call or emergency will monopolize his time until the situation is resolved. Just last year, Tony was on location when nine people in a charter boat ended up in the ocean after their craft started taking on water. It was the light keepers who observed the distressed boat and were first on-scene to pluck those cold, scared souls from the sea.

Those people might not have fared too well in an era of automation. In the light keeper's world, rescue missions may not be ordinary occurrences but certainly happen.

Most days a light keeper's routine is more predictable. On one hand, life on the light is punctuated with a heavy dose of isolation and loneliness, but on the other hand, there's a long list of daily chores and tasks that are not only part of the job but also part of the lifestyle. Traditionally, a light keeper's primary functions have been maintenance of the light, equipment, and grounds, and as an observer of the weather and ocean conditions. Secondary duties could be likened to that of an ocean lifeguard: continually on the lookout to assist in the preservation of lives and marine equipment and property. In recent years, they have developed a tertiary role as environmental, wildlife, and law enforcement sentries. Tony sees the possibility of an expanded role some day for light keepers. Their unique locations afford keepers the possibility of providing assistance and other services for the public and other governmental departments. A redefined role could encompass issues of sovereignty, law enforcement, coast watching, and environmental monitoring.

Monitoring, observing, reporting, and recording the weather and ocean conditions are a light keeper's most consistent duties. It's done every three hours and informs forecasting for general, marine, and aeronautical weather reports. Some of the observational information required includes sky conditions, visibility, wind speed, wind direction, and sea state. Although meteorological imaging and forecasting systems have become

very sophisticated, there's something to be said for real-time observation. Float-plane operators, fishermen, whale watchers, and others still rely heavily on information provided by lighthouse keepers. In the unusual event of a tsunami, many light stations would be the first point of contact. Assuming the keeper was secure on high ground, their observations and response could be invaluable due to their training in search and rescue.

THE LENNARD LIFESTYLE

Life on a light station requires not only essential skills and competencies from the keepers but also, as I learned during my stay, significant infrastructure. Light stations are remarkably well equipped for independent living. I was fascinated to learn there's a two year supply of diesel fuel for running the island's generators, which keep the electrical systems operational.

On Lennard, there's a head keeper's house, an assistant keeper's house, a contractor/guest house, an office/workshop, a boat shed and winch engine room, storage sheds, and a helipad. Most light stations also have impressively manicured grounds and well maintained walkways for getting around, thanks to the head keeper, the assistant keeper, and their families. The fruit and vegetable garden at Lennard was an inspired effort that could keep both keepers and their families well fed when in season. Anytime during the year, other groceries and necessities are delivered by coast guard helicopter. It was a unique thrill to witness the delivery service during our stay.

BRIGHT FUTURE

The grandest reward for me during my stay at Lennard was discovering just one of the many stories and personalities within the brotherhood of light keepers. Tony found the light after finding the courage to change careers later in life. You could say he trusted he'd find his way to a better life by simply stepping away from something that wasn't working for him. Through helping mariners find their way, he found his own way. It was a privilege meeting Tony, learning about his career as a lighthouse keeper, engaging his conversational energy, discovering his many talents and hobbies, and spending time on this amazing island.

More recently, the Senate Committee updated their stance on lighthouse automation saying, "The Committee can only conclude that staffed lightstations and lightkeepers play a key role in public safety, and that any cost savings realized from destaffing lighthouses will come at a very high price—that is the risk of loss of life. For this reason, the Committee cannot support the Coast Guard's destaffing plan."

It's now up to the government to continue to do the right thing for the public interest. I will pass lighthouses in the future and during those moments, I'll harken back to the friend I made at Lennard Island. I'll remember the prototypically bearded keeper helping me off the skiff with a strong arm, a warm smile, and a "Welcome to Lennard Island!"

It's the sort of thing that just can't be automated. ■

*For reference and more information, the Senate Report on lighthouses can be found at <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/SEN/Committee/403/fish/rep/rep06dec10-e.pdf>