

## Pat Fanning's Lighthouses

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**My great-grandfather Patrick Fanning first settled in Queenscliff in 1853, at the age of 17, having survived the nightmare voyage of the *Ticonderoga*, and having been stationed at Point Nepean for nearly a year. After service with the Health Officer and with the Pilots, he joined the Lighthouse Service at Queenscliff on 1 October 1861. To qualify for the lighthouse service Pat had to “*be able to read and write, ride a horse, handle a rowing boat, and be able to work at heights*”.**

At that time, William Foy was ‘Keeper’ (or Superintendent) of the two lighthouses at Shortland’s Bluff (Queenscliff) and of the new Swan Spit light which had come into service in October 1860. Pat’s service record shows he joined “*Division No. 1 - Shortland’s Bluff and Swan Spit lights.*” His fellow assistant keepers at that time were Henry Kermode, James Jamieson, James Dimond, and James Taylor, all employed at seven shillings a day. Pat started as Junior Assistant Keeper and gradually worked his way up to Senior Assistant Keeper. He was assigned to the lower wooden lighthouse which had been erected hastily in 1853 to indicate, in tandem with the upper light, the correct shipping lane for safe passage through the Rip.

It was an exciting time to be involved with the Shortland’s Bluff lights. Preliminary works had been started on building a new battery on the Bluff, which in turn meant that the old lighthouses had to be replaced with new towers solid enough to withstand the shock of cannon fire. Between June 1861 and February 1863, two new bluestone towers were erected close by the old towers giving approximately the same guiding line. Two new lighthouse keeper’s quarters were built near the lower light. Pat, his wife Kate and their three little children moved from their own house in Stevens Street into one of the keeper’s houses. Four more surviving babies were born to them there.

The two new lighthouses were both built with their doorways 12 feet above the ground and were accessed by ladders that most certainly would not pass modern -day Work Safe inspections! The keepers climbed up and down those ladders day and night, in all kinds of weather. There are several theories about why the lighthouses were built that way, but I don’t know of any documentary evidence supporting any of one of these theories.

In 1877 a big change came into the Fannings’ life. Robert Bowie, the keeper at Cape Schanck retired on 1 July 1877, which brought about a reshuffle amongst the other keepers. George Tapp, the keeper at Gabo Island since 1858, suffered from asthma and chronic bronchitis and reached the point where he could no longer manage the 93 steps of the tower. He was moved to Cape Schanck, which is not quite as tall, to give him some respite (!). In the interim, Thomas Musgrave, the keeper at Wilson’s Promontory was sent to Gabo Island and Pat was moved to the lighthouse at Wilson’s Promontory as Senior Assistant Keeper at a salary of 180 pounds per annum. He was not given full keeper’s status, as it was only meant to be a temporary arrangement. (Keepers were paid 200 pounds per annum at that time).

The wind catches the tower at Wilson’s Promontory in a peculiar way and during a gale it makes a booming noise like a cannon going off. So Pat nicknamed the tower ‘Roaring Meg’, after the cannon mounted on the wall of old Londonderry city. The nickname stuck for many years, and still survives as the ‘Roaring Meg Creek’ camp site, not far from the lighthouse.

George Tapp never did recover and after a year at Cape Schanck was taken to Melbourne where he died shortly afterwards. After his death, there was another reorganization. Thomas Musgrave was moved to Cape Schanck whilst Pat was promoted to Keeper status and posted to Gabo Island .

The Fannings spent two years at Gabo and were seemingly quite content on their remote little island, until yet another change arose. William Foy, Keeper at Shortland's Bluff, was due to retire on his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday at the beginning of October 1880. Pat was appointed as his replacement. It was the proudest moment in his life when he returned to his beloved Queenscliff with full Keeper status.

The Fannings then lived in the Keepers' quarters close by the upper black lighthouse. While they were there, it was decided that at last the Victorian Government could afford to build a Fort at Queenscliff and have it manned by a permanent army corps. The Fort was opened in 1882. At about the same time, the Keeper requested that the doorways of the two lighthouses be lowered to ground level. It was probably Pat who requested that change, but I have no documentary evidence of that. Heaven knows he knew all about having to climb those ladders - he'd had fifteen years doing it!

(A little aside: Although intimacy between the Fort's soldiers and the lighthouse keepers' families was actively discouraged, it didn't stop a certain gunner Robert Leech marrying Pat's eldest daughter Catherine - and they became the reason why Patrick is my great-grandfather!)

At the end of 1884 Pat received some bad news. The Harbour Trust, who were by then in charge of all lighthouses, made the decision to rotate the keepers, giving them two years on an outstation and two years close to a town where their children could attend school.

As a result, Pat had to leave Queenscliff once again. He knew there was a valid reason, but was nevertheless deeply disappointed. The other keepers were very sympathetic about his losing the No. 1 posting. They took up a collection amongst themselves and the citizens of Queenscliff and gave him a send-off at the Royal Hotel. They presented him with a gold watch chain. He wore it till the day he died and it is still in our family's possession.

So it was back to Wilson's Promontory and 'Roaring Meg'.

A further two years on and Pat was sent to Point Lonsdale and put in charge of the old wooden tower that he had tended at the start of his career. This tower had been moved from Queenscliff in 1863. Pat's assistant at Point Lonsdale was Henry Stewartson, an old friend from way back in 1853. Only two months later, William Martin, Keeper at Cape Schanck, became seriously ill and was taken to Melbourne where he, too, died. Pat was sent to Cape Schanck to take his place.

Patrick spent two years at Cape Schanck and in 1889 came back once more to Queenscliff. Then, in 1891, he was put in charge of the new light at Airey's Inlet, now known as the White Queen. That appointment proved to be somewhat of an embarrassment. The light had been ordered showing a red light shining over the safe waters out at sea and a white light shining over dangerous rocks, contrary to convention. No-one had picked up the mistake, and it stayed that way until the Commonwealth took over the lighthouses in 1913 and had the lights reversed.

Whilst at Airey's Inlet, Pat was beginning to slow down somewhat and actually became ill in 1892. He was given sick leave that extended to six months in the latter half of the year. During this time he wrote a number of articles about his experiences for the 'Queenscliff Sentinel'. He went back to work at the beginning of 1893, but died suddenly on 23 March of that year. He is buried at Winchelsea, at the time the nearest cemetery to Airey's Inlet.

