

Lighthouse Keepers

Lighthouse keepers' main function was to look after the light and lens. If you wanted to become a keeper you had to be aged 18-25, over 1.63m (5ft 4in) tall, male, have normal vision without glasses, swim, have good written English, have a trade or be an able-bodied seaman, and pass a medical examination. Some women became Assistant Lighthouse Keepers from the 1960s.

The number of keepers looking after the lighthouse related to the fuel being used. Six were needed when coal gas was used and then four then three, for paraffin and electricity. In general, keepers moved lighthouses every four years. They worked two shifts a day, on watch for four hours at a time starting at 6.00-10.00am, 10.00am-2.00pm and so on. The watch was repeated every 12 hours. The shifts changed every Sunday.

The **Principal Keeper** was in charge of a lighthouse. **Supernumerary Assistant Keepers** travelled round different lighthouses for a year before being made permanent and stationed at a lighthouse as **Assistant Keeper**. Keepers were trained in operating lighting and



Lighthouse keeper cleaning the Optic
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fog signal apparatus, engines, radio, the international code of signals, aspects of boat work, ropework and the operation of lifting equipment.

In the 1990's the lighthouses were automated, and the keepers left. The lighthouses are now cared for by attendants, engineers and staff from Irish Lights.

Living at a Lighthouse

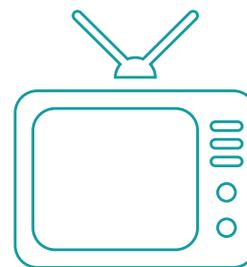
Lighthouse keepers' families lived in houses on off-shore lighthouses until the 1960s. Families left Mew Island in 1965. Keepers had to cook, clean and entertain themselves.



As a lighthouse keeper you needed to cook, clean and entertain yourself. In the early days, there was a gramophone and a library.



A radio was gifted to Mew Island Lighthouse in 1925 through the generosity of the 'Daily News and Star' Lightstation Wireless Fund.



It was the first lighthouse in Ireland to receive a television in the 1960s – a gift by the carpet magnate Cyril Lord, who often visited the island.

The Great Light

Duties

Keepers had a wide range of duties during the day. They would always be checking the weather, particularly for fog when the fog signal would be operated. They had to clean the lenses several times a week, to remove the fine layer of soot that the gas and paraffin burners produced.

At dusk, the lead weights, used to drive the clockwork mechanism turning the lens panels, would be wound to the top of the tower; the burners would be lit and the blinds opened. The clockwork mechanism had to be rewound every 30 minutes. At dawn, the lens rotation was stopped, the burners extinguished, and the blinds drawn to protect the inside of the optic from the magnified rays of the sun.



Lighthouse keeper winding up the clockwork mechanism. ©National Library of Ireland.

Communication

They used Morse code, semaphore and flags which allowed them to communicate with ships and the shore. One person sent the signal, one read the reply using a telescope and the last person wrote it down. Communication with the shore was particularly important during World War II when the keepers on Mew had to check with the Admiralty in case they had to extinguish the light. On the night of 14th – 15th May 1941, the lighthouse had a near miss when the port of Belfast was bombed with the loss of 900 lives. Two bombs were dropped near Mew Island's west landing. A coastal radio was installed in 1951, but communication by semaphore continued for another ten years.



Lighthouse keepers using semaphore. © National Library Ireland.

Semaphore Alphabet

A-1 B-2 C-3 D-4 E-5 F-6 G-7 H-8 I-9 J-0
K L M N O P Q R S T
U V W X Y Z Rest/Space Numerals Error / Attention Cancel / Annul

International Naval Signal Flags

A B C D E F G
H I J K L M N
O P Q R S T U
V W X Y Z
1 2 3
4 5 6
7 8 9
10