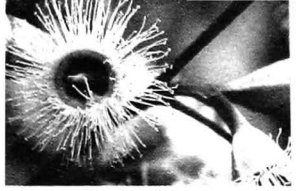


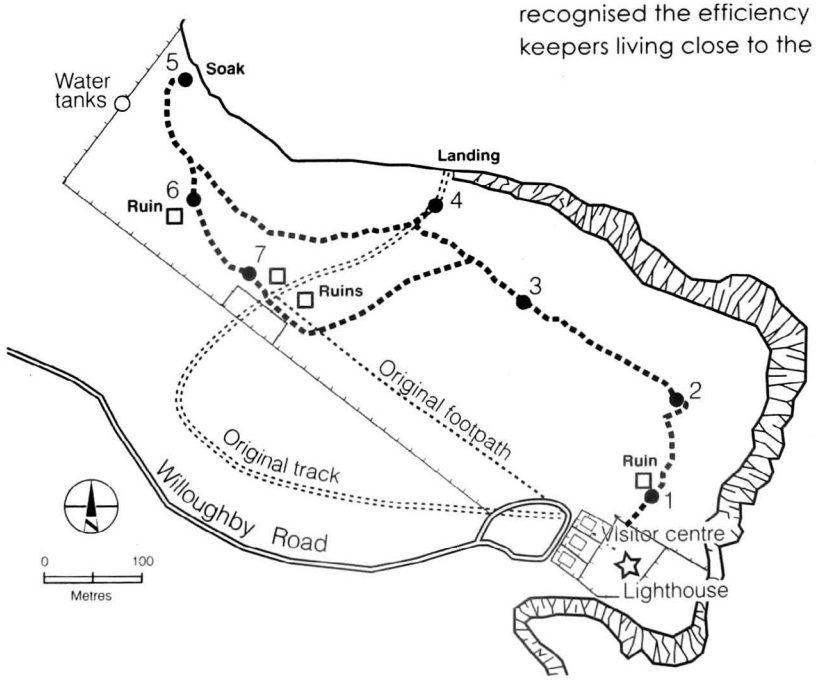


# Cape Willoughby Lightstation Heritage Hike

***For your safety please keep to the marked trail.***
***Please respect the heritage of the site by leaving all relics as you find them.***

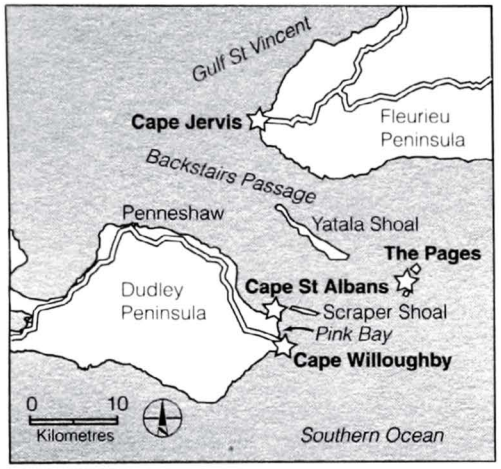
This hike will take you into the sheltered gully of the original lightstation settlement. It will give you an insight into the early lightkeepers' lives and how their demanding routine and sense of isolation was heightened by the distance between their homes and the lighthouse.

Built in 1852, Cape Willoughby Lighthouse (Sturt Light) was the first lighthouse in South Australia. In the early days the tower stood alone and the keepers' cottages were about a kilometre away in the gully. The site for the cottages was chosen because it was sheltered from raging southerly winds and close to the best available anchorage for the supply boats. In 1927 the original cottages were demolished. The three current houses were built to the Commonwealth standard plan that recognised the efficiency of having keepers living close to the lighthouse.

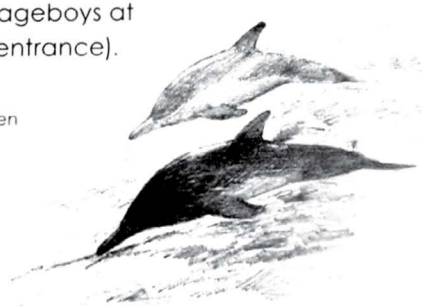


# Cape Willoughby Lightstation Heritage Hike

By orientating this map to the landscape you will be able to identify Backstairs Passage and locate the position of the four beacons (South Page, Cape Willoughby, Cape St. Albans and Cape Jervis) that guide ships past hidden dangers.




Ships travelling between the eastern states and South Australia use Backstairs Passage. You may be able to see how the tide races between the Southern Ocean and the Passage. These tides and the prevailing south-westerly winds would have often made it difficult to negotiate past Cape Willoughby to the narrow passage entrance at The Pages (so named because they stand like two English pageboys at a castle entrance).



Dolphins often surf a boat's bow wave

## 1. Mystery ruins

Records are still being searched to discover the history of the building that once stood here. There are several theories as to when and why it was built. It was used as a telegraph station. The telegraph was connected to Cape Willoughby in 1880 but building plans for a Post Office and Telegraph Station dated Sept 1879 do not include a site plan or indicate if it was built. A mud map of the lightstation, drawn by headkeeper A.D. Frank, in 1920 labels it as a 'cottage'.

## 2. Shipwrecks and salvage

There have been a number of shipwrecks around Cape Willoughby. The earliest was the *Midge*, recorded in the Sturt Light Journal on June 28th 1853. 'At daylight observed from the Lighthouse a Cutter hove to. F.Sheet to windward M.Boom on the quarter and peak of M.S. down heading to the Eastward. At 9 AM the Midge Cutter Gray Mast (sic) came on the Rocks in Pink Bay and became a total wreck.' The following three days involved 'saving articles from the wreck and cargo and hauling them on the rocks'.

Journal entries were mainly routine – weather reports, lighthouse duties, and details of ship sightings. Notice how the above journal entries are very brief even though they represent a huge additional workload.

## 3. Navigating the Scraper

If you look out towards Cape St. Albans you can see a rough-looking line where the water breaks over the shallows of Scraper Shoal. If there's a reasonable swell you'll see big breakers rolling in. The American schooner the Kona was wrecked on the Scraper on a particularly low tide in January 1917. The water depth over the shoal on a low tide is about two metres.

Imagine witnessing, only a few years later in September 1923, the sails of the *Garthneill*, a large square-rigged barque, in the same waters. Her Captain reported: 'We sailed through the passage between the Scraper (sic) and Cape St. Albans without a particle of danger.... The channel was about a quarter of a mile wide and we were running before the wind with top sails and top gallant sails set.' It was at the time 'hailed as a wonderful feat of navigation for a sailing ship master'. (Magazine source unknown.)

## 4. Landing - and supplementing the supplies

Supplies arrived every three months and were brought ashore at the landing by a dinghy. Not as simple as it sounds. In 1917 the landing was described as 'practically a shelf of rock with jagged boulders scattered around.' (Department of Trade and Customs Minute Paper 19/4/1917.) Around 1920 it was upgraded and later a crane erected. The dinghy was housed in a boat shed built here in 1858.

You can imagine how the early keepers supplemented their stores by rowing out to passing ships. Anything extra - maybe a bit more rum or tobacco - would have made life more pleasant. Fish caught from the landing and from a much more dangerous spot directly below the lighthouse also supplemented the supplies.

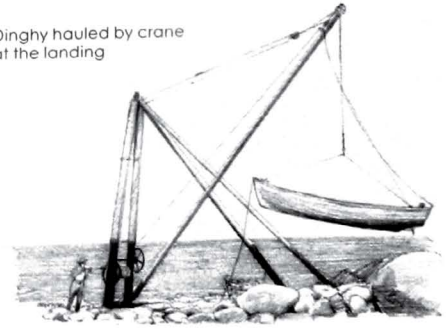
The next part of the hike initially follows the old track that led up to the cottages.

## 5. '...the hole where the water is obtained'

This soak was carefully maintained when in use. Water was pumped to an underground tank next to the headkeeper's cottage and then carted to the other cottages. Even after the buildings were demolished in 1927 the water was still pumped to the tank and then carted day after day up the hill to the new houses for the gardens.

In 1861 the headkeeper complained that the neighbours' sheep, cattle and horses never left the reserve. Readily available water from the soak would probably have enticed them to stay. No longer in use, the soak has silted up.

Dinghy hauled by crane at the landing



Headkeeper's house 1927

## 6. The headkeeper's cottage '...amidst a profound solitude'

Next to this underground tank are the ruins of the headkeeper's cottage. Early photos of the cottages give the sense of a relaxed lifestyle. In spring you can see flowers that survived from the gardens, including Mullein (Verbascum thapsus), a yellow-flowering herb that was used for coughs and colds. We get a very different impression from the headkeeper's son, writing for the Adelaide Observer January 15th 1853 - Journal of a trip to Kangaroo Island.

He describes arriving at the headkeeper's residence 'amidst a profound solitude, and about half a mile from the Lighthouse, whose grim aspect added little to the scenery in the way of beauty'. He describes seeing – and variously killing and eating - wildlife such as snakes (one was drinking at the soak), goannas (which ate the keepers' chickens), Cape Barren Geese (which raided the vegetable garden) and wallabies. Finding time for hunting and fishing was difficult but necessary because provisions were always stretched.

At the time of this visit they were using roasted peas for coffee!

## 7. The assistant keepers' cottages

The cottages were a short distance from the supply landing but look how far it is to the lighthouse. The keepers rotated 8-hour shifts so that the light was always tended. Imagine walking up the footpath to take your shift in the middle of a dark night with 'thunder, lightning and rain' or 'squalls with hail and rain'. Your map shows how the original footpath took the shortest (and steepest) route to the lighthouse.

The path you will take follows a gentler slope.

Photographs of the original cottages, the landing, ships and shipwrecks are displayed in the visitor centre.

Further Information
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Government of South Australia

National Parks & Wildlife South Australia

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