

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

WILSONS PROM – ALL ABOARD FOR THE PROM

By Mary Ryllis Clark, circa 2000

*Long 'ere King Alfred
burnt the toast
The seas have
washed this rocky
coast.*

*-- Graffiti seen on a
granite boulder at
Wilson's Promontory in
the 1940s.*

The day we set off on
a six-hour voyage
around the east coast
of Wilson's
Promontory, the sea
was unusually calm,
the sun shone and
there was enough blue
in the sky to make a pair of sailor's trousers.

As we skimmed across the waves of Bass Strait, our tour guide regaled us with stories of the history of the Prom and its waters. He explained that George Bass explored this area in January 1798, and first thought the "high, hummocky land" he saw was part of the Furneaux Islands. When he returned a few months later with Matthew Flinders in the Norfolk, he realised it was part of the mainland. On Bass's recommendation, Governor Hunter in Sydney named the area Wilson's Promontory after Thomas Wilson, a friend of Flinders.

As we passed through the entrance of Corner Inlet out to Bass Strait, we stood on the deck with wind in our hair and spray in our faces, the rocky coast of the Prom coming closer on one side and the open landscape of Snake Island on the other. These were the waters that Bass and Flinders, and later John Lort Stokes on the Beagle in 1842, charted so well.



Admiring the surf fringed coastline reaching back to Waratah Bay, circa 1928. Photograph by Mr A. McPhee, courtesy of DSE.

When Lort Stokes published his journal, 'Discoveries in Australia' in 1846, he wrote of "the smooth, quiet sand beaches, and dense forests reaching the water's edge, the mist-capped hills, and the gusts that swept down the valleys". His words, like his maps, are still a good guide.

The muted colors of the mountains emerged in many shades of brown and green as we reached a long stretch of sand, rocks and scrub known as Biddys Cove. The only sign of life was an emu on the beach staring uncertainly at this intrusion. The tide was high as we made our way along the eastern coast of the Prom into Miranda Bay. There was nothing to be seen of the ribs of the 1850s wreck of the brigantine Miranda, often visible when the water is low.

A great gathering of gannets and terns dive-bombing the deep waters opposite Five Mile Beach convinced us that there must be

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pilchards or salmon in abundance. A sleek, black seal and a few fairy penguins agreed.



Party visiting the Prom circa 1920-1930. Courtesy of DSE.

We, too, fished for a while but gave up in favor of a picnic lunch on the boat in tranquil Sealers Cove, named by Bass, who was impressed by the number of seals on the rocks of the promontory and the islands of the strait. His reports promoted the sealing and whaling industry, which were soon established in the strait.

After lunch, we braved the cold water of Sealers Cove to wade ashore. There we strolled along the three-kilometre boardwalk built by Parks Victoria over swampy ground and under spreading tree ferns in a forest which, as early as 1839, rang with the harsh rasp of pit saws. These days, it is shadowy, still and peaceful.

Bass recommended Sealers Cove as a shelter for ships, but Lort Stokes found a better place and named it Refuge Cove. People often disembark here to read the information boards in the ranger's hut, walk along the beach or stroll to the campsite set back from the sea.

Having spent many happy hours walking on

the Prom, seeking out the tops of hills for the view, it was exhilarating to be part of that view

looking in - particularly when we reached the choppy waters below the lighthouse. Gazing at the dramatic expanse of rock, rising 100 metres above us to the lighthouse and the cluster of cottages around it, we wondered at the bleakness and isolation suffered by those who lived there.

The late Bill Cameron, president of the Foster Museum for many years (about half an hour's drive from Port Welshpool),

serviced the lighthouse as a linesman for the General Post Office in the late 1940s and early '50s. At first, he and a colleague rode in once



Mt Oberon, March 1952. Courtesy of DSE.

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every fortnight to maintain the telephones for Mr Bank the lighthouse keeper. Later, after one of his supervisors, who was terrified of horses, strode in and out in a day, the linesmen had to do it, too, struggling with up to 36 kilograms of equipment.



Mrs A.P. Hardy examines flora on a field trip, 1905. Courtesy of DSE.

knowledge. Such groups lobbied for the reservation of places of "unspoilt nature".

After what heritage consultant Jane Lennon calls a "long and spirited fight" led by the Field Naturalists Club, part of Wilsons Promontory became Victoria's second national park (after Tower Hill near Warrnambool) in 1898. The whole of the Prom became a national park in 1905.

"All the keepers were married and most had kids," said Mr Cameron. "They were fanatics at keeping things clean. Everything shone. Mrs Banks cooked on a Primus stove you could see your face in. There was nothing else to do."

Supplies for the lighthouse came by boat from Port Albert and were loaded into a dinghy lowered into the water at the flat rocks at the water's edge. A flying fox from the lighthouse to the landing carried the goods up the steep slope. These days, the Department of sustainability and Environment flies supplies once a month by helicopter to the lighthouse, which now offers overnight accommodation.

Bill Cameron rarely saw any tourists on his fortnightly trips to the lighthouse. It was too hard for most people to get to, he said. But some dedicated nature lovers, such as the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria, founded in 1880, began to see places such as the Prom as beautiful, inspirational and a source of