

Keeping the Light: Assisting at Cabot Head Lightstation

Written & Photographed by Sandra J. Howe

The historic Cabot Head Lightstation perches on the northeastern tip of the Bruce Peninsula, much as it has since 1896. Though operating systems have changed, this important navigational aid still serves to guide vessels large and small on Georgian Bay's often turbulent waters. The light itself now stands atop a steel tower, solar-powered and automated. The lightstation and lightkeepers' cottage remain vibrant and alive with activity, preserving the human and natural history of this beautiful, rugged coast. Cabot Head witnessed the heyday of Great Lakes shipping and fishing, of timbering and pioneering in the Bruce Peninsula's remote wilderness. Today visitors from around the globe come to explore maritime history, and relive the pioneering spirit.

"Friends of Cabot Head" was formed in 1993 by area residents concerned with keeping the lighthouse alive. In agreement with the Canadian Coast Guard and Lindsay Township, the organization undertook major renovation work from 1994 to 1996. The Cabot Head Lightstation now operates as a museum and historic site, maintained and managed by staff and

volunteers. Funds are generated through donations, gift shop and gallery sales, and the Assistant Lightkeeper Program. Our week as assistant lightkeepers at Cabot Head was a wonderful adventure. The history, scenery, and people brought me great joy. I look forward to my stay there again next year.

What a unique opportunity to live amidst the past!

Assistant lightkeepers have private kitchen, lounge, bed, and bath facilities in the actual lightstation. The rest of the building houses museum displays depicting lighthouse and pioneer life. Stories of shipwrecks, timbermen, fisheries, and local flora and fauna cover the walls. A blackboard offers visitors a place to add their experiences: "Met a black bear while riding bicycle," "Saw bald eagle with

fish," "Rebuilt rock armchairs on beach," "Saw rattlesnake on path."

Area residents generously donated family antiques, and the Bruce County Museum loaned artifacts. Local craftsmen meticulously built models of the Meneray Fish Camp, and of Cabot Head Lightstation. The community rallied to protect and share this precious heritage. It is clearly a labour of love, and

I was excited to play a small part.

It was a lovely September morning when John Vanderburgh and I arrived at Cabot Head. The gravel road in from Dyer's Bay winds between the cliffs and boulder beaches. The views of Georgian Bay's crystal clear waters and rugged shoreline are spectacular. Kathleen and Guy Langman welcomed us kindly. This is their eighth

season as site managers at Cabot Head. From May to October they live full time in the lightkeepers' cottage, keeping all operations in shipshape condition. Guy showed us around the lightstation, and then left us to get settled in our home for the week. The quarters are rustic but functional. Luxuries like electricity, hot running water, and a flush toilet came late to this remote post.



▲ Cabot Head Lightstation, old and new. Today's automated, solar-powered navigational beacon stands atop a steel tower adjacent to the original, wooden lighthouse structure built in 1895.



◀ Stormy skies over the bluffs of the Niagara Escarpment, and the lightkeeper's cottage. This is the summer home of Friends of Cabot Head staff, and The Lightkeeper's Locker Gift Shop.



▲ Author Sandra Howe at work. Daily chores for Assistant Lightkeeper include cleaning windows, sweeping down cobwebs, and keeping the lightstation in ship-shape condition. John Vanderburgh of Paisley descends lookout tower ladder with caution after doing daily sweeping. ▼

Cabot Head Lightstation ▶

As assistant lightkeepers, we helped clean and maintain the lightstation and grounds, welcomed visitors and answered questions, and worked in the gift shop and gallery. The duties were light and relaxing, in September, but summer months are busier. We settled easily into the routine of sweeping, dusting, and cleaning windows. I enjoyed the quiet times of reading, writing, and chatting. John was more outgoing with visitors, sharing stories and laughter. Sunrises, sunsets, storm-watching, and star-gazing

were incredible from the lightstation tower. In off hours, we hiked, kayaked, explored, and did photography. It is a simple life, close to nature, a pleasure to the soul. Saturday brought the fall tour of the Horseless Carriage Club of America in their pre-1915 automobiles. It must have been a tough drive in because the Cabot Head Road is very bumpy, and those cars lack good suspension systems. They had picnic lunches on the grounds, climbed the tower, and checked out the exhibits. Many visitors



▲ The southern Ontario group of the Horseless Carriage Club of America visiting Cabot Head with their pre-1915 vehicles. They enjoyed a picnic on the lawn and toured the museum.



▲ The main floor of the lightstation functions as a museum from early lighthouse days, and is furnished with authentic house and kitchenwares donated by local families. It is easy to get a real feeling for what life was like for the pioneer lightkeepers. Stories and photos accompany the artifacts.

The old cookstove in the lightstation museum. ▶



snapped pictures of the antique cars in front of the historic lighthouse. Several visitors also chatted with Dorothy Dedels, a local artist who at age 81 still volunteers regularly in the Shipwreck Gallery. Dorothy notes, "The lighthouse has always been a symbol of hope and courage. When we come here, we step into our basic nature. We are in touch with the beauty of the place, the bears, the wildlife. I love the Escarpment; it feels like home." Dorothy told a story about life in the lighthouse: "When I first stayed in the lighthouse, I hoped to meet a ghost. I watched and waited because it seemed there should be one. I was very disappointed. I think the lightkeepers worked hard but they were happy." Dorothy is clearly a lively and happy person with a fondness for bears. She was working on a lovely oil painting of a grizzly, and eagerly shared photos of the

black bear that visits her yard. Each evening sailboats ventured into the sheltered harbour of Wingfield Basin. A 10-minute walk along a path to the west brings visitors to this historic anchorage. Relics of docks, winches, and rails mark an old landing site. One evening we walked the beach looking for remnants of the lumber and shingle mill that worked in this basin; nothing remains but a massive log full of iron rods. I imagine this as part of a log boom used to transport the Bruce Peninsula's massive pines off to southern markets. Several old car engines are strewn along the beach, their purpose unclear. Wingfield Basin provided shelter for any boat that could pass through its narrow mouth. The Gargantua was one that passed in, in 1952 but never left. Today the hull of this faithful steam tug is home to a family of beavers, and many

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▲ Wingfield Basin provides an excellent sheltered harbour. Rails and winch from original boat docks are still visible, as well as old engines, sawmill remains, and a very photogenic shipwreck.

◀ John Vanderburgh on the rock "sofa" on the beach at Georgian Bay.

swallows. Paddling my little kayak around this 150-ft. vessel that served throughout the Great Lakes, I was reminded of the essential role played by boats in the opening up of Canada. We owe a great debt of gratitude to the sailors, pioneers, and woodsmen who came before us. So many lives passed over these waters, and many were lost to the waves

and winds. The Gargantua sank here in a December storm without loss of life. The half dozen other wrecks close to Cabot Head were less fortunate.

Each day we filed an informal report about our adventures. Lightkeepers Log, Day 7: Winds light out of southeast. Waves under 1 metre. Visitors numbering 50 adults, 6 children.

Skies clear until noon with clouds increasing in east by mid-afternoon. Red sunset bodes for good sailing tomorrow. Swept tower and museum, deadheaded flowerboxes, dusted art gallery. Observations: Vultures circling low over beach feeding on dead cormorant and fish. One visitor said she had seen a black bear on road driving into Cabot Head Lightstation. Several commented on quality of museum displays.

Guests from across Ontario, Michigan, Florida, and Europe. Lots of smiling faces taking in the peace and history. Another relaxing day in this wild and beautiful place! **NEV**

Sandra J. Howe writes, plays, and guides adventure tours in Bruce County. She loves to kayak, and hike, especially on the Bruce Trail. Visit her at [facebook.com/greybruceadventours](https://www.facebook.com/greybruceadventours).

Stewardship Opportunities in Bruce Peninsula

- ▶ **Cabot Head Lightstation**
Join Friends of Cabot Head and apply for the Assistant Lightkeeper Program: cabothead.ca
- ▶ **Flowerpot Island Lightstation**
Friends of Bruce District Parks Association: castlebluff.com/fpi.htm. See Volunteer Lightkeepers.
- ▶ **Bruce Peninsula Bird Observatory** has several types of stewardship activities from groundskeeping to assisting with bird monitoring and banding programs. Their facility is across Wingfield Basin from Cabot Head Lightstation. See "Stay with Us" under bpbo.ca.