

International Lighthouse/Lightship Weekend

Kevin Mulcahy VK2CE

It all started in 1994 during a wet wintry evening when two members of the Ayr Amateur Radio Group in Scotland, John GM4OOU and Mike GM4SUC (now SK), after a club meeting were talking about creating an event in the summer when club members could get out on a sunny weekend and play radio. Various themes were considered; ports, airports, historic Scotland sites, the Firths of Scotland, castles, etc., but it was finally decided that lighthouses of Scotland would be ideal.

Following research, it was discovered that the lighthouses of Scotland were controlled by the Northern Lighthouse Board in Edinburgh, who were not only responsible for the lighthouses of Scotland, but also around the Isle of Man. Approval was sought and obtained from the Northern Lighthouse Board to establish amateur radio stations adjacent to their property. In February 1995, an invitation was sent to all Scottish clubs and the Isle of Man club to join in the fun of a weekend, to be called the Northern Lighthouse Activity Weekend, by establishing an amateur radio station at a lighthouse during the third weekend in August. This first year's event saw 11 stations established at lighthouses, operating primarily on the HF bands, with each station making approximately 750 QSOs over the weekend.

The following year, the Scottish clubs were involved in a weekend activity with the theme of Scottish Firths (river estuaries), so two years elapsed before the next Northern Lighthouse Activity Weekend. During this period, Anne-Grete OZ3AE enquired through a letter to Practical Wireless if there was any lighthouse activity on amateur radio. Following discussions with her, it was decided that Danish stations could join in the fun of the weekend. Quickly Germany, South Africa and France asked to join, so the name of the weekend was changed to The International Lighthouse/Lightship Weekend in 1999. It was at this time that John GM4OOU, due to pressure of work, had to cease his connections with the event.

The weekend became an annual event taking place over the third full weekend in August. The event has slowly grown in popularity. In 1999, there were 204 lighthouse/lightship stations in 36 countries. By 2006 there were 377 stations in 48 countries that took part. Full statistics and guidelines

for participation can be found on the ILLW web site at <http://illw.net/> which is funded and maintained by the author.

The main reason the event has become so popular is because it is NOT a contest. It is a relaxed fun weekend without the pressure of a contest. The guidelines are simple and the onus is on the operators to act within the spirit of the weekend which is simply to expose amateur radio and the plight of lighthouses to the public. This is why it is important for the ham station to be as close to the lighthouse/lightship as possible and with the controlling body's approval.

In Australia, it can be very difficult to obtain permission, as it is not an easy matter to find out who actually controls and maintains the lighthouse. The Australian Maritime Safety Authority used to control all lighthouses but they have relinquished most to the Parks and Wildlife Services in each State. Some lights are managed by local councils, some by Port Authorities and some are totally off limits.

A few years ago the International Association of Lighthouse Keepers decided to have an annual open day for lighthouses all around the world to encourage visitors to look at their lighthouses. They decided that no better day could be decided upon other than the Sunday of the ILLW. This move has been highly successful, as the media have become involved in quite a few areas on our East coast as well as in other countries.

I first entered the event in 1999 and was one of only four Australian entrants. This seemed to me to be ridiculous considering the number of lighthouses in this country, so I decided to do something about it and asked Mike Dalrymple GM4SUC, the organiser, if I could organise some PR here and in New Zealand. He appointed me the Oceania co-ordinator for the event

and last year we had 30 entries from VK. In 2001, I took over the entrants list from Jim Weidner, the President of the Amateur Radio Lighthouse Society, based in USA, and set up the web site as it is today. Last year the entrants list clocked up over 12,000 hits.

This year's event takes place on 18-19 August 2007, so if you haven't done so already, find a lighthouse nearby and get a group together or do it solo and fire up a lighthouse station. In most cases, if you don't intend operating from within the lighthouse itself or one of its cottages, you really don't need to get any approval. The Parks and Wildlife people used to be quite difficult but word has now circulated that we are fairly harmless and the PR generated is good for them as well. At Green Cape, they have even provided a caravan as a radio shack and they even tow it from Merimbula, some 60 km away.

Everyone I know who has participated in the event for the first time has come back year after year. A report from the Burlington ARC, Canada, summed their first participation in these few words:

"The greatest delight of the day was the active participation of the visiting children who showed a remarkable interest in the whole idea of amateur radio, especially the use of Morse Code. It was an honour and a delight to participate in this adventure and we look forward with increased enthusiasm to next year's participation."

As you can see from the website, Mike Dalrymple passed away in December 2005. He was the Treasurer of the Ayr ARG and one of their members has taken on Mike's roll as the PR man and main co-ordinator. The event is now dedicated to Mike's memory.

I am happy to answer any questions anyone might have about the event. My email address is vk2ce@vk2ce.com

ar