

# GREAT OCEAN WALK

## Walk Victoria's Icons

### INTERPRETIVE NOTES

#### **Significance of the Coast**

*The Great Ocean Walk (GOW) skirts the interface of the Southern Ocean and the land mass of Australia. Visitors can now walk along this stretch of hitherto all but inaccessible coastline. As likely however, few walkers will be aware of events of international maritime significance that played out along this ironbound coast a century and a half ago – as critical to the building of the Eastern Australian colonies as the coast is memorable.*

*This melding of rugged beauty and a fascinating history make the GOW all the more special for both the new visitor to Victoria and those who for years may have wondered just what mysteries this coast held.*

*Hopes, dreams and frustrations of colonial explorers, confident settlers seeking well watered pastures and a native people who knew it as their home for millennia– have played out along this coast.*

*Every beach and headland along the Walk has a story to tell, whether it be of shipwreck, massacre, drowning, rescue or refuge, industry or indolence.*

*Fundamental to understanding this stretch of coast and what it has in store for those who seek to walk it, is to appreciate that the Southern Ocean is the world's largest ocean and the waves that ceaselessly crash on the cliffs you skirt have travelled from as far as Patagonia and Cape Horn at South America's tip. The GOW is set in latitude 39 deg south which is 300 km below Africa's southern tip.*

*Storms in the Southern Ocean are continually propelling waves out and into "The Funnel" or "Eye of the Needle" - two 19<sup>th</sup> century terms used by mariners to describe the most dangerous passage of water on the long voyage from Europe to the Australian colonies - the entrance to Bass Strait.*

*This section of coast, where the GOW now runs and further west to Portland, was the Landfall Coast for generations of Australians and was preferred over low lying, all but invisible by night, King Island - when winds allowed and a Clipper ship captain's courage held.*

*As you walk the GOW you are unaware of King Island, unseen over the gently curving southern horizon line - though on most nights you can see the flash of the King Island Lighthouse (Cape Wickham) from The Otway Ridge between Lavers Hill and Beech Forest.*

*The gap is narrow (75 km) and had to be "threaded", very often in the pitch blackness of night with only an approximate idea of your vessel's true position. This was after an 80 day voyage from Europe and after 1851, when the Great Circle Route was adopted, without sight of land because of the savings in time such a route provided. That was what emigration to Australia entailed and the cliffs that the GOW now skirts were the first sight of land for tens of thousands of "New Australians".*

*Terrible wrecks occurred in western Bass Strait. The worst was the emigrant ship *Cataraqui* (Australia's worst loss of life in peacetime shipwreck) in 1845 when 399 died of 408 aboard. A decade earlier 300 drowned aboard the convict transport *Neva*. Both wrecks were on the west coast of King Island.*

# GREAT OCEAN WALK

## Walk Victoria's Icons

*Cape Otway was identified in a NSW Legislative Council Enquiry into Lighthouses in Bass Straits as the location for a beacon, principally because high cliffs made for a safer landfall and were silhouetted against all but the blackest of night skies.*

*In the mid 1840's the coastline of today's GOW was all but unvisited by citizens of the decade old Port Phillip District settlement on the Yarra River or the slightly older Portland to the west.*

*Enter Charles Joseph La Trobe, Superintendent of Port Phillip District. He had been six years in Port Phillip and it was another six years before Victoria separated from New South Wales. The "unlit" status of Bass Strait at night for vessels had become sufficiently important that the Superintendent himself was directed from Sydney to satisfy himself on the matter of how a lighthouse might be built at Cape Otway.*

***For more background on La Trobe and his love affair with the outdoors and exploration you may care to refer to .CJ. La Trobe Fact Sheet.***

*La Trobe had to ascertain the salient features of the cape – its elevation, geology, ease of access from the sea, then mark a suitable site with firm ground capable of supporting a tower of, at this stage, unknown height.*

*His first attempt from the Colac-Winchelsea side of the Otway Ranges was unsuccessful and so early in 1846 he decided to attempt to find a route from the west by working along the coast from Warrnambool and Port Campbell. Though initially optimistic upon reaching the Gellibrand River, within four days he had admitted defeat in the thickest scrub in the hills above Cape Volney and Milanesia Beach. This today contains some of the most rugged sections of the GOW.*

*A third attempt was demanded of him by NSW Governor Gipps in Sydney, and by April 1846 La Trobe was back at the Gellibrand River. This time, after a five day struggle, he with Henry Allan of Allansford and an escort of Border and Native Police eventually reached Cape Otway.*

*His journal records the exultation he felt – the more appreciated now by all those who have themselves walked the GOW:*

*"Push forward and reach the highest sandhill amongst the Cups and Saucers and know that we have really found Cape Otway. Receding line of Coast on both sides. East to C. Patten(sic) and West to Moonlight Head. An hours halt and then return, on our steps, to our camp on the Joanna River. The soft deal board. A gusty night."*

*He had camped at Joanna River (today known as Johanna) and the effort involved in a 15 km "bush bashing sprint" from Johanna to Cape Otway and return in a day can only be imagined. It is as well that La Trobe could draw on years of exploring Swiss mountain passes and trekking east to west across America as a 30-year-old in 1832.*

*Today the GOW passes behind the Cape Otway Lighthouse and it is from here, the southern most point of land west of Melbourne, that the visitor begins to appreciate the sweep of the coast back eastward into Bass Strait and westward out toward the horizon over which the great sailing ships appeared, 65 days out from Liverpool a century and a half ago.*

*The lighthouse was designed by Mortimer Lewis, the New South Wales Government Architect, from information furnished by La Trobe and completed over a period of two years. It commenced operating on August 29, 1848 and, although upgraded a number of times, operated continuously until automation in 1994. That was the end of the Light keepers at Cape Otway.*

# GREAT OCEAN WALK

## Walk Victoria's Icons

*The construction of the 26 metre high tower proved more difficult than expected with the Geelong contractor Alexander McGillivray being dismissed by the Public Works Department mid contract. The Colonial Government took the work over and completed the works using casual labour and skilled tradesmen.*

*Supplies, equipment and materials as well as the delicate mechanism of the lighthouse, all had to be landed through the surf at the Parker River 3km to the east of the lighthouse reserve. This was a treacherous business - a number of seamen drowning on one occasion at Crayfish Bay in 1847. You can imagine the difficulty this entailed as you tarry a while at Parker River or Blanket Bay.*

*Today the reassuring beam of the lighthouse commands all but a few portions of the GOW - a white tower by day and beacon by night - still guarding this coast and warning all vessels who approach too close to beware.*

*La Trobe returned in 1849 to Cape Otway to see the light house in operation. He went via the new bridle track cut between Winchelsea and the infant Apollo Bay settlement, continuing on to the Cape.*

*This track is today part of the GOW. He stayed overnight with the Ford family and then set out westward back across the route he took in 1846 - again, part of today's GOW. In pushing his way up behind Milanesia Beach he wrote that night in his journal most likely camped near Ryans Den "had a day of the most severe exertion I ever encountered".*

*Delayed for two days because of fires near Moonlight Head he eventually reached Warrnambool. He had a public meeting and records: "The deputation sits till 10pm though I never had my clothes off for eight nights."*

*The Ford family would in charge be at The Otway for another 29 years - the longest continuous service rendered at one lighthouse in Victoria.*

*To walk the GOW today is to experience the same splendid isolation that so attracted the erudite La Trobe in the 1840's - one of many expeditions or what he called "his rambles", be they in Mexico, Switzerland, Jamaica or here in the new colony of Victoria*

### Prepared by Donald Walker

Donald Walker is the author of "Beacons of Hope" - a history of the Cape Otway and King Island Lighthouses at the western entrance to Bass Strait. This work sets out the story of the rugged Otway Coast that the Great Ocean Walk now follows - its shipwrecks and settlements, its explorers and peoples. A practicing architect he continues to draw inspiration for his work in the Otways from the high ranges mist filled gullies as well as the cliff rimmed bays and the bold headlands the coast is known for.

For more information please contact:

Alysia Brandenburg

Strategic Tourism Adviser

Parks Victoria

Telephone: 13 1963

Email: [abranden@parks.vic.gov.au](mailto:abranden@parks.vic.gov.au)

Updated May 2010