

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MARITIME MUSEUM RESEARCH PAPER

What were people's experiences on Torrens Island Quarantine Station?

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Introduction

The purpose of this report is to investigate the question: what were people's experiences on Torrens Island Quarantine Station? The South Australian Maritime Museum are interested in discovering more about the quarantine station and people's experiences on it. The Maritime Museum have run tours on the island for a number of years and there are many people who are interested in the history of the quarantine station. This report aims to fill in some of the details of the history of Torrens Island Quarantine Station to enable to the Maritime Museum to invite people to explore its history with a new depth. The report is comprised of four sections: basic history and context, buildings and site layout, life on station and recommendations.

This report aims to investigate the topic through the exploration of primary sources. This includes photos, maps, oral histories, newspapers, letters and diaries. Secondary sources on this topic are limited but some were used to provide basic information and to supplement information gained from primary source investigation.

Basic History and Context

Use of Torrens Island

Before there was a quarantine station, Torrens Island was used by the Kaurna people, an Indigenous tribe of the Adelaide Plains.¹ After European settlement of South Australia, Isaac Yeo began squatting on the island in 1850 and established a farm there.² He was evicted in 1856 when the first Torrens Island Quarantine Station was established. Instead of leaving the island Yeo moved and settled on the Western shore and began farming again.³ In 1875, the government bought Yeo's second farm to build a new quarantine station. By 1882, the government eventually acquired all other private land on the island.⁴ The quarantine station operated on the island until 1979 and was officially closed in 1980 due to a decline in maritime transport.

Australian and South Australian Quarantine

In the nineteenth century, Australia was a new nation and therefore it was free from many of the diseases that plagued Europe. Historian Krista Maglen, in her article 'A World Apart', explains that Australia's position far away from other countries and surrounded by oceans meant that Australia was 'beyond the reach of disease' and was afforded 'ideal circumstances for the application of quarantine'.⁵ Initially, Australia followed British quarantine practices; but due to the differences in location and diseases, Australian quarantine practices diverged from Britain's in the nineteenth century.⁶ Maglen states that 'by the end of the [nineteenth] century, Australian and Britain maritime disease control almost could not be more different.'⁷ She explains that in the 1850s and 1860s, 'Australian colonies became more reliant on quarantine for

¹ South Australia Maritime Museum, *2013 Q Station Tour Notes*, unpublished, 2013: 3.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Maglen, Krista, 'A World Apart: Geography, Australian Quarantine, and the Mother Country', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 60:2, Oxford University Press, 2005: 204.

⁶ Ibid, 198.

⁷ Ibid, 198-199.

providing an essential first line of defense against imported infectious disease.’⁸ It was believed that due to its distance from Europe and its limited contact with European diseases, Australia would be able to remain free from many of the diseases that had plagued the rest of the world.⁹

South Australian quarantine was established under these quarantine regulations. The Torrens Island Quarantine Station was established under the State government and then after Federation it became the Federal government’s responsibility. South Australia initially operated under the ‘English Public Health Act’ of 1848. Then after Federation it was brought under the ‘Quarantine Act 1908’. This act covered quarantine administration, the inspection of vessels, the performance of quarantine, the role of the Medical Officer and the provision of quarantine stations.¹⁰ The act does not specify how quarantine stations are to be run.

Literature Review

A review on the existing studies of the island was conducted before the commencement of primary source investigation into the Torrens Island Quarantine Station. In 2006, Linda Honey conducted an archaeological study *Quarantine Stations at Torrens Island and Port Nepean: A Comparative study*.¹¹ Her study focused on the archaeological findings of the stations and how they might uncover the story behind how the quarantine stations were run. Honey looked at the structures on the stations and did a site analysis. Her primary focus was to use spatial analysis to determine how control of each site was maintained during operation. Her study is very thorough in its investigation of the quarantine station buildings and she also provides useful information from the McDougall & Vines conservation report of Torrens Island, which is

⁸ Ibid, 198.

⁹ Ibid., 203.

¹⁰ Commonwealth of Australia, ‘Quarantine Act 1908’ at http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/qa1908131/, accessed 24 October 2013.

¹¹ Honey, Linda, *Quarantine Stations at Torrens Island and Port Nepean: A Comparative Study*, Flinders University, 2006.

hard to access. However, her study does little to reveal what everyday life was like on Torrens Island Quarantine Station.

Historian Peter Bell conducted a historic study into the island entitled *History of Torrens Island*.¹² As his study is more focused on historic enquiry it provides more useful background to the island than Honey's paper. Bell's early history of the island is particularly helpful in providing information on the events that preceded the establishment of the quarantine station. His early history of the station provides some useful information about the buildings. He also includes useful historical information collected from newspapers. His post-federation history of the island is brief but does provide useful information about the closure of the station. Overall his work provides a useful starting point but lacks depth and does not reveal much about the experiences of the people on the station.

A study of Torrens Island was commissioned by AGL before the commencement of their Torrens Island power station expansion project. This study was called *Torrens Island Energy Park: Non-Indigenous Heritage and Cultural Study*.¹³ Justin McCarthy from Austral Archaeology prepared this study and Peter Bell wrote the history of the island. As Peter Bell wrote the history, this section is almost identical his *History of Torrens Island*, the only difference is the addition of some maps and pictures. The aim of the study was to determine areas of non-indigenous historical and cultural significance and provide recommendations for monitoring the impact of the power station expansion project. The study acknowledges that the site of the first quarantine station and the fields of the quarantine station are within the proposed construction area and also that there are existing remains that will need to be demolished before construction. The study concludes that these sites are of 'nil to low' archaeological potential and that the existing Torrens Island Quarantine Station will not be affected by the expansion

¹² Bell, Peter, *History of Torrens Island*, Unpublished, 2012.

¹³ Austral Archaeology, *Torrens Island Energy Park: Non-Indigenous Historical and Cultural Heritage Study*, Austral Archaeology: 2009.

project.¹⁴ The study does not provide any new historic information about the quarantine station but provides helpful information on what parts of the historic station lay under the current power station.

The main gap in previous study is the investigation into the personal experiences of the people quarantined on the Torrens Island Quarantine Station. Honey focused on the buildings and what they can reveal about structures of control on the station. Bell focused on recorded facts and events, which revealed little about the experiences of people on the station. This study will aim to investigate the buildings and the events as well but also to explore the stories of people who went through the buildings and experienced the events.

¹⁴ Ibid., 30.

Buildings and Site Layout

Early Period

The Torrens Island Quarantine Station was first opened in 1856 and was run by the State government until Federation. Peter Bell's report suggests that the original station consisted of a timbre-framed dormitory, a timbre-framed kitchen, a washhouse and a fumigation room.¹⁵ There were also quarantine station tents and a stone building set up near the water's edge but no trace of this part of the station remains today.¹⁶ In 1875, the government acquired the farm of Isaac Yeo, a farmer who was squatting on the island, in order to build a more permanent quarantine station. This was also to make sure that the station met new quarantine regulations that were introduced in 1879.¹⁷ In 1878, the construction of this new station began. In 1879, the new facility was completed; it included an iron fenced enclosure (pictured below) on the western shore with a jetty, dormitories for singles, cottages for married couples (pictured below), hospital wards, disinfecting rooms, a doctor's residence, staff quarters, kitchens, dinning rooms and a mortuary.¹⁸



Quarantine Station, 1879, State Library of South Australia Archives, Torrens Island Collection, B4071.

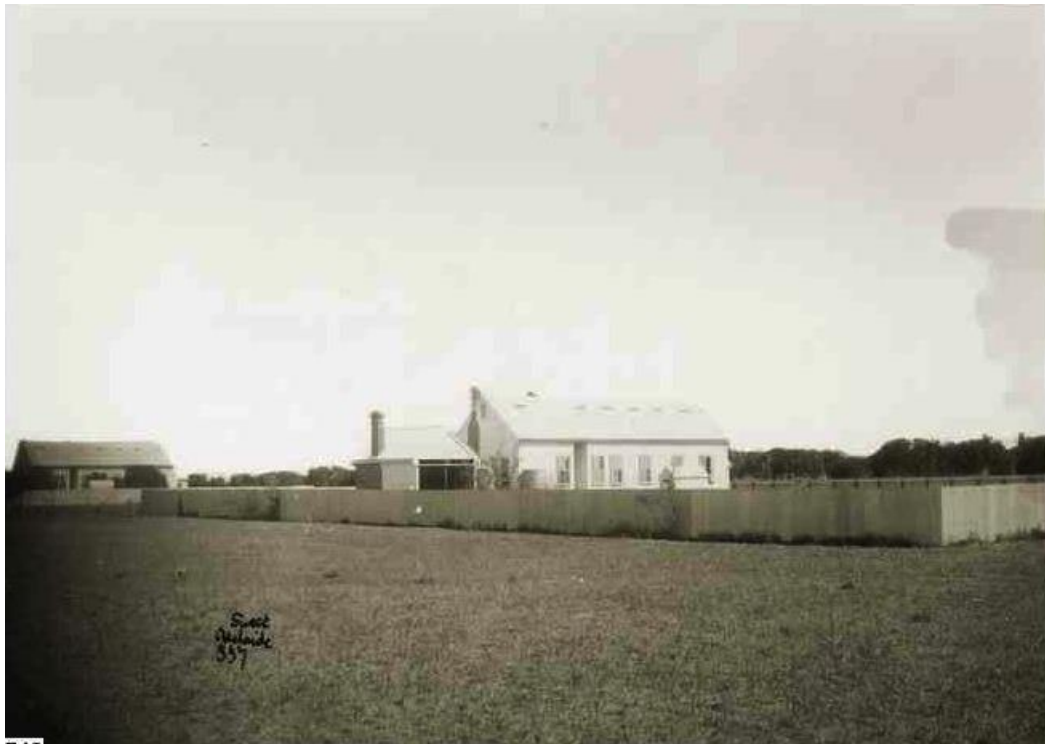
¹⁵ Bell, 3.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

1879 Site photographs



Station with galvanised fence: *Quarantine Station, 1879, State Library of South Australia Archives, Torrens Island Collection, B3743.*



Chalets: Samuel White Sweet, *Quarantine Station, Torrens Island, 1880, State Library of South Australia Archives, Torrens Island Collection, B43143.*

After Federation

Peter Bell records that the quarantine station was taken over by the Commonwealth Quarantine Service in 1909.¹⁹ A round of construction took place between 1912 and 1915. Peter Bell states that this period of building was to ensure that 'the station was brought up to the standards of Commonwealth quarantine stations at all major Australian ports'.²⁰ He records that this upgrade involved the addition of 'a boiler house and autoclave disinfecting room... along with other buildings'.²¹ A map of the station after this construction is shown on page 10, the boiler house and autoclave disinfecting room are in the western configuration of buildings.

Bell notes the addition of 'a separate timbre ward for isolating patients with venereal diseases' in 1921.²² He says that this building was also used as a general isolation unit and was demolished in 1999 when the Torrens Island power station was built.²³ The venereal diseases hospital can be seen on the map on page 13, it is in the southern-most complex – it is the smallest irregular-shaped structure in the group of four buildings.

Although there was construction done in the 1960s to build more cottage accommodation, the *Register of Admissions and Discharges* from the island only shows six people coming through the station after 1960 and none of them were recorded to have stayed in the cottages.²⁴ This means that although these buildings were constructed some may not have ever been used in quarantine.

¹⁹ Peter Bell, 3.

²⁰ Ibid.

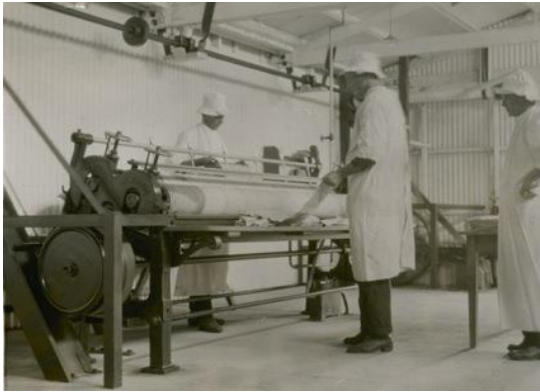
²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 4.

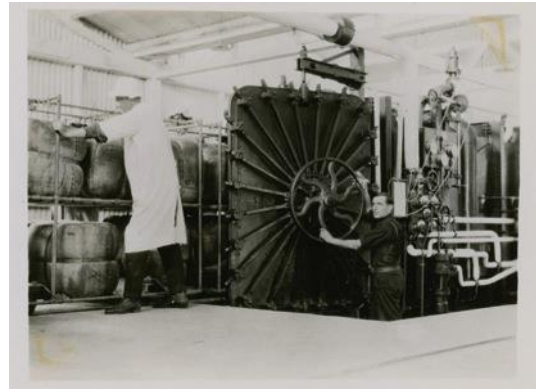
²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *Register of Admissions and Discharge – Torrens Island Quarantine Station, 1923-1970*, National Archives of Australia (Adelaide), D2305.

Building Photographs 1912-1915



Disinfecting Block (D3185/18)



Fumigation chamber (D3185/15)



Furnace (D3185/16)



Administration Block (D3185/88)

Building Photographs 1921



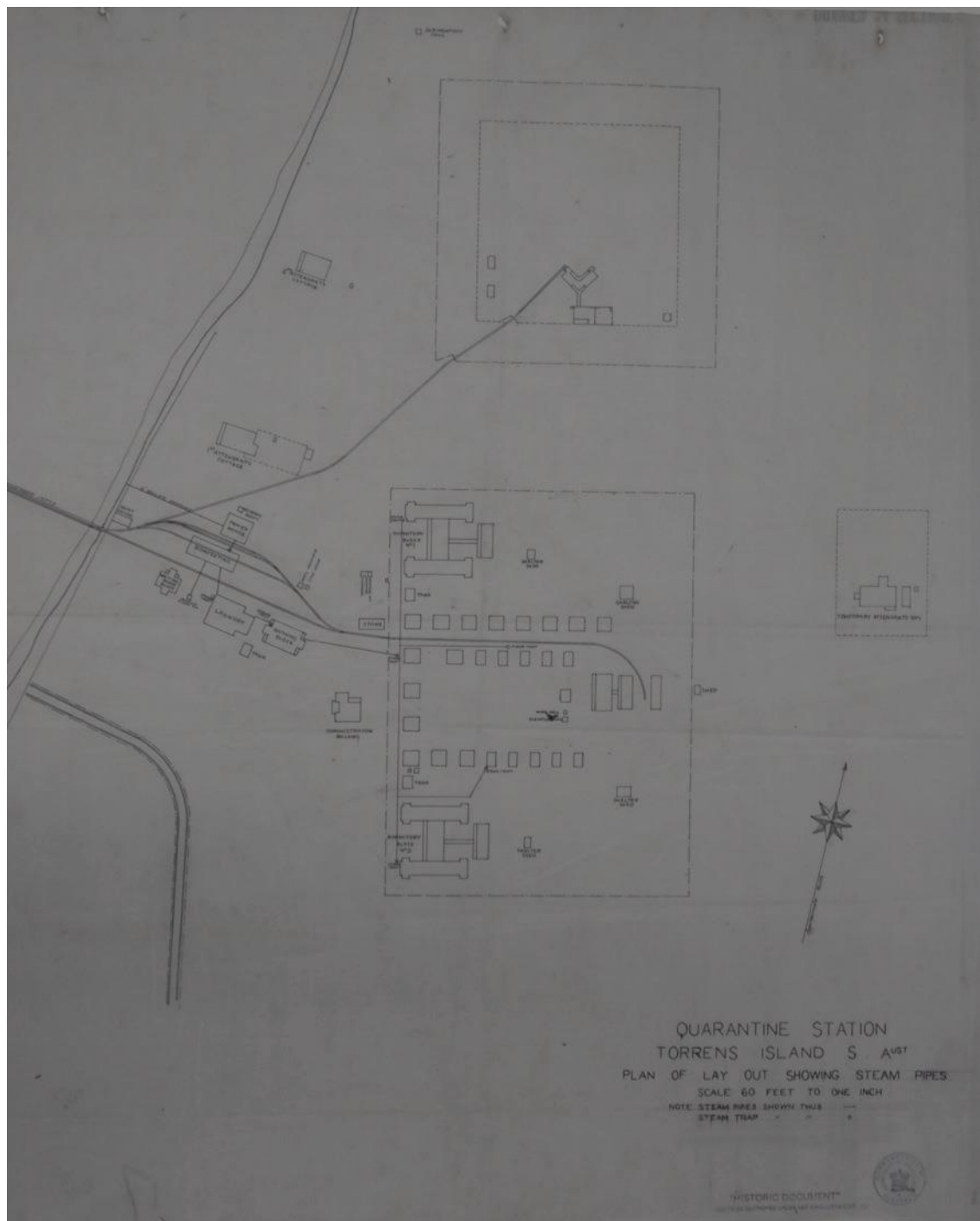
Isolation hospital (D3185/53)



Isolation hospital kitchen (D3185/52)

Torrens Island Quarantine Station photograph albums, 1924-1945, National Archives of Australia (Adelaide), D3185.

Site Map 1918



Site plans and service layouts –Quarantine Station Torrens Island – plan of layout showing pipes, 28 May 1918, National Archives of Australia (Adelaide), Folder 57A Drawing 26, D1051.

Site Map 1929, showing additional Venereal Diseases compound



Site plans and service layouts –Quarantine Station Torrens Island – plan showing layout of buildings, January 1929, National Archives of Australia (Adelaide), Folder 57A Drawing 27, D1051.

After Operation

In 1980 the station was officially closed and many of the buildings were auctioned and removed.²⁵ In 1993 the remaining buildings were entered into the SA Heritage Register. The SA State Heritage Register currently includes the cemetery, the mortuary, the jetty and the complex.²⁶ The buildings that remain on the island today are the bathing block, the luggage block, the boiler house, the Administration House, the mortuary, the isolation hospital, the linen store and a row of 'chalets' or cottages. Recently, the station has become more dilapidated and a number of the buildings have fallen into disrepair.



Chalets: Warrick Barnett, 2013.



Workingman's Cottage Warrick Barnett, 2013.

²⁵ Peter Bell.

²⁶ Government of South Australia, 'Heritage Places: Torrens Island', *Heritage Places Database*, http://apps.planning.sa.gov.au/HeritageSearch/HeritageItem.aspx?p_heritageno=17297, accessed 16 October 2013.

Life on the Station

The Torrens Island Quarantine Station was in operation for 124 years from 1856 until 1980. Its history is long and a lot of people passed through the station. It is impossible, in such a short time, to investigate and record the experiences of everyone. This section aims to provide a snapshot of what life was like on the station and provide some insight into how their experiences varied.

Regulations

Station regulations

As mentioned previously the Torrens Island Quarantine Station was established under State control and then shifted to Federal control after Federation. From Health Officer Handyside Duncan's official correspondence, a general idea about quarantine practices and regulations can be gained. Duncan's correspondence includes a document entitled 'Rules of Quarantine Station'. These rules instruct that 'any person breaking the rules will be reported to the Health Officer and punished as the law directs'.²⁷ No infringement of the rules was ever recorded in his correspondence and it is unclear what punishment the law would direct. The rules include instructions on keeping bedding and utensils clean, following the instruction of the Keeper, the hours residents must be out of bed and when they must turn their lights off, the boundaries residents must keep within, meal times and instructions on personal hygiene.²⁸ They also prohibit residents from attempting to escape and from aiding anyone else in their attempt to escape.²⁹ It is unclear whether this was ever attempted. This is the only official document that was found amongst the Health Officer's correspondence relating to the quarantine regulations for residents on the Torrens Island station before Federation.

²⁷ *Letters received, drafts of letters sent and miscellaneous papers* – Health Officer, Port Adelaide, 1849-1859, 1864-1885, State Records of South Australia, GRG35/47 Unit 1.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

After Federation the station would have come under the regulations of the 'Quarantine Act 1908'.³⁰ This act does not prescribe the rules of a quarantine station but instead outlines the extent of the power that a Quarantine Officer should have and the laws they must abide by. It is unclear whether the rules that were enforced pre-Federation were maintained or whether there were changes.

Quarantined Residents

There was a range of different people that passed through Torrens Island quarantine station. People's experiences on Torrens Island were varied just like their backgrounds. Some were migrating to South Australia for the first time, some were just visiting, others were returning from travels and some were returning from war.

When exploring what the stories of those quarantined it is first important to ask: who was quarantined? For the purpose of this report four categories will be used to investigate the experiences of those that were quarantined on the station: immigrants, travellers, internees, and soldiers and army nurses. It is very hard to find personal information about the earlier periods of the station's operation so this study will focus mainly on twentieth-century residents and their experiences. Information about these residents have been found in newspapers, letters, diaries, records, photographs and oral histories.

Immigrants

Many of the people that passed through Torrens Island Quarantine Station were migrants, coming to start a new life in Australia. Some were planning to migrate to South Australia and others were told that they were going there on the journey. Regardless, no one expected to end up at the quarantine station. It is hard to summarise the general reaction of migrants to being quarantined but through conducting oral

³⁰ Commonwealth of Australia, 'Quarantine Act 1908'.

histories with some migrants an idea of what it was like can be gained. Ron Young and Dave Binyon both migrated to Australia as children – Ron was ten years old and Dave was fifteen years old. They both came over on the *Strathaird* in 1954 from England. The passengers on the ship were quarantined for smallpox contact.³¹ There were over 170 people quarantined, which is one of the largest recorded groups to be quarantined at Torrens Island.

Their stories both begin with their parents' decision to migrate to Australia. Ron's father didn't like the job he had in England and he had developed a liking for warm weather when he was stationed in India and Palestine during World War II. His father had the choice to migrate to either Canada or Australia and he chose Australia due to this liking for warm weather and also because they had family friends there.³² Similarly, Dave's father decided to migrate due to work dissatisfaction. His father had worked as a furrier before WWII but after the war this sector was heavily taxed and therefore he had to stop. He got into driving busses and also working on the platform but he had to work extremely hard, it was difficult to make a living out of it and he developed health problems due to the long hours he was working. Dave's father looked into migrating to either Canada or Australia and, like Ron's father, he decided on Australia because of the warm weather.³³ Both families then came over on the *Strathaird*. Ron's family consisted of only him and his parents whereas Dave's family included his parents and four siblings, an older brother and a younger sister and two younger brothers.

On the voyage over it was discovered that one of the crew had smallpox and when they arrived in Port Adelaide they were told that they would be quarantined at Torrens Island. Ron recalls that, as he was only a child, he wasn't really concerned about being quarantined. Although he said that he could imagine that it would have been stressful

³¹ *Register of admissions and discharges*, NAA.

³² Interview with Ron Young, 15 October 2013, conducted by Catherine Manning and assisted by Emma Kluge, Migration Museum holdings.

³³ Interview with Dave Binyon, 16 October 2013, conducted by Emma Kluge and assisted by Catherine Manning, Migration Museum holdings.

for the adults as ‘they were waiting to go for jobs and settle into a new life and there they were stuck on Torrens Island for two weeks.’³⁴ He also recalls that a couple of migrants ‘got a bit stressed’ in response to being quarantined and that there was a nurse who came over to look after them at night.³⁵ Ron said that many migrants did not like the idea that they could not contact their family and friends to let them know why they were delayed in arriving. Conversely, Dave was separated from his family once he got to Torrens Island because his brother had to be put into isolation and as a result he was unaware of how his parents felt about being quarantined.³⁶

Dave’s first impression of arriving at Torrens Island was only that it had a nice beach and that it was ‘much better than any British beach’.³⁷ Both Ron and Dave recall their time on Torrens Island Quarantine Station as a happy one. Ron remembers having bonfires each night and that people would sit around it and ‘tell yarns’.³⁸ He also remembers playing games of Treasure Island with the other kids and being taught how to fish off the jetty.³⁹ He likened his experience on the island to a holiday. Similarly, Dave remembers thinking that the island would have been better suited to being a holiday spot than a quarantine station. Dave did not have as much leisure time as other kids as he had to look after his brother in the isolation hospital. He said that he mainly went for walks and watched the other kids play on the beach. He recalls that his older brother Brian and his friend Ian found an old rowboat, plugged up a hole in the front and gave kids rides up and down the beach.⁴⁰ Both descriptions paint the station in a positive light.

Both migrants remember their time on the island vividly, although they were there almost 60 years ago. This shows that their experience on the Torrens Island Quarantine

³⁴ Interview with Ron Young.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Interview with Dave Binyon.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Interview with Ron Young.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Interview with Dave Binyon.

Station was significant and memorable. The *Advertiser*, on August 14 1954, declared their quarantine group to be the 'happiest group' in quarantine.⁴¹

Travellers

Some travellers also found themselves put into quarantine on the way back to Australia. For them Torrens Island was not their first contact with South Australia but a delay in returning home. This delay produced varying responses.

Journalist Hugh Kalyptus was quarantined on the island along with the passengers on the *Ormuz* in 1901 after a case of small pox was detected on its way back from London.⁴² While there he was there he edited a paper called *The Yellow Flag*. In this paper many wrote of their outrage at being 'marooned' on the island.⁴³ The outrage seems to be for the sake of creating dramatic reading material. The writers of the paper even renamed Torrens Island 'Muddle Island'.

The 'muddle' is that those on the ship as visitors were quarantined along with the passengers when the ship was declared infected. This caused outrage, as the visitors were merely 'contacts of contacts' – as one of the 'exiled reporters' wrote.⁴⁴ The *Advertiser* reports that Medical Officer, Dr Gething, boarded the ship and initially said that everything was satisfactory. Due to this visitors were then allowed on board. Afterwards, the ship's doctor informed him of an 'eruptive skin disease' on board, which Gething then diagnosed as smallpox.⁴⁵ He then asked for another doctor to examine the patient so that he could be sure of the disease. Dr Lawrence boarded the ship and confirmed that that disease was smallpox, the yellow flag was then hoisted and all passengers and the visitors that had come on board, including journalists, were told that

⁴¹ *Advertiser*, 14 August 1954.

⁴² *Advertiser*, 22 May 1901.

⁴³ *The Yellow Flag and the Torrens Island Terror*, ed. Kalyptus, Hugh, Fred Coombs: Adelaide, 1901.

⁴⁴ *Advertiser*, 1 June 1901, 1.

⁴⁵ *Advertiser*, 22 May 1901.

they were to be taken to Torrens Island Quarantine Station and would not be able to return home for three weeks.⁴⁶ The paper records that the station was not ready for so many passengers and that there was not enough bedding for everyone.⁴⁷ This added to the outrage of the visitors who believed they were already being unnecessarily quarantined.

The *Yellow Flag* appears to be the journalist's protests against this 'muddle'. The opening article of the paper speaks of the 'Yellow Flag', a flag that was hoisted to declare that a ship was carrying a diseased person and needed to be quarantined. The author begins his article by describing how the flag flutters and then says:

'true it is only a flutter as far as this paper is concerned, but that flutter is in the fresh breeze of public indignation which will develop into a cyclone to sweep with no uncertain purpose and clear away in its restless force the jerry-built fabrics of officialism erected by unskilful sub-contractors upon a foundation laid out for public well-being...'⁴⁸

This author seems to be venting his frustration at the government. In contrast, the writer of the next article describes his time on the island as an enforced holiday. He says that although some were angry at being contained on the island there were those who rejoiced 'in this much-desired but unexpected holiday' and that all 'may look for good and solid benefit from the three weeks sojourn here.'⁴⁹ The paper includes many other articles and poems about quarantine. Many express outrage at being stuck on the island and describe the horrors of quarantine whereas others, like the writer of the second article, seem intent on making the most of their time in quarantine on Torrens Island. Regardless of what the writers complain of, they were able to write a full paper and have it printed in their time in quarantine and therefore the restrictions placed on them while they were there must not have been too harsh. Most of the outrage was triggered by a belief that they were falsely quarantined rather than the conditions of the station.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *The Yellow Flag*, 1.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Gladys Ward was another traveller who was quarantined on Torrens Island. She had been travelling on the *Strathaird* in August 1938 when it was discovered at Fremantle that someone on board had smallpox. Twelve passengers, including Gladys, were quarantined when they reached Port Adelaide due to contact with the diseased person, and they were transported to Torrens Island Quarantine Station so they could be vaccinated against the disease and declared healthy before returning to the mainland.⁵⁰

A lifelong diarist, Gladys recorded some of her time at the Quarantine Station on the back of the stationery from the ship. Her time at the station seemed pleasant enough; she writes that they were given a hot three course meal for dinner and also that they were able to make phone calls to loved ones.⁵¹ Gladys recalls having photos taken and that newspaper reporters and press photographers travelled alongside them as they were taken to the quarantine station.⁵² *The Chronicle* reported that along with the passengers from the ship, four stewards were transferred to the station to care for them while they were detained there and also that a wireless was being brought to occupy those quarantined.⁵³ The *Advertiser* reports that the group was 'fairly happy' and that they had taken up fishing and crabbing and that some of the women had become 'proficient anglers'.⁵⁴ The paper also reported that all the passengers were well although some were still recovering from vaccination.⁵⁵ Gladys' stay on the station was short as no cases of smallpox were found among the passengers. She was released after 10 days in quarantine.

⁵⁰ *Register of admissions and discharges*, NA.

⁵¹ *Gladys Ward: Summary Record*, State Library of South Australia Archives, PRG 893/29.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *The Chronicle*, 31 March 1938.

⁵⁴ *Advertiser*, 2 April 1938.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Photographs from the Quarantine Station (State Library SA)



Top left: *Passengers detained for quarantine on Torrens Island, 1937, State Library of South Australia Archives, Torrens Island Collection, B 61389.*

Top right: *The fumigation store on Torrens Island, 1937, State Library of South Australia Archives, Torrens Island Collection, B 61388.*

Bottom: *Passengers disembarking at the jetty on Torrens Island, 1937, State Library of South Australia Archives, Torrens Island Collection, B 61395.*

Internees

The scope of this project did not allow for extensive research into the internees that were quarantined at Torrens Island but the *Register of Admissions and Discharges* reveals that there were seventeen people quarantined as 'internees' from the ship *MV Cramer* in 1942, during WWII.⁵⁶ One is recorded to have had chicken pox, another made contact with them and then fifteen were recorded to have amoebic dysentery.⁵⁷ The names seem to indicate that the internees were of Chinese or Japanese descent. The *Register of Admissions and Discharges* records that the internees were under the control of the Department of Defense. They are recorded to have stayed at the island from 28 January until 8 February 1941.

Soldiers and Army Nurses

Soldiers and army nurses were also recorded to have come through Torrens Island Quarantine Station during WWI and WWII. Kathleen Avery, a nurse from World War I, spoke about being quarantined on the way home from war in an Oral History interview. She recounts that they were forced to stop at the quarantine station because many of the troops had Spanish influenza. Although she does not say a lot about her experience there, she records that after being away from home she was very disappointed that she was not able to see her family. She said that they could even see their families waiting for them but they were not able to go to them.⁵⁸ Besides this, she recalls little about what her experience on the island was like.

It is also recorded that five of the soldiers that were quarantined after World War I with Spanish influenza died and were buried on the station.⁵⁹ The *Register of Graves* for Torrens Island Quarantine Station lists that five soldiers were buried in the cemetery in

⁵⁶ *Register of admissions and discharges*, NA.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ *Interview with Kathleen Avery*, conducted by Joan Durdin, 1985, State Library of South Australia Archives, OH 17/24.

⁵⁹ Bell, 3-4.

1919.⁶⁰ This is the highest number of deaths recorded that occurred from one quarantine group in the history of the station.

World War II also brought soldiers to the quarantine station. In May 1942 a number of the AIF, along with their crew, on board *MV St. Essyit* were quarantined for smallpox and contact with the disease. The newspapers did not report their arrival and stay, but a number of the AIF left comments in the visitor's book. A group from the AIF recorded themselves under the nicknames: Doc, Bashful, Sleepy, Dopey, Grumpy, Happy, Sneezy and Prince Charming.⁶¹ They also left a comment scrawled across the side of the page that said: 'good beds, good food, good attention, but no beer! Signed: the seven dwarfs.'⁶² Another more sensible soldier commented 'a nice change to be here' and another said 'a good place in wartime'.⁶³ For these soldiers the quarantine station provided a reprieve from the war.

Visitors

It is unclear what the restrictions were on visits to the island but the *Visiting book* from Torrens Island lists a number of visitors coming to the island.⁶⁴ The comments from the book tell an overwhelmingly positive story of the station. Some visitors commented on the nice location of the island. J.E.M. Aree of Largs Bay, who visited in March 1902 wrote, 'beautiful scenery'. Emily Greene Klee of Kewswick, who visited in April 1902 wrote, 'a nice place for a holiday'.⁶⁵ M. Lanfford of Largs Bay even went so far to comment 'a treat to be quarantined' in April 1902 and another visitor in 1911 simply remarked 'faultless'.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ *Register of graves 1887-1932 and Torrens Island Quarantine Station Hospital index 1918-1992*, National Archives of Australia (Adelaide), Volume 1, D2303.

⁶¹ *Visiting Book, Torrens Island Quarantine Station – 1892-1958*, National Archives of Australia (Adelaide), D3186.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Photographs of Servicemen



Torrens Island Quarantine Station photograph albums, 1924-1945, National Archives of Australia (Adelaide), D3185/106 & 109.

Working on the Station

This study ended up focusing primarily on those who were quarantined on the station rather than those who worked on the station. As part of the investigation Margaret Barnett, who worked on the island from 1967 until 1971, was interviewed.⁶⁷ Her interview is able to give a snapshot into what working on the quarantine station was like.

Margaret began working at the Torrens Island Quarantine Station in March 1967. She recalls seeing the ad for the job in the paper and that she and her husband rang up to apply for the job. There were no qualifications or external contracts and soon after they were told they had the jobs and that they would be going to visit Torrens Island. Margaret, who was pregnant at the time, was a little worried about the boat trip over because she was under the impression that Torrens Island was in Darwin. She took a couple of seasickness tablets but was surprised to arrive at the island about 40 minutes after they left. After that visit they signed the paper work; Margaret said that the government directly employed them. They moved over to the island after their daughter Kerry was born, she was only fourteen days old when they got there. There were also four other families that were living on the island – three others with young kids and one older couple with no children.⁶⁸

Margaret does not recall being given any rules, only that they had to behave themselves and that there were certain areas, like the cemetery, that they were not allowed to visit. Although, she said that whenever they were told not to do something that is what they wanted to do. She recalls the women hiking out to the cemetery with their kids in strollers, wading through knee-height grass and on the watchout for snakes.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Interview with Margaret Barnett, 1 November 2013, conducted by Emma Kluge assisted by Emily Jateff, Migration Museum holdings.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Management structures were not strict while she was over there. Margaret says their only official contact was with Doctor Dorsche, the resident doctor who hired them and gave their vaccinations. Wally Ferris, a man from one of the other families who was living on the station, was put in charge. Margaret recalls that Wally and his wife Laura were a little separate to the other families because they did not have children, but it appears that the families still viewed Wally and Laura as equals. Margaret's main tasks on the station were cooking for quarantined patients, cleaning and working the switchboard when Laura was away. She says that the women did not have as much work to do as the men. Margaret's husband, Robert, and Wally had to get up at 8am and only finished work around 5pm. She said that they maintained the animal quarantine station as well as doing work on the human quarantine station.⁷⁰

From Margaret's story, and also from the *Register of Admissions and Discharges*, it is clear that not many people were quarantined on the station during her time there. Margaret only recalls having three patients in the whole time she was there and the *Register of Admissions and Discharges* records the same.⁷¹ Margaret and the records differ on what the patients were in there for – Margaret is sure she looked after two lepers and someone with smallpox but the register records two patients with chicken pox and only one leper. Margaret said that having a leper on the station was very 'hush-hush'. It was Margaret's responsibility to bring the patients food while they were in the isolation hospital. She was forbidden to talk to those in the isolation hospital, although since there was no surveillance she said she would often talk to them when bringing food. She says that she did this because she knew it would have been extremely lonely in isolation.⁷²

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Register of Admissions and Discharges, NA.

⁷² Ibid.

Margaret particularly remembered her interactions with one leper. She says that they used to talk all the time and that he told her that he was from a leper colony but had been unlucky and got caught. When it was time for him to leave, the crew found out that he was going to be transported on a commercial flight. Margaret invited him to come over to the house after dark and they had a final talk before he left. There was still a stigma surrounding the disease of leprosy at this time but Margaret says she did not view the patients negatively, which is clearly shown by her conduct.⁷³

Margaret refers to her four and a half years on the Torrens Island Quarantine Station as one of the happiest times of her life. Although they were isolated and had to use some out-dated technology she loved being in a close community with others and says that it was a great place for her daughter to spend the first years of her life. As there were five families on a small island, Margaret says they were forced to make their own fun and grow together. She said they were also forced to do things they would not have usually been brave enough to do, such as driving a car through a small flowing river.⁷⁴

Although Margaret recalls an overall positive experience on the station they did have a few scares while they were there. Once, when they were on the tug Aedes about to go to Port Adelaide, waves from racing tugs disturbed their boat and tossed the babies on board out of their strollers. She remembers thinking that they were going to die but luckily the captain managed to right the boat and everyone was fine. After that the staff decided they were going to build a bridge to make transport safer. She also said that the water used to be a lot higher on the island then it is now so when it was stormy they would be stuck on the island. One time they were on the mainland and were called back on quarantine duties. They could not drive back so they had to be pulled across a river that had formed to get back to the station. She recalls being pulled with a rope around

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

her waist across chest-high water. She said that her husband had to do this with their daughter Kerry in a basinet on his head.⁷⁵

Margaret and her family were eventually forced to leave the station when it was time for Kerry to go to school. It would have been too difficult and dangerous to send her on a boat to school everyday. Margaret said that they were very upset that they had to leave and that they tried everything to arrange a way for them to stay.⁷⁶

Overall Impressions

The experience of quarantine at Torrens Island cannot easily be summarised but from these accounts it seems that for many their experience at the station was positive. Only a small percentage of those that were quarantined were actually diseased. Of those that were sick only a small number were fatally ill. For most people the only complaint was that they were detained on the island. For those that were healthy, Torrens Island Quarantine Station was a pleasant destination with a nice beach and a jetty.

People's experiences did vary over time – one example of this is communication. The passengers that wrote for the *Yellow Flag* in 1901 and those in Gladys Ward's group in 1938 were given easy access to communication with the mainland. Whereas Ron and Dave recall limited access to the telephone and Margaret said that migrants were not allowed to make calls in her time there. The station's layout and facilities also changed over time which means that the station that Gladys Ward was quarantined at in 1938 would have been different from the station that Margaret Barnett worked at in 1967. Further investigation into the conditions and management of the station will help to nuance this more.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Recommendations

Remaining gaps

This study began the work of looking at the stories of those who were quarantined at Torrens Island. The history of the site and the buildings was also limited to the official history and did little to explain why the buildings were constructed and what they were used for. My paper also fails to cover the use of the station and its buildings from 1930 - 1960. The main gap in this investigation of the lives of those quarantined was the stories of nineteenth century residents as they have all passed away and there is little to be found about their experiences in archives or newspapers. The experience of workers of the station is still largely unknown and the reason for keeping the station open towards the end of its operation remains a mystery.

Future research possibilities

Avenues for future research could include a deeper study into quarantine procedures and how they operated in Port Adelaide in the nineteenth and twentieth century. This could include looking into the different quarantine notices that were issued, the patterns of those who were quarantined, the rationale behind quarantine procedures and the stigmas attached to various diseases.

This investigation focused mainly on the quarantined residents but it could also be useful to research more about those that ran the station and the government's interaction with it, this could reveal more about how regulations and procedures changed over time. A limited number of oral histories were conducted in the duration of the project, further research could involve interviewing more people that were known to be quarantined or to have worked on the station – this would fill out the picture of people's experiences of Torrens Island. As mentioned previously, not much is known about why the buildings were constructed and how they were used. Through gathering

Oral Histories and more information on those that worked at the station, this area could be explored with greater depth.

Community Engagement

Torrens Island Quarantine Station plays an important part in the history of South Australia. Very few people know about Torrens Island so making its existence known is the first step to engaging people in the history of the island. This could be done through an update and relaunch of the Quarantine Station tours. The launch of an education tour would also help to educate people on the station's existence and give them an understanding of its importance.

In order to engage people personally in the history of the station, a network of former residents and workers could be set up. There are many twentieth century residents and workers are still alive. Through setting up this network those that went through the station can contribute the stories of their experience to South Australian Maritime Museum's knowledge database. A reunion of the station's workers could be used to promote this history and get people talking about their time on the island.

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