

Matiu/Somes Island human quarantine station

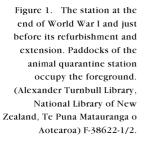
Published by Science & Research Unit Department of Conservation PO Box 10-420 Wellington May 2001

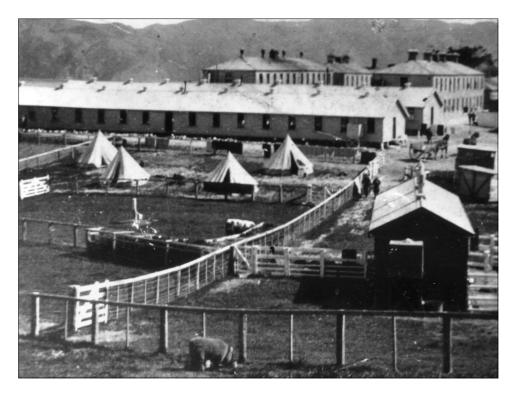
Text by Tony Walton and Richard Nester Islands close to harbours have long been used to quarantine people with contagious diseases. Matiu/Somes Island was formally designated for quarantine purposes in 1869 and was first used in March 1872. The facilities were refurbished and extended in 1918–19 and were maintained in readiness until World War II (1939–45) but were little used. The accommodation blocks were used in both World War I and World War II to house interned enemy aliens.

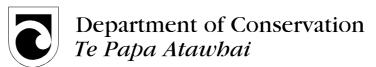
1872—Smallpox

Measures were introduced to prevent outbreaks of contagious diseases from the earliest days of the colony. Matiu/Somes Island was designated as a quarantine station in 1869 and in 1872 the immigrant ship *England* arrived with smallpox on board. The crew and passengers were placed on Matiu/Somes Island in makeshift accommodation. This event prompted the construction of a purpose-built station in 1872–74. Similar stations

were also set up at other main ports. A number of ships were put in quarantine between 1872 and 1876 but the years following were relatively uneventful. Smallpox and scarlet fever were the most common diseases at this time requiring quarantine. The young and the infirm were most at risk and this is reflected in the ages of those buried on the island. For a period after 1900 bubonic plague was a threat and the station was maintained in a constant state of readiness.







An unusual case involved a Chinese man named Kim Lee. He was suspected of having leprosy and was put in quarantine on Mokopuna Island, just north of Matiu, where he died after 6 months on 14 March 1904. Mokopuna Island is informally known as Leper Island.

Matiu/Somes Island was shared with the Department of Agriculture from 1893. The human and animal quarantine facilities existed side by side, with the Department of Agriculture caretaker responsible for the day-today care of the buildings.

The World Wars—internment camp for enemy aliens

The quarantine station was used in World War I (1914-18) to hold enemy aliens regarded as a risk to New Zealand's security. This resulted in the building of additional accommo-

We walked up the zig-zag path up to the top

And there were the buildings there seemed quite a lot

Of every descriptions and of every kind

And every thing to the bave you could find.

The sight it is grand as you gaze all around

And there in the distance looms Wellington town.

•••

We then went back away down to the shore
They showed me the shed where the luggage they store.
They showed me a building of brick I declare
It had not any windows twas about 12 feet square
Round the walls ran a network of iron like a seat
And holes in the floor right under the feet.
They told me they called it the Chamber of Woe
As all as they landed inside it must go
And stay there ten minutes while the fumes that arose
Fumigated their bodies as well as their clothes
Outside was a place where a fire it was lit
And chemicals poured quite liberal onit.
The fumes passed to the inside and up through the seats
And when you came out you smelt far from sweet ...

dation blocks in 1916 and, in 1918, a hospital. At the end of the war, which coincided with a world-wide influenza pandemic, the quarantine facilities were refurbished and extended. Provision had to be made for larger ships carrying more people.

The station was again used as an internment camp in World War II (1939-45); most of the now-dilapidated buildings were torn down after the war. The island was subsequently used only for animal quarantine, and this included the construction of the maximum-security block built in 1968.

A memorial to those buried on the island

There is a memorial cairn to those buried on the island. The cemetery was located on the slopes below. About 40 people are buried there and most of the burials date to between 1872 and 1876. There is a small group of burials from 1919, including George Stanley of the sloop HMS *Geranium*; his headstone stands near the memorial.

One building particularly associated with the quarantine station that has survived (in a truncated form) is a barrack building constructed in 1919. It was originally built alongside two identical buildings erected in 1916 to accommodate guards or internees. The remains of the fumigation shed described by Thomas Heath litter the shore near the wharf.

Figure 2. Extracts from Thomas Heath's 'The Voyage of the *Collingwood*'. Written in 1925, the doggerel recounts events of fifty years before.