

# Matiu/Somes Island human quarantine station

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*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.

Figure 1. The station at the end of World War I and just before its refurbishment and extension. Paddocks of the animal quarantine station occupy the foreground. (Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Te Puna Matauranga o Aotearoa) F-38622-1/2.



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*Te Papa Atawhai*

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-to-day 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-

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.

*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 have 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 ...*

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