



Editor - Peter Ludlow

A Visit to Peel Island (Teerk Roo Ra)

by Graham Peck - October 2018

Some years ago, I discovered through family research that my grandfather, Frank Graham, was buried on Peel Island. Frank came from an aboriginal family who lived in Brighton Parade, Southport, near the mouth of Nerang River. Part of the Yugambah/Kombumerri tribal group, they were "saltwater people", who made their living through various water-related activities - fishing, piloting, river transport, etc.

Unfortunately, Frank contracted leprosy and was confined to the Lazaret on Peel. He died there in 1939 and was buried in an unmarked grave in the Lazaret cemetery. I decided it would be a good thing to visit the cemetery, to celebrate the memory of my grandfather. He died about ten years before I was born but my mother gave a glowing account of him. They seem to have been a close family.

Visiting Peel Island is easier said than done, particularly as I'm a UK resident. I return to Australia every few years, to keep in touch with family and friends. On my 2014 visit, I contacted the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and made some preliminary enquiries. I had found that you need permission from QPWS to visit the Lazaret and that there is neither a jetty on the island nor any commercial transportation available. QPWS were fine; sure, they said, contact us the next time you're coming over and we'll sort it out.

That next time turned out to be this year, 2018. As instructed, I contacted QPWS in mid-year and asked for help to visit the island. They advised me to contact the Moreton Bay Ranger Service, which I did, but time slipped away with no concrete plan being made.

I decided to try to advance the matter via the Friends of Peel Island Association (FOPIA) of which I've been a member for some years. Scott Fowle, FOPIA President, responded promptly and said he would be happy to make the arrangements through his QPWS contacts. I was also able to attend a FOPIA monthly meeting which was informative and fun and a chance to meet the gang.

Scott was as good as his word, which led to a large number of emails bouncing around between Scott, QPWS and me. Scott persevered and overcame various obstacles, not the least of which was some wild weather which threatened to arrive around the date on which we planned to set off.

I'm very pleased to report that the weather held off, QPWS came through and at 8 am on Wednesday, 10 October, our party converged on the One Mile jetty on North Stradbroke Island. As well as myself, my wife and daughter, there were Scott, Peter Ludlow and two QPWS rangers. The rangers welcomed us aboard their small but sleek boat, the "Otter", and we set off on the ten-minute passage across the bay to the island. It was a calm, sunny, beautiful day.



The "Otter" leaving Platypus Bay
(Photo Scott Fowle)

We drew into the small, very pretty cove beside Horseshoe Bay at the eastern end of the island, past the wreck of the "Platypus". The boat cruised slowly up to the sand and then, just as we were thinking about jumping in to wade the last few feet, it sprouted wheels and rolled up to dry land under the trees.

It's true! Cop that, James Bond!

The rangers had a commercial Ute to take us to the Lazaret which was located at the other end of the island. As we drove along the sandy track, Peel proved to be a very inviting place, quiet, green, sunny, lots of trees and very little sign of human intrusion until we reached the Lazaret.

The settlement itself occupies quite a large area, roughly circular and probably quite a few hundred metres of cleared ground across. I didn't count them, but there are perhaps two dozen buildings. About a third of them are restored and maintained; the rest are slowly collapsing into ruins. It was interesting to see the impressive results of the maintenance work that the FOPIA work teams put in when they come over for their regular weekends. The buildings where the patients lived are mostly small wooden huts with veranda's. There are also the Administration Houses, Community Hall, Medical Quarters, Doctor's House and other structures such as the stables.

There is even the remains of the Ute version of the iconic original Holden, the 48-215/FX, rusting away amongst the undergrowth, awaiting the attention of an unusually dedicated car restorer. How did that get there?

We were doubly fortunate to have Scott and Peter as our guides. Nothing was too much trouble for them and they took as much time as was needed to explain every detail of life in that solitary place. The site has a sombre, poignant beauty.



The exception is the section for aboriginal patients. This consists of a small number of tin shacks with no doors and rough cut outs for windows (apparently made by the residents themselves). The shacks have concrete floors, which, after complaints, were a later addition. Originally the floors were bare dirt. It is truly shocking.

[Inside an Aboriginal patient's hut](#)
(Photo Karen Ludlow)

We moved onto the cemetery, the ultimate goal of the trip. It was a short walk away, silent and cloaked by trees. There are many graves, probably a couple of hundred. A very small number have surrounds and name plaques. Quite a lot have small numbered metal markers and I understand that many have no marking at all. It was a peaceful and beautiful place. We spent a few moments thinking of grandfather Frank, his life and times, and how good it was to be able to share this space with him for a short while, even so many years after his death.



[Graham Peck at the Lazaret Cemetery with his wife, Angela, on the left and his daughter, Lily, on the right](#)
(Photo Scott Fowle)

On returning to the Lazaret, our ranger escorts, Josh and Dan, were waiting to take us back to the "Otter". They were both friendly and professional.

On the way to the cove, the rangers treated us to a scenic drive via the fabulous Horseshoe Bay, easily the nicest beach in Moreton Bay and probably for some distance beyond.

We bounced over the waves and, on our return to One Mile, Scott and Peter allowed us to interrupt their busy schedules to buy them a beer at the (highly recommended) Little Ship Club.

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Thoughts about the Future of Peel Island and the Lazaret

Peel is an unusually interesting historical, medical and social site.

It has great potential as a "heritage" attraction, particularly if linked with other similar sites around the bay, such as Tangalooma (Whaling) and St Helena (Prison).

At the risk of sounding presumptuous, our visit prompted the following thoughts in my mind:

- More than anything else, Peel needs a jetty. Nothing further can happen until this is in place.
- Most of the infrastructure to make the Lazaret an appealing destination is already in place. It looks great and is intrinsically interesting in many ways. The things that are needed are not, as these things go, so very expensive - a visible boundary, signage, small museum, toilets, some explanatory leaflets/literature, a café, staffing (probably part-time, both voluntary and paid)
- Could the further development of Peel be a joint venture between FOPIA and the North Stradbroke Island Historical Museum? This would seem to be a plausible way of advancing the project and tapping into sources of funding. Hopefully QPWS, the Quandamooka Yoolooburrabee Aboriginal Corporation and other interested groups would support the concept.
- I understand there is a government study looking into these matters:

<https://www.statedevelopment.qld.gov.au/index.php/industry-development/industry-support-dsd/north-stradbroke-island-economic-transition-strategy/north-stradbroke-island-economic-transition-scheme-initiatives/1431-peel-island-teerk-roo-ra-access-project>

It is due to report in 2019. I'm sure FOPIA and other interested parties are making every effort to ensure their views are made known to this group. The final report should be very interesting.

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Finally, I cannot thank FOPIA's Scott and Peter and our fine QPWS rangers, Josh and Dan, enough for making our visit to Peel and the Lazaret unforgettable.

I'm reminded, perhaps strangely, of the last verse of Coleridge's "*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*":

*"He went like one that hath been stunned,
And is of sense forlorn:
A sadder and a wiser man,
He rose the morrow morn."*

Story courtesy of Graham Peck, London, UK - November 2018

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