

## SOMES ISLAND a Site Visit By Andrew Edgcombe

For many years Somes Island in the Wellington harbour had a real air of mystery about it, a place with access strictly forbidden yet in plain sight of Wellington. A place of so many questions and few answers.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries quarantine station was closed in 1995 and Somes Island was handed over to the Department of Conservation effectively lifting the veil of secrecy that had surrounded the Island for so long.

During October I squeezed in a few days leave and we traveled down to Wellington to spend a few days exploring the district and check out an auction. One of our day excursions had us up early organizing the three boys with packed lunches, water bottles and warm clothing for a trip to Somes Island in the Wellington harbor. We departed Days bay on the harbour ferry for the 15 minute trip to Somes Island where we along with eight or ten other visitors and volunteer workers were given a biosecurity check at the wharf to ensure what is now after a good deal of time and effort from DOC a pest free wildlife sanctuary remains just that.

The others dispersed and the ferry slipped away into the distance as we found ourselves suddenly alone, our expedition had commenced.

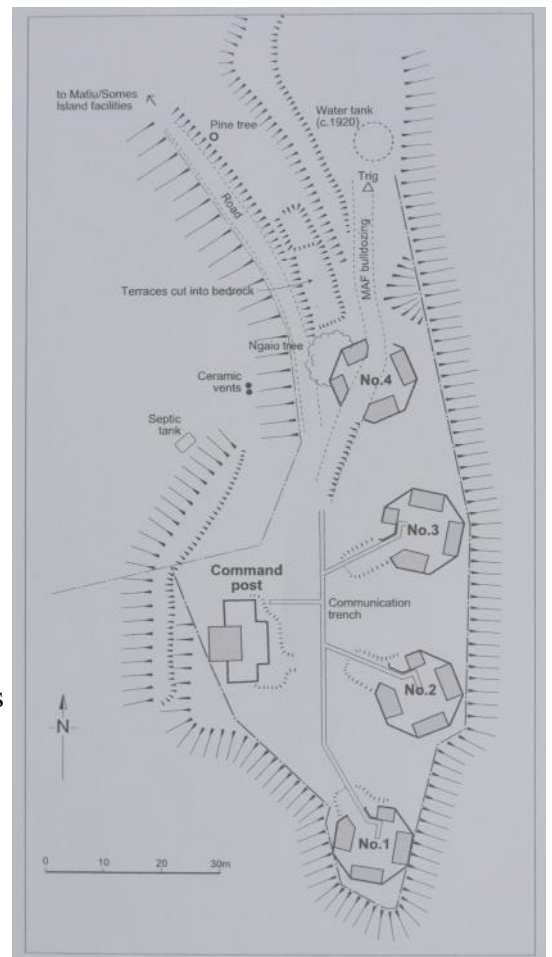
In 1872 the ship “England” arrived with several cases of small pox aboard, the crew and passengers were quarantined on Somes island in makeshift accommodation leading to the establishment of a permanent quarantine station which was in use until the end of the first world war. Following the track from the wharf brought us to the remains of the islands cemetery where a memorial cairn was erected in the 1970’s recording the names those buried on the weather beaten hill side having been quarantined after traveling across the globe to start a new life in this far flung corner of the world. It was quite a sobering experience indeed to read the names and ages of those who did not live to get off the island. As we stood there so close to the hustle and bustle of Wellington, I could appreciate the feeling of isolation endured by those who’s names were immortalized in granite before me . It must have been quite a depressing experience to be confined so close to civilization.

A short detour had us at a more recently unveiled memorial to Italian Nationals interned during the Second World War as “Enemy Aliens”. These people along with German’s and Japanese’s were interned in the interests of “National Security” just as German Nationals had been interned during the First World War. Many of these people were New Zealand born with families who were well established within the community. Half of the barracks originally built in 1919 for the influenza pandemic and then used by internees during WWII remain as does the prison hospital dating from 1918 (now the DOC field centre).



Further down the track we find the “new” light house first used in February 1900, built as a replacement for the original cast iron light house imported from England in 1865. The original cast iron light house having been removed and relocated to Jacks Point, Timaru where it resides to this day. Little sign of the extensive light house keeper’s buildings and fuel storage facilities remain although small railway tracks for drawing provisions from the beach by trolley can still be seen today.

At the summit of the island is the site of a Heavy Anti Aircraft Battery which for a time during WWII housed four 3.7 inch guns and a control station manned by around 50 members of the 104<sup>th</sup> Heavy Anti Aircraft Battery, New Zealand Army between January 1943 and September 1944. Thankfully the guns were never fired in anger. During the time the Guns were on the Island all prisoners were relocated to Pahiataua. The concrete structures are extremely well preserved (except for one emplacement which has had an access track pushed through it with a bulldozer some time in the not so distant past while the Island was under MAF control) this was also the sight of one of the two fortified Maori villages on the island prior to European settlement although little evidence remains as the summit lost some 14 meters of height when the area was leveled to build the gun emplacements, the other village was in the area of the Island's cemetery. We spent a good deal of time exploring the emplacements trying to imagine it as it would have once been, ready to defend the Capital at a moments notice from aerial attack. After the boys finished their war games in the emplacements and command post and a spot of lunch we left the sight to its most recent occupiers, the islands flock of sheep and some cheeky Kakariki Parrots.



Descending from the summit we came down to the more modern facility which was the “Maximum Security Animal Quarantine Station” where scientists and geneticists could study exotic breeds of animal and assess potential risks to our very important agricultural industry. Quite an eerie place to visit, entry was once strictly controlled with decontamination showers and sanitation. Animal pens resembling prison cells, a small enclosed exercise yard, laboratory facilities and incinerators for disposing of waste that conjured up images of concentration camp ovens. Quite out of place in one of the animal pens was a superb NoI Mk III artillery “predictor” of the type that would have been used to calculate the range and speed of moving targets and assist in directing fire.

A quick stop at the old hospital/ DOC visitors centre had more interesting tales come to light of escape attempts and island life in general. Photographs of a wooden sextant constructed by a German prisoner and intended to be used in an elaborate escape attempt are on display, beautifully constructed but never used, the German gave it to the prison warden as he left the island telling him he “didn’t need the bloody thing anymore”

All too soon it was time to head back down to the wharf and meet the ferry, we had seen every inch of the Island which we enjoyed immensely, and the boys were happy but worn out. A great experience and a place steeped in history that is within easy access from Wellington, well worthy of a visit which will be all the more enhanced if you take the time to do a little research beforehand.