

STRADBROKE: A BRIEF HISTORY



MARION DIAMOND SURVEYS THE EVENTFUL HISTORY OF STRADBROKE ISLAND.

Stradbroke Island is the most southerly of the three great sand islands—Bribie, Moreton and ‘Straddie’—that guard the entrance to Moreton Bay. It has been the home of Aboriginal people for thousands of years; the oldest evidence of Aboriginal occupation dates from perhaps 20 000 BCE. Europeans first discovered and occupied the island in the early nineteenth century.

In 1770, sailing the *Endeavour* north along the east coast of Australia, James Cook passed to the east of Moreton Bay. The names he gave to features of the coastal landscape—Mount Warning, Point Danger, Point Lookout—tell us something of his state of mind as he struggled with contrary winds and weather in this area. Consequently he stayed well out from the shore, and while he knew from the currents that a large river must empty into the bay, he didn’t venture far into Moreton Bay, and did not identify three separate islands.

It is quite possible that in 1770 there were no separate islands for Cook to ‘discover’. These sand islands are subject to constant erosion, which has been a feature in the history of Stradbroke Island since European occupation, most spectacularly when the sea broke through between North and South Stradbroke Islands during a storm in 1896. Durbidge and Covacevich¹ suggest that in 1770, Moreton and Stradbroke Islands were possibly still linked to

the Southport Spit. Thomas Welsby² reported that Toompani, who died in 1888, was told by his father that he remembered when his Noonuccal people, and the people of Moreton Island, could shout to each other across a small gap that later grew to become the South Passage.

Matthew Flinders first recorded the South Passage during his exploration of the area in 1799. Four years later, coming south from the wreck of the *Porpoise* in the cutter *Hope*, he came ashore on Cylinder Beach, where the Noonuccal people showed him where to collect water.

The first Europeans to spend any time on the island were Thomas Pamphlett and John Finnegan, two timber-getters from Sydney whose boat was wrecked nearby, and who were trying to find their way home to Sydney. John Oxley, the Government Surveyor, found them on Stradbroke Island in 1823, and with their help found his way into the Brisbane River.

The following year, Governor Thomas Brisbane established the Moreton Bay Settlement. After several false starts at Redcliffe and Cleveland, the settlement eventually moved upstream to the present Brisbane CBD, but throughout the nineteenth century, Brisbane had a close association with the islands of Moreton Bay—and particularly with the most southerly, Stradbroke Island.

Above: ‘Early Amity’.
UQFL122, box 9,
image 32

Right: Detail of 'East Coast, sheet 2' from Matthew Flinders, *Charts of Terra Australis or Australia: showing the parts explored between 1798-1803*, G&W Nicol, London, 1814



In 1827, the Commandant of the Moreton Bay Settlement, Patrick Logan, established a convict and military settlement at Dunwich, on the landward side. With the end of the convict era, this settlement was abandoned until 1843, when a group of Passionist priests set up a Catholic mission to the Aborigines in the abandoned buildings. The mission failed, and they left in 1847.

Brisbane looked to the sea for communication with Sydney and the rest of the world, but the long, shallow channel up the Brisbane River was slow and unsuitable for ocean-going ships until a deeper current was cut, much later in the century. Until the 1840s, ships entered Moreton Bay via the South Passage, guided by a pilot based at Amity Point (Pulan) on Stradbroke Island. A small settlement grew up around this pilot station.

The South Passage was dangerous, and in 1847 the passenger steamer *Sovereign* was wrecked coming through into Moreton Bay, with forty-four people drowned. After that tragedy, ships used the safer northern shipping route between Moreton and Bribie Islands, and the pilot station moved to Cape Moreton.

By the 1850s, there were two main settlements on Stradbroke Island. Amity Point, stripped of its pilot station, remained as a community of fishermen and dugong hunters. In many ways, it conformed to Caroline Ralston's definition of a Pacific beach community,³ with a mixed-race population of beachcombers and fishermen, many with Aboriginal families. During the 1850s, Amity Point was surveyed and town allotments sold. Thomas Welsby, the early historian of Moreton Bay, had a home there, but the settlement has been subject to inexorable erosion by the Rainbow Channel, to the point that the pilot station, a racecourse and Welsby's original cottage are all now many metres out to sea.⁴

Meanwhile government functions were concentrated in the other main settlement, Dunwich. On 15 July 1850, a government quarantine station was proclaimed there, and only two weeks later, the *Emigrant* arrived with typhoid on board. Over fifty passengers and crew died, and are buried in the old cemetery at Dunwich. In 1864, the quarantine buildings were taken over by the Benevolent Institution,⁵ when it moved from the Brisbane Hospital at Herston, bringing a

miscellany of vulnerable people, aged, poor, insane or otherwise troublesome to society. The Benevolent Institution remained at Dunwich for more than eighty years, and over 8000 of its inmates are buried there.

Until it moved to Eventide at Sandgate after World War II, the Benevolent Institution dominated the economy of Stradbroke Island. 'As the only government institution in the area, [it] became an administrative centre dominating the island through the lack of regulations which could limit its power.'⁶ The institution employed Aboriginal people from the nearby Myora Mission, supplementing their inadequate pay with rations and blankets. In the 1930s, the 'Aboriginal gang' was led by a 'bossman', Teddy Ruska, whose agitation for improved conditions led to conflict with the administration of the Benevolent Institution.⁷ In 1944 he was dismissed. His daughter, Kathleen Ruska, would eventually become famous as Kath Walker, later Oodgeroo Noonuccal.

Other economic activity on Stradbroke Island was limited. In 1895 Bill North took an occupational licence for one year on ten square

miles around Point Lookout, and swam cattle over from the Southport Spit. Although he never renewed his licence after the first year, he continued to run cattle there until he retired in 1930, supplying beef to the Benevolent Institution.

Oystering was important. The Moreton Bay Oyster Company was formed in 1876, with shareholders including the politicians Thomas McIlwraith and Arthur Palmer. The Aboriginal families who worked for the company 'appear to have been more efficient at managing the specific leases for which they had responsibility than the parent company',⁸ and continued to work the beaches after the company was finally wound up in 1963.

And then there is sand mining, which remains a contentious issue to the present day. The first mining company, Zinc Corp, set up operations in 1949, followed by Titanium and Zirconium Industries in the 1950s, and Consolidated Rutile in 1963. The sand is mined for heavy metals, particularly zirconium and titanium, which have become ever more valuable as raw materials in the electronics industry, but while mining remains a major employer of labour on the island, it has increasingly been seen as incompatible with the other major driver of economic development, tourism.

Stradbroke first became a destination for recreational fishing, camping, bushwalking and sailing in the late nineteenth century. As Amity Point gradually disappeared into the ocean as a result of erosion, a third settlement, Point

Lookout (Mooloomba), grew during the twentieth century as a holiday and retirement settlement. In the 1930s, Bert Clayton built the first guesthouse, beginning with tents that he gradually replaced with one-room cabins. He also started the first bus service to Point Lookout.⁹ The Point Lookout Lighthouse was built in 1932, and during World War II, Point Lookout was the site of an American radar station, which later passed to the RAAF. The sinking of the *Centaur* in 1943 was first reported from here.

With the removal of the Benevolent Institution at the end of the war, the focus of Stradbroke Island shifted to sand mining on the one hand, and recreation and leisure activities on the other. A vehicular ferry service began in 1947, the same year that lifesavers began to patrol Point Lookout.¹⁰ Mining and tourism remain in constant tension to the present day.

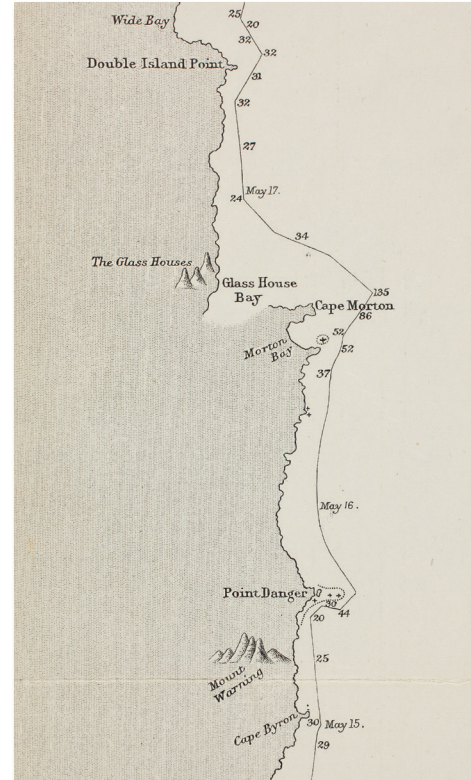
The sand islands of Moreton Bay are in constant flux, with only a few rocky outcrops, like Point Lookout, that are permanent fixtures within the shifting sand dunes. In geological terms, the most significant event since the European occupation of Stradbroke Island occurred between 1894 and 1896, when South Stradbroke Island separated from the larger, northern part of Stradbroke Island. In early September 1894, the *Cambus Wallace* was wrecked off Stradbroke Island.

The local residents turned out to help rescue most of those on board. *The Brisbane Courier* reported:

*The scene of the wreck is only about two hundred yards off the shore, but the surf which is constantly breaking over her would render it a rather risky task to swim ashore. Portions of the cargo, such as cases of spirits, salt, dynamite, and large pieces of wreckage, are to be seen strewn along the beach of the Island for about two miles, and the Customs authorities are doing their best to prevent ... thefts ...*¹¹

SWIMMING CATTLE AT SOUTH-PORT.

A mob of one hundred head of prime fat cattle were crossed over to Stradbroke Island at Southport on Monday last, bound for Dunwich, to the order of Mr. W. R. North. Considering the season, they would be very hard to beat for quality and weight. From the time the cattle entered the water, near the Grand Hotel on the mainland, the swim across the Bay only occupied thirty minutes, which is a record trip. Mr. L. Hanlon, who had charge of the trip, has crossed upwards of 2000 head of cattle for Dunwich within the last two years without the loss of a single beast.



Above: Detail of 'A reduction of Captain Cook's original chart of the East Australian Coast-Line 1770 from originals in the British Museum, south sheet', from James Cook, *Captain Cook's journal during his first voyage around the world, made in H.M. Bark 'Endeavour', 1768-71: a literal transcription of the original mss. with notes and introduction*, Stock, London, 1893

Right: *The Brisbane Courier*, 24 Jul 1896, p. 5



Above: 'Naturalists and scientists at Point Lookout at cottage, the home of Billy North'. UQFL122, box 9, image 28

Men in boots marched up and down the beach, guarding the remaining cargo. Their activity damaged the fragile grasses that stabilise the dunes, and more damage occurred when the authorities blew up the cargo of dynamite, fearing it might become unstable. Two years later, during another winter storm, the sea broke through at what is now Jumpinpin.

The shipwreck and its aftermath undoubtedly hastened this event.¹² Men in boots were new to the island. Yet the creation of South Stradbroke Island was inevitable nevertheless, part of the constant pattern of erosion that has affected the area for millennia, and will continue to do so.

REFERENCES

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