

CHANNEL ISLAND LEPROSARIUM AND REEFS

Updated: 31st May 2002

Channel Island is significant for both its natural and cultural heritage values. Located in Darwin Harbour, Channel Island Leprosarium provides evidence of the official policy of enforced segregation of diseased people. It also offers an insight into the experience of this compulsory isolated group. The natural environment of Channel Island is significant as a teaching site.

A Quarantine Station was first established on Channel Island in 1884. In 1914 three new buildings were erected, but between then and 1930 the island was used on only two occasions; in 1919 during the influenza epidemic that followed WWI, and in 1930 for the isolation of whooping cough patients.

In 1929 Channel Island was nominated as a site for a leprosy hospital, and two years later 48 leprosy patients were transferred to the island. The three existing main buildings were used as a medical clinic and separate accommodation buildings for part-Aboriginal men and part-Aboriginal women. Eight huts, of corrugated iron with cement floors, were erected along the cliff to accommodate Aboriginal patients. In 1934, due to overcrowding, an additional six small huts were built



*Channel Island Leprosarium Accommodation huts along cliff
c. 1935
Photo: Stuart Bert Collection, Northern Territory Library*



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Most of the buildings, including the hospital, were damaged during the 1937 cyclone. Extensive repairs, and the construction of additional facilities including new dormitories and a recreation hall, were completed the following year.



*Part-Aboriginal female ward after 1937 cyclone
Photo: Australian Dept. of Interior Collection, Northern Territory Library*

When Channel Island was abandoned in 1955, much of the building material and relocatable equipment was removed.

The Channel Island Field Study Centre, the board walks through the mangroves, the geological features and the reefs are all important teaching resources.

From an educational and research point of view the reef is a valuable resource because it demonstrates that a coral based community can survive in an area where most physical conditions are adverse, provided other conditions (such as strong currents) are met.

The Channel Island reef is located well inside a large ria system. This is characterised by low salinity during the wet season, high turbidity and deep, fine mud over much of its area. Yet, despite its location, the reef has a fairly diverse coral community.

Gazetted: 25th February 1997

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