

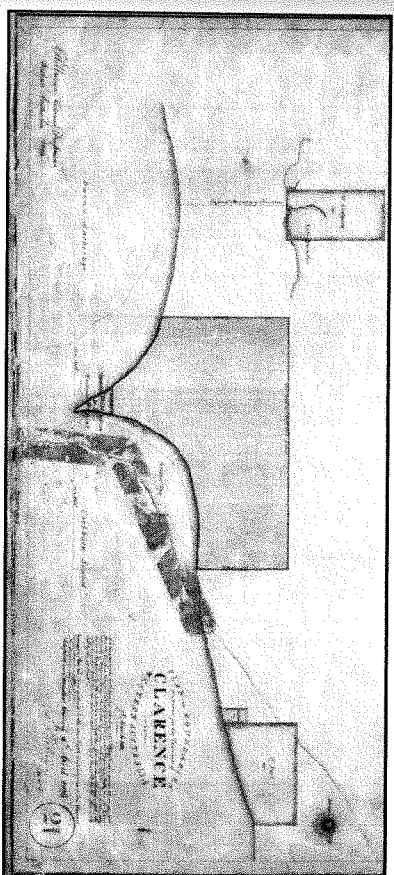
The hidden community— Woodman Point quarantine station

Quarantine stations played an important role in colonial societies insulating the early settlers from the danger of imported diseases. EARLE SEUBERT traces the significance of Western Australia's first line of defence against contagious diseases.

Woodman Point is about nine kilometres south of the City of Fremantle on a coastline peninsula flanked by Owen Anchorage and Jervoise Bay in Cockburn Sound. The area is part of the territory of the Belliar Group of the Bibbulman people, and known to them as Nyyerbup. Its European naming was declared in 1827 by Captain James Stirling after the Pursuer of *HMS Success* who had died on Garden Island opposite this point.

In 1829, Stirling granted Thomas Peel, 250,000 acres of land which included the Woodman Point peninsula. When Peel's immigrants arrived in 1829 they settled at Clarence behind Woodman Point, but almost all had left by the end of 1830. A plan of the proposed boundaries for Peel's townsite of Clarence was signed by Stirling on 7th March 1836. On this map Woodman Point's isolated tip was designated as a quarantine station, although 40 years would pass before it was officially gazetted for that purpose.

Western Australia's first quarantine law was proclaimed in 1836, influenced by a cholera epidemic in the United Kingdom. The first recorded use of Woodman Point for human quarantine was in January 1852, when 226 civilians and military personnel aboard the vessel *Anna Robertson* were landed there, and from then until 1979 the quarantine station was Western Australia's



Plan of boundaries between Clarence and Woodman Point

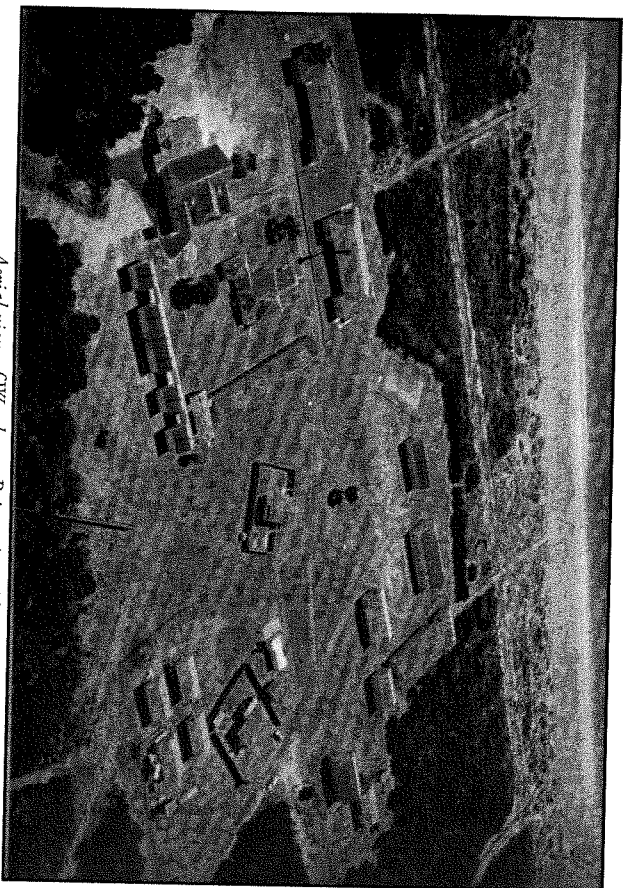
main defence against a range of contagious diseases. Between 1914 and 1918, 75 vessels came under quarantine at Woodman Point. Between the two wars, that is, 1919 to 1939, 158 vessels came under quarantine jurisdiction.

When a whooping cough epidemic struck in 1879, civilians and military personnel were quarantined out on Carnac Island - but people became sick from contaminated water that had been transported from the mainland in English ale casks. As a result the Army Medical Officer had the group removed to Woodman Point.

Carnac is a small, flat desolate island with low scrub vegetation and rocky outcrops, about seven kilometres west of Woodman Point. It is known for its seal and bird colonies, and also for the large number of tiger snakes on the island. Most of these snakes are blind, because seagulls invade their nests for the eggs and peck at their heads. The snakes apparently originated from a traveling reptile show, when the owner, Richard Vane, an entertainer and snake-handler, was required to get rid of the reptiles after his wife and business partner were bitten and died from the bites. His show was banned by the police, and he allegedly dumped his collection of tiger snakes on Carnac Island.

The Quarantine Station at Woodman Point was erected in 1885 at a cost of £490. George Temple-Poole, who was Superintendent of the Architectural Department and designed many of the

State's public buildings in the gold rush era, had the opportunity of building to his own design and Woodman Point Quarantine Station was one of his first projects. Its buildings have been placed on the State's heritage list. This original facility is now part of the Woodman Point Regional Park, which covers 272.5 hectares in the City of Cockburn. Evidence of the quarantine station that still exists includes the Medical Officer's residence, also used for administration, the dispensary and surgery, a dining hall, dormitories, and cabins, and a recreation hall that was originally the Quartermaster's store. In addition there is the shower block, fumigation block, and laundry, the original Caretaker's residence, an observation/detention block, the Isolation Hospital, as well as the remains of a colonial limestone wall and road, two known cemeteries, morgue foundations and a crematorium.



Aerial view of Woodman Point, circa 1980

The Quarantine station needed a jetty, as all ships' passengers and crew suspected of having a contagious disease had to be landed and taken straight into quarantine. The original jetty at Woodman Point was built by Davis Hankinson & Co. in 1903

and was 322 feet long. It was a regular disembarkation point from this time up until the mid 1950s. In 1972, the jetty was purposely destroyed after suffering severe storm damage.

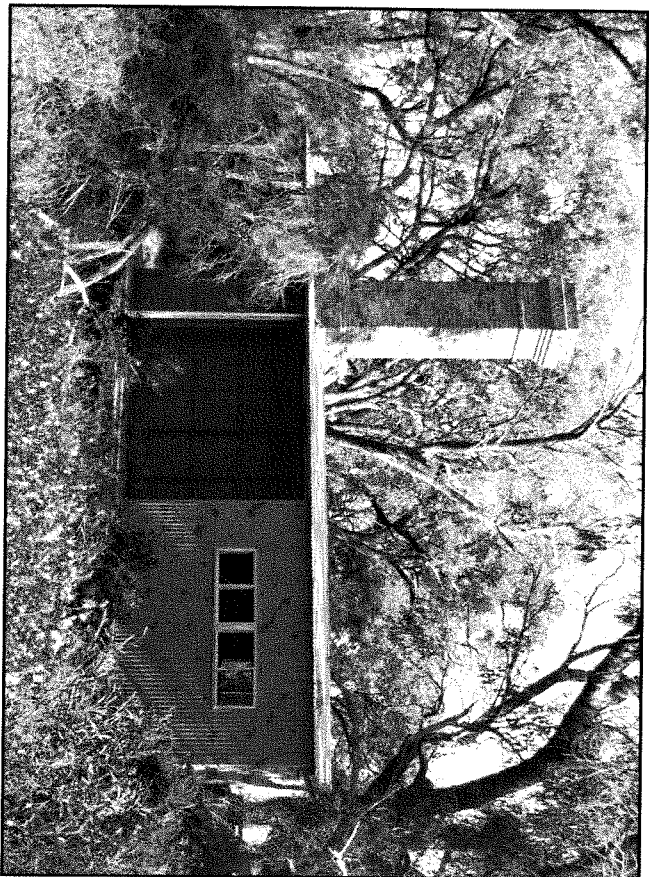
Possibly the first people to use the quarantine buildings were 127 passengers from the ship *Elderslie* who were isolated against scarlet fever in 1886. The first person known to have died at Woodman Point was William Miller, from the vessel *Saladin* who succumbed to smallpox on the 21st April 1893. Between 1890 and 1900 there were three deaths — one from leprosy and two from smallpox. According to the records, one of these smallpox victims was cremated, and this was before the present crematorium was built. What method of cremation and where, is not known.

In 1893 a portion of Woodman Point was allocated as the official burial ground for metropolitan smallpox victims and it was also designated the first official metropolitan typhoid cemetery. We know of two graves in this section, and we assume there are quite a lot more. It is thought that some of the deaths that occurred in the town of Clarence were also buried there.

Woodman Point Station became the State's first official bubonic plague hospital and crematorium, and in 1903 a railway line, aptly called the bubonic plague railway, was constructed to Woodman Point. There were 27 bubonic plague-infected corpses cremated at Woodman Point and most of these were locals from Fremantle, Claremont and Perth.

The crematorium is an extremely rare building. Built in 1902, this intact facility is the nation's oldest crematorium still in existence. Designed by Sir Henry Thompson, the president of the Cremationist Society, it was first shown on Public Works Department plans in 1901 and was originally built to burn plague-infected corpses, and was also available for private cremations for a small fee paid to the Public Works Department.

Woodman's Point was also the State's first metropolitan leproserium, built at a cost of £175, as the successful tender



The oldest crematorium in Australia at Woodman Point

shows. The first unfortunate victim to make use of it was a 35-year-old of Chinese origin named Ah Sing, who died on 28th July 1898 in the Leper's Hut. From old maps, the Leprosy Hut was situated along the eastern side of the Isolation Wall, towards the beach, and it must have been an extremely lonely and isolated place.

The *West Australian* newspaper gave a description of the Leper's Hut in 1901, in an article 'The Lonely Leper, John Higgins'. It continued:

The hut consists of a galvanized iron lean-to, about 10ft. long by 8ft. wide, with a tiny verandah in front. It has the usual back blocks open fireplace of galvanized, iron, a small window, an iron bedstead, a couple of bollards nailed to one wall. This building is surrounded by a high galvanized iron wall, about 98 yards square. A ladder gives access to the roof, which a leper would be permitted to mount so that he might survey his little world,

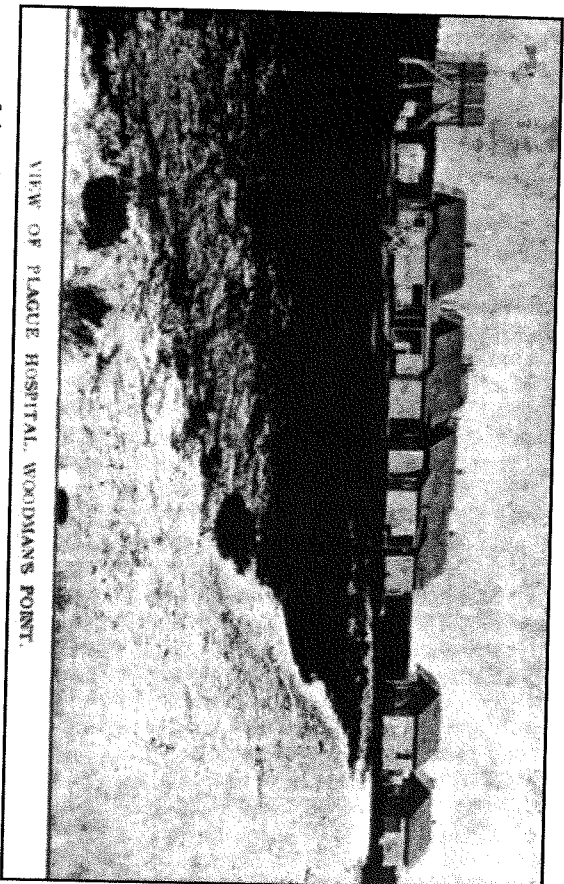
and there the wretched outcast has existed for six months, isolated from mankind, except the orderly who brings the food.

The first caretaker at Woodman Point, appointed when the station opened in 1886, was John Hookey. He was there for four years, resigning his position in 1890 for reasons unknown. The caretaker post was assumed on 29th May 1890 by John Carroll, and he resided there with his wife Elizabeth and their twelve children. Carroll had been in the Police Force but had resigned when found drunk on duty. An article in the *West Australian* of 14 April 1893 refers to Carroll and the smallpox epidemic that occurred in that year - apparently introduced through men from the *SS Saladin*. Carroll was the only person authorised to convey persons affected with smallpox or other contagious diseases to the Quarantine Station. The article states that he would 'carry a yellow flag and not be permitted to enter any dwelling, except for the purpose of removing a patient'. The Fremantle Local Board of Health Committee recommended the payment of a £10 gratuity to Carroll for valuable services rendered during this epidemic.

Once Carroll's party arrived at the quarantine station, one of the first structures they met was the limestone wall that diagonally dissected the station - and known locally as the Isolation Wall. This wall, erected in the 1880s, was the official boundary of the quarantine station and in some of the original plans it is described as being positioned 'from sea to sea' across the Point. Only a section of the wall remains.

Once past the boundary, confirmed cases were ushered directly to the isolation cottage on the eastern side of the wall, completed in 1901, while other contacts were sent to appropriate wards on the other side where their possessions and clothing would be fumigated.

An article of the time noted 'that an incinerator has been provided in a suitable part of the grounds, and in this, the whole



VIEW OF PLAGUE HOSPITAL, WOODMAN'S POINT.

of the objectionable matter from the buildings is treated without a nuisance of any kind being caused in the neighborhood'.

Between 1893 and 1909 there were 29 vessels subject to quarantine at Woodman Point. Sometimes this meant individual admissions from a particular ship, and other times all of the passengers and crew. When Carroll died in 1901 his son William took over as caretaker, and from then on there were only six other caretakers of the station before it was finally shut down in 1979. They were Henry Chambers, Thomas Bucknell, Frank Churcher, Arthur Dumble, Roy McIntosh and George Marsh.

A tragic chapter occurred at the Quarantine Station at the end of World War I involving *H.M.A.T. Boonah* and the War Transport vessel *Wyreema*. The complete story is told in an excellent book, *The Boonah Tragedy* by Ian Darroch. In 1918, the *Boonah*, with 920 troops on board heading for the Western Front, was three days out from Durban, during the Indian Ocean crossing from WA, when the armistice was signed. At this time the Spanish influenza pandemic was sweeping the world and South Africa was very badly affected. The *Boonah* was placed in strict quarantine on arrival in Durban. However, the ship was running low on coal, and when workers infected with influenza were employed

THE HIDDEN COMMUNITY — WOODMAN PT QUARANTINE STATION

to bunker the ship, the disease spread quickly to the men on board.

War's end meant the *Boonah* was ordered to return to Western Australia. Within a few days symptoms of the flu began to occur. By the time the ship reached Gage Roads, conditions had become horrific. Flu was spreading rapidly, and more and more cases were developing daily, due to the close living conditions of the 900 soldiers onboard. Worse still, quarantine and public-health restrictions meant the vessel had to remain at anchor, with no prospects of berthing in Fremantle. Tensions began to run high when the local contingent were told they could not go ashore in their home port, and a mutiny onboard was a distinct possibility.

By early December 1918, deaths were occurring on the *Boonah* and eventually a decision was made to employ the Fremantle Harbour Trust launch *Reliance* to take the sick to the Quarantine station at Woodman Point.

At the same time, the Transport *Wyreema* had just arrived off Fremantle with members of the Australian Army Nursing Service on board, and volunteers were called for to nurse the infected soldiers. When every nurse put up their hands to volunteer, they put all their names in a hat and 20 were selected for the task. On the 10th December the nurses were put ashore at Woodman Point and set up their living quarters. The following day, the soldiers started coming ashore. Within five days there were 395 cases of influenza at Woodman Point and 10 deaths.

Sister Rosa O'Kane arrived at Woodman Point on the 10th and died on the 21st December. Her remains are still at Woodman Point and a three meter granite memorial was erected in her honor by the Patriotic Committee of Charters Towers. The other grave, at Woodman Point Military Cemetery, is of Hilda Williams, who, because she was a civilian nurse, was not given a military burial. Another nurse, Ada Thompson, was interred in Fremantle Cemetery in 1920. Doris Ridgway, who had only been at Woodman Point for four days, died after having been on

duty for just six days. Her remains were interred in the Military Cemetery at Karrakatta in 1958.

Conditions for the nurses and the soldiers were horrific. One of the volunteers, staff nurse Suzie Cone from Victoria, kept a diary which makes heartbreaking reading:

Wednesday 11th, Got up and started to get ready for the boys off the *Bonah*. Wilkinson, Hamilton, Bradshaw and I were in Ward 3, a hut holding 8 beds and 10 tents. No conveniences of any kind. At 10am the boys began to come up from the jerry. Our tents and huts were soon full. Poor lads were in a terrible plight. Filth and dirt all over them, terribly sick, we had no drugs, no clean shirts or pyjamas to put on them. All we could do was wash them and make them as comfortable as possible. Three died the first day. This place is hell.

In 1921 Bertie Poore started work at the station as a general hand/ male nurse, and stayed there until he retired in 1957 as Head Male

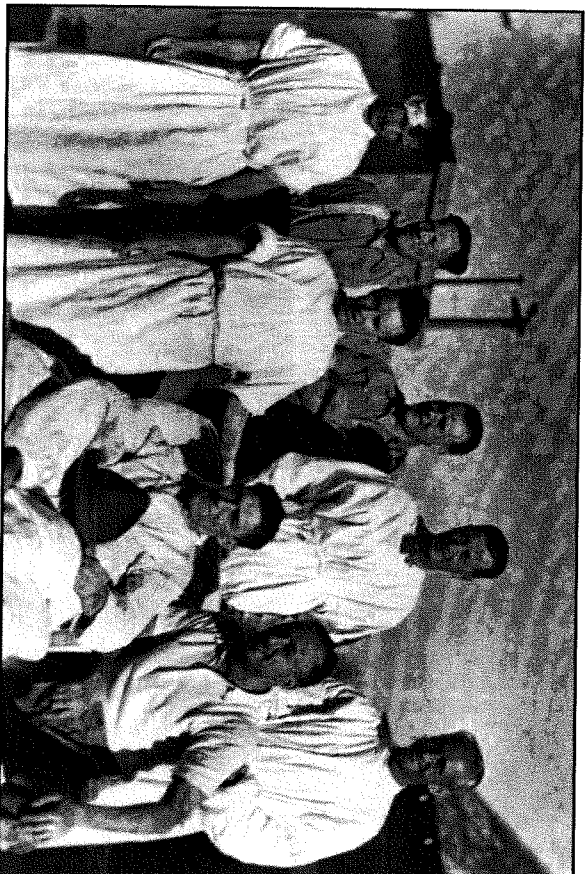


Hilda Williams and Ada Thompson who volunteered after World War I and died at the quarantine station

Nurse. The two Norfolk pine trees, planted by him in 1921 in front of the caretaker's residence, remain today as a memorial to a compassionate and dedicated man. It was during Bertie's time that 12 'whites' and 37 Chinese were quarantined in beach huts at Woodman Point, with suspected smallpox. But the station Log dated 23rd April 1936 revealed that the subsequent diagnosis was secondary syphilis, rather than smallpox. Presumably they were discharged. Bertie and his wife Babs had six children and lived at the station throughout his long tenure except for World

War II, when his wife and children had to reside elsewhere because of wartime regulations.

From 1939 to 1963 the station's Head Officer was Roy McIntosh. Bertie and Roy worked closely and efficiently together in the running of the station, until Bertie's retirement. Roy left six years after Bertie in 1963.



Bertie Poore on left with Officer in Charge Roy McIntosh in the back row second from the right, and others (1943)

During the war years only 17 vessels were quarantined. However the names of some of the ships would become stamped on the history of the Point. Photographs, documents and data relating to patients, crew members and quarantine personnel, including the volunteers who were onsite at the station during wartime, along with childhood memories, helped to document this period. Four of these vessels have stories to tell.

The *Clan MacDonald* arrived in Fremantle in 1942 and on board was a 17-year-old third-class radio operator named Dennis Barrington who had been diagnosed with smallpox. This was his first voyage on this vessel and it was assumed he had contracted

the disease in Bombay. Because the ship's doctor had not been vaccinated, he was left in care of a small Indian boy on board. As the ship approached Fremantle, he fell into a coma and was thought to have died. On 28th July, whilst they were taking the presumed corpse ashore on the short boat trip to Woodman Point, Dennis came out of his coma, brought round by the sea spray blowing over him. He survived his ordeal and returned to Fremantle in later life to thank Roy McIntosh and his family with whom he had become close friends.

Another patient who was in quarantine with smallpox at the same time was Jim Fox, who had been put ashore from the New Zealand hospital ship *Maungani*. It was explained that the only reason Jim survived his ordeal with smallpox, even after the disease cost him an eye, was that his mother had had him vaccinated as a child in India. Dennis and Jim became close friends, as did their families, who continued the association into the 1980s.



Smallpox patient Jim Fox, 1943

The Pacific Trading vessel *Suwa* arrived in 1943 with 28 crew on board suffering various degrees of smallpox. One victim had already died and been buried at sea, while four more were being cared for by 36-year-old Chief Officer Arthur Waters. He in turn contracted the disease and died whilst caring for his men on 1st April. The four Fijian crewmen eventually died. Osea Tugovuu, who succumbed on 11th April was the last smallpox death in this State.

These *Suwa* victims are buried together in a small grave at the Woodman Point Military Cemetery, a simple plinth being the only reminder of their passing. However, the Chief Officer and the crewmen's names are recorded on a memorial board that is still displayed at the Flying Angel Club in Fremantle. Arthur Waters, originally buried at Woodman Point, was interred at the Karrakatta Military Cemetery in 1958.

All of the victims of smallpox who died at the quarantine station were cremated at Woodman Point.

In 2008 I interviewed a man named Griffiths, who in 1944 was the third Mate on board *Empire Mist* when it experienced a health crisis. He recalled vividly that when two crew members showed signs of smallpox, the chief steward immediately requested any other crew members who were feeling off colour to come forward. The original two were not told of the chief steward's diagnostic suspicions, so as not to cause any panic among the other crew members.

The *Empire Mist* was twelve days out from Karachi, bound for Chile to load nitrate, and due to call in at Wellington for bunkers. So drastic was the situation that it was essential for the ship to alter course for the nearest quarantine station — at Fremantle. Nine days later on the morning of 28th January 1944 the Minister of War Transport approached Rottnest Island flying the double flag signal of 'two Q's'. This signified to the naval examination vessel patrolling north of the Fairway Buoy that the vessel was 'suspect' having had cases of infectious disease on board for more than five days.

The vessel was allotted an anchorage well south of the entrance to the port of Fremantle and a thorough fumigation of the ship's accommodation was undertaken by quarantine officers. Later that morning the vessel's two steel lifeboats were loaded to the gunnels with the crews' bedding, and their personal effects, and towed to the quarantine station jetty with crew members sitting on top. As it turned out, the diagnosis proved negative, but Griffiths did point out that on returning to their ship it was

noticeable that the fumigation had had a salubrious effect on the ship's cockroach population.

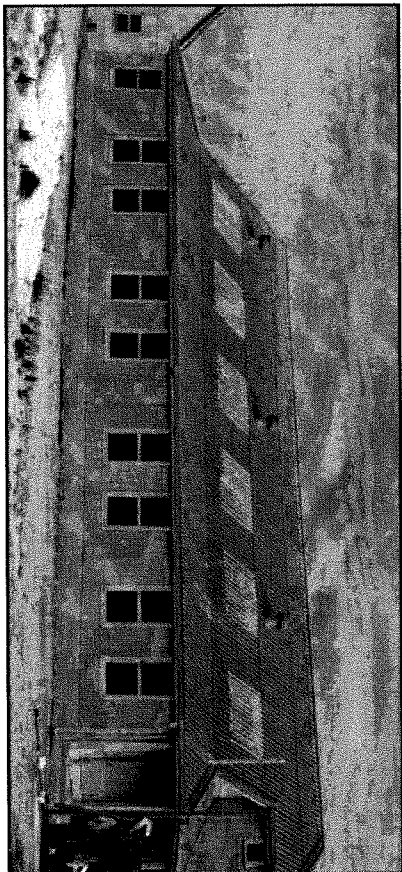
After the war, considerable numbers of displaced persons and immigrants from Europe and Britain began to arrive in Western Australia, with the hope of a new life. While immigration was at its peak it involved a number of passenger vessels arriving from countries where smallpox, bubonic plague, typhoid, foot and mouth disease and other exotic disorders were still prevalent. From the end of the war through to 1964, 22 ships came under quarantine restrictions and regulations.

All immigrants identified as potentially having an infectious disease were sent to Woodman Point. Most recovered, having been either vaccinated in their childhood, or thanks to treatment with penicillin. People arriving by aircraft without valid vaccination certificates were also dispatched to Woodman Point for five days' observation. The first record of this was in 1948 when eight crew and 44 aircraft passengers were quarantined for not having inoculation certificates for cholera and smallpox.

One vessel that caused some concern was the *S.S. Moolhan* when it arrived in Fremantle on 29th May 1949. The daily newspaper reported that the liner arrived with smallpox and that

'Passengers onboard have been ordered not to attempt to leave the ship when it arrives tomorrow for oil, stores and water. Wharf barricades will be patrolled by guards throughout the *Moolhan's* stay in Fremantle'. There were 15 'suspect' smallpox passengers, including an eight-year-old girl named Janet Welch, who had presumably picked up the infection when the ship was in Port Said. All 15 passengers were taken ashore by launch to the quarantine station.

The normal procedure for people landed at Woodman Point with suspected smallpox was as follows: they were processed, bathed or showered, then penicillin in oil was administered intramuscularly, and their luggage was disinfected or fumigated. For some the compulsory showering was a reminder of the Holocaust.



Shower block before restoration

The *Moolhan* made numerous trips carrying the so-called '10 Pound Poms' to Australia, and this time on her return voyage to Britain six passengers died of smallpox before she entered Tilbury. In a bid to stop the spread of the disease, the library onboard containing over 1500 books was destroyed, all crockery, glass and kitchen equipment was sterilised in water at a temperature of 190 degrees, and even all the ironing tables were stripped and recovered.

Another incident occurred five years later when the *S.S. Strathaird* arrived off Fremantle on Saturday 7th August 1954 with a ship's steward suffering suspected varioloid — which resembles smallpox and is found in people who have had the disease or been vaccinated against it and come in contact with it again.

Three Commonwealth Medical Officers boarded the vessel and after receiving a diagnosis from the ship's surgeon, agreed unanimously that the case was not varioloid but actually 'moderate smallpox'. At 11.30am, the steward was dispatched to the Woodman Point quarantine station by the ship's boat, where the quarantine doctor confirmed that he would certainly have died had it not been for his two-year-old vaccination. Nine stewards who occupied the same cabin as the victim were then taken off with their belongings, and their cabin was disinfected with Formalin spray.

All 76 passengers, plus their hand luggage, were taken from the *Srabhind* to Woodman Point in the afternoon, where they were given germ-killing showers using Lysol, their clothing was disinfected, and their vaccination history checked. 24 of the passengers were then released under surveillance because their vaccinations were sufficiently recent to be certain of protection. All cabins on the *Srabhind* were then fumigated, and 15 tons of passengers' luggage and 481 mailbags were surface sprayed with Formalin before the mail was handed over to the Postmaster General's Department. Four doctors worked around the clock vaccinating passengers and crew. Although most had been vaccinated previously, they were vaccinated again and more than 1200 British migrant passengers were vaccinated while the ship lay in Gage Roads. Fortunately there were no deaths. Those remaining on the ship and travelling on to Adelaide were accompanied by one of the quarantine doctors.

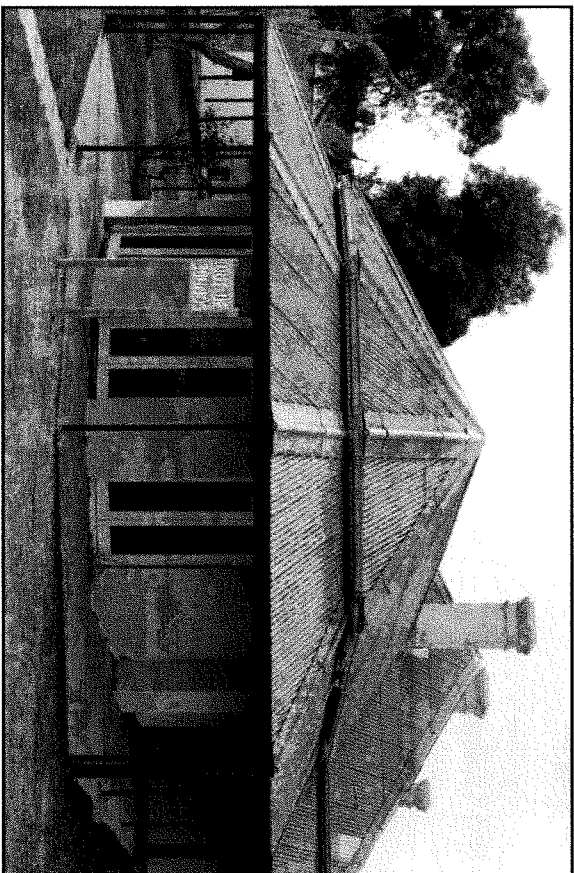
As a result of an amendment to the Immigration Act in 1958, a detention centre was established at Woodman Point, one of only two in Australia. Previously, stowaways, prohibited or illegal immigrants and ship's deserters were detained in State prisons pending their deportation. They were now detained at Woodman Point together with any non-nationals suffering mental illness or venereal disease.

From the Woodman Point Detention Centre there were many daring escapes. An Italian detainee escaped in October 1965 and a series of breakouts occurred in 1968. A German detainee escaped in March 1968 causing road blocks to be set up with State police and quarantine officers combining in the search. In May 1968 a British deserter escaped by climbing the fence of the exercise yard and disappearing. In October 1968, two Greek detainees escaped by bending the iron bars in the bathroom. Due to these incidents more vigilant surveillance was required and daily exercise was withdrawn in November 1968 and the Commonwealth Police became involved.

There only death in the Detention building was a Sister Barbara Smith, who died from smallpox after tending a patient from

St John of God's Hospital. She and five other sisters had been nursing a patient off the vessel *Naldena* who had been misdiagnosed with typhoid. It was discovered five days later that in fact he had smallpox. Although vaccinated that day, the 22-year-old Sister Barbara had not been vaccinated against smallpox in infancy. She and other contacts were immediately removed to the Woodman Point Quarantine Station, and the doctors who had also been in contact with the patient were put under house arrest. She died a month later, on 17th April 1930.

Roy McIntosh, the OIC and caretaker of the station, retired in 1963 and George Marsh filled his place until it was finally closed in 1979. In this period the quarantine station was used for a variety of other purposes, including being an important reception/medical assessment centre for Vietnamese refugees fleeing to Australia at the end of the Vietnam War, prior to their transfer to the Graylands Refugee Centre.



Doctors residence before restoration

The autoclave or fumigator was also put to a variety of uses in this period, including all fumigation requirements of commodities coming into the State by air and sea. Chemicals used in the

autoclave were hydrocyanic gas, sodium cyanide and methyl bromide and, as one operator noted in a log, 'the necessity to open the windows in half an hour after the mixing was most inconvenient and a nuisance'. At certain times sulphur was also used to fumigate clothing and belongings.

Ships were also disinfected against contagion by spraying with formalin and cabins and compartments fumigated using methyl bromide. Yellow flags were flown to show the station was under active quarantine or 'lock down' as some staff referred to it, and the gates were kept closed, but there were instances of intrusion. Trespassers were vaccinated and detained until the quarantine was lifted. In one instance some soldiers during World War II entered the station collecting firewood and were detained for two months.

Throughout the history of the quarantine station, no rubbish or discarded material was allowed to exit the station on any condition, it had to be disposed of by being either burnt or buried.

From its beginning, the Woodman Point site has been used to quarantine against a number of deadly infectious diseases including typhoid/enteric fever, cholera, scarlet fever, smallpox, leprosy, bubonic plague, pneumonic influenza, venereal disease, chicken pox, tuberculosis, whooping cough and measles. There have been a total of 88 known deaths from these diseases, and probably more because records are incomplete. During times of active quarantine, hundreds of persons were landed at Woodman Point and subjected to disinfection by bathing and showering, using lysol, and re-vaccination along with the quarantine staff and their families.

From 1979 onwards, the station was no longer active but was used by various organisations, such as scouting groups, school camps, various sporting groups. On 15th December 1982 the Minister of the Department of Youth, Sport and Recreation officially opened the Woodman Point Recreation Camp. In

1989 the original residence of the OIC was used as a reprise by the Vietnam Veterans Association.

Gradually the site became rundown and degraded, and it was earmarked for demolition to make way for a proposed housing development.

Fortunately the Department of Sport and Recreation had the foresight to see the potential of the area, and had the old Quarantine Station heritage listed in 2002. Following a generous grant of about \$9 million from the State Government and numerous grants from Lottery West, the City of Cockburn, and the Federal Government, the station was gradually restored and it was officially opened to the public on 9th October 2007. Today the venue is fully utilised all year round and is a most popular community asset.

For more detailed information on Woodman Point Quarantine Station please visit www.woodmanpointquarantinestation.com