

A healthy prognosis for *Q Station*

Sensitive adaptive reuse of a nationally significant site gives it a future



By Angela le Sueur

Photos: Stephen Antinopoulos

When the decision was taken by the NSW Government in the late 1990s to lease Quarantine Station on Sydney's North Head to a private company for adaptive reuse which included on-site accommodation and entertainment, it became one of Australia's most hotly debated heritage issues. With a history spanning the years from the early 1830s to the late 1970s, the station had been the nation's oldest and largest quarantine facility. As such it had made a major contribution to the understanding and management of disease since the early days of the Colony as well as reflecting social and cultural changes. Its built fabric, equipment and stories were largely intact within an environment bordered by sea and bush, chosen for its isolation and containing many rare species.

Ownership of Quarantine Station was transferred from the Commonwealth Government to the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) in March 1984. The Service consistently carried out basic repairs to the almost 70 buildings and large-scale medical installations on site, and mothballed smaller artefacts in the hope that happier days would come. But it had been clear for some time to the resource-strapped NPWS that a massive injection of funds would be needed to conserve, interpret and present the site to fulfil its potential as one of the nation's most significant heritage assets.

The controversy started in earnest in 2000 when a Conditional Lease was signed with the Mawland Group. Many loud misgivings were voiced which ranged from specific and detailed concerns about protecting the integrity of the site and surrounding environment, to a general feeling that sites of such significance

were better left in the hands of government. A major concern was the length of the proposed lease (21 years followed by options for a further 15 and 9 years). Despite Mawland's strong track record in conservation and reuse of significant heritage there was a strong body of opinion, with the National Trust at the forefront, that the site was too significant and too fragile to risk management by a private company with other priorities and vulnerabilities.

Within the most stringent framework of controls yet seen in Australia for such a project, developed and monitored by the then NSW Heritage Office and watched closely by the National Trust, the risk was taken. What was at stake, and how successful is it so far?

A nationally significant site

In February 1833, concerned by the increasing number of ships arriving Sydney waters with incurable diseases which threatened the very existence of the Colony, the government dedicated land on Sydney's North Head as a place of quarantine. The diseases most feared were typhus fever which, transmitted by lice, rampaged through passengers and crew alike, yellow fever, smallpox and bubonic plague.

Until 1837, ships bearing disease were anchored at bay until declared free of threat. To avoid expensive delays, many ship owners ignored the responsibilities under the Quarantine Act of 1832 to declare disease while others charged an

(...continues on page 3...)

often crippling demurrage. Neither option was satisfactory for the government, which took action to develop the on-land quarantine facility following the arrival of the *Lady MacNagten* in February 1837. Among the mainly Irish immigrants on board, there were at least 90 cases of typhus fever and the possibility of a long stay at anchor. A wharf was built on the North Head site which was divided into Healthy and Sick Grounds. Four unlined timber buildings were built for passengers as yet showing no sign of disease, while a hospital was built on the Sick Ground.

Over the decades until the facility was closed in the 1970s, there were years when Quarantine Station was crammed to overcrowding and years of what must have been an uncanny quiet, when circumstances (such as the virtual suspension of assisted passage in the 1840s and again the 1860s) dramatically reduced the number of arrivals. Despite some deterioration during sustained quiet times, when it would have been harder to justify the personnel needed to maintain it, facilities at the Station were gradually expanded over the decades. By the time Quarantine Station closed, there were almost 70 buildings on-site together with equipment, much of which had represented state of the art medical knowledge and care in its time. All this was intact as the century turned, albeit in an increasingly worrying state of disrepair.

Layers of history, countless stories

Preserved in its isolation and encircled by bushland and sea, Quarantine Station was a world of its own where for decades the measures taken to understand and contain infectious diseases were starkly in evidence. In 1873, aware of Australia's vulnerability as a nation dependent on immigration, the government launched into a major upgrade of the Sydney site. By 1889 immigrant ships carrying 600 passengers could be cleaned, disinfected, washed and admitted for medical examination within 36 hours of arrival. The 'showers' where new arrivals stripped and stood under sprays of carbolic (watched through holes in the metal walls by vigilant matrons) still exude a strong sense of horror at the lack of privacy or individual rights in this frontline of protection for the community.

Between 1912 and 1920, further major upgrades were carried out which included the installation of two inhalation chambers. Emitting a solution containing zinc sulphate, these were intended to kill the bacteria in the lungs thought to be responsible for respiratory diseases, but quite possibly caused many new problems. They were put to heavy use between November 1918 and March 1919 when some 12,000 people - mostly diggers returning from the trenches of World War I - were quarantined to protect Australia from the Spanish flu pandemic. Accommodation was dramatically insufficient, and the diggers had to clear scrub and erect their own tents on arrival. Bored and keen to get home after the privations of war, many escaped and marched into Sydney in protest.

In addition to the giant autoclaves, fumigation chambers and disinfecting areas, the two hospitals and morgue on the site (one hospital burnt down in 2003, thought to be a result of electrical faults) told their own gruesome tales. But life on Quarantine was not always grim. For the First Class passengers who grew in number and influence following the advent of steam travel, the lifestyle was positively elegant. Sewing and smoking rooms, refined entertainment around the piano and meals served on Wedgwood platters under silver cloches helped to create the atmosphere of an enforced but not entirely unpleasant holiday. Second and Third Class passengers had their respective levels of comfort, strictly stratified to reflect the passage they had paid for on board ship (a requirement of shipping lines which were forced to pay the bills for quarantine). Although Asians too were accommodated according to their passage, most travelled steerage. An 'Asiatic' block was constructed as part of the upgrades which followed transfer of the Station to the new Commonwealth Government following Federation. With its basic bunks, open shed, log table, stools and rice boilers - sufficiently basic to make people wonder why they had come - the block was a tangible expression of the White Australia policy.

Although it would be frowned upon today, the stratification of society as existed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was clearly reflected at Quarantine Station, and all parties involved in the conservation and reuse of the site have endeavoured to preserve this aspect of social history. Although Q Station's accommodation rooms and community facilities are discretely elegant and contain the latest communications technology, subtle differences in bathroom facilities, room placement and size reflect their earlier status. Room sizes remain unchanged and, while 'First Class' accommodation contains ensuite bathrooms, bathrooms for 'Second Class' rooms are 'down the corridor', albeit each allocated to a room.



Former First Class dining room - now a guest lounge

Conservation and Interpretation

At a cost of over \$7 million and guided by heritage architects Paul Davies Architects and Godden Mackay Logan, conservation works have stabilised and repaired the fragile buildings on site, now painted in original heritage colours. Thousands of artefacts have been conserved by the site's full-time, live-in curator and housed in a state of the art new climate-controlled storage facility. Major items, such as the great Edinburgh-built fumigators, boilers, autoclaves and the equipment in the morgue have been conserved in-situ, and it is easy to imagine the trepidation of detainees as they saw such tangible evidence of deadly disease on arriving at the wharf.

The natural environment has benefited too. In addition to paying a percentage levy on its income from the site towards sound ecological management, Mawland asks each guest for a \$3 donation to the National Parks Foundation, and sells small fabric frogs as souvenirs, very popular with young visitors, of the special environment to which they have contributed.

Many millions of dollars further on, the fit-out needed to accommodate guests - including a fine-dining restaurant established in the wharf boiler room (which, like the storage facility, can be removed without trace if necessary) - was completed in time for the site to be opened on 25 April 2008, its name change from Quarantine to Q Station preserving the past in its future.

Visiting the site recently, NSW National Trust CEO Will Holmes à Court said that the Trust was delighted with Q Station as it is today, which has given nationally significant heritage a new lease of life while making the facilities and stories there easily accessible for everyone. The proof of its success will be in the years to come but at present, the prognosis for Q Station is for a long and healthy future.

Acknowledgements

This article draws from the book *From Quarantine to Q Station - Honouring the Past, Securing the Future* written by Jennifer Cornwall and Simon McArthur for Mawland Group. It in turn is largely based on the work of Lady Jean Foley who has researched the history of the site for many years and in 1995 published *Quarantine: A History of Sydney's Quarantine Station 1828-1984*.



Spectacular Views (Photos: Stephen Antinopoulos)