

Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement

c. 1904 – 1986

Other Names: • Barambah Aboriginal Settlement

Details

The Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement was located on the lands of the Wakka Wakka people, near the town of Murgon in south eastern Queensland. The Salvation Army missionary William J Thompson established a mission at Barambah in 1899. Initially it was sponsored by the Ipswich Aboriginal Protection Society. In 1904-1905 the Queensland government took over management of the Barambah Aboriginal Settlement, as Cherbourg was also known at that time. In 1986, Cherbourg became a DOGIT (Deed of Grant in Trust) and the community began managing its own affairs.

The Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement was located in the South Burnett district of south east Queensland. In 1899, William J Thompson of the Salvation Army began negotiations with the Queensland government to establish an Aboriginal mission – 1280 acres of land at Barambah was gazetted as an Aboriginal reserve in March 1900. Thompson was the first superintendent and the mission was sponsored by the Ipswich Aboriginal Protection Society.

The site of the reserve was moved to a new location 3 miles from the original site in 1901 which comprised 7,000 acres of land. In around 1905, the Queensland government took over management of the Barambah Aboriginal Settlement. In the early days, living conditions and facilities were poor and the Aboriginal residents lacked adequate housing, sanitation, education and medical facilities.

The population at Barambah nevertheless increased as large numbers of Aboriginal people from all over Queensland and New South Wales were forcibly removed from their lands under the terms of the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 and subsequent 'Protection' legislation.

The people on the settlement worked hard to develop its facilities. According to the Cherbourg Memory website:

They cleared land for farming, raised pigs and goats, and planted vegetable gardens. They cut timber, dug two saw-pits and erected the first buildings. In 1909, a bridge and the road to Murgon were built. Barambah began to take shape.

But it was not a town in the normal sense: it was divided into two distinct areas – the white administrative domain near Barambah Creek and the Aboriginal domain, known as the Camp. By 1909, 258 people lived in the Camp in basic dwellings with earth floors and bark humpies they built themselves.

Between 1919 and 1932, 40 cottages were built at the settlement, using Aboriginal labour. Many male residents of Cherbourg were sent out to work as cheap labour for landowners in the surrounding area and women were employed as domestic servants.

In 1932 the name changed from Barambah to Cherbourg to avoid confusion with the nearby Barambah pastoral station.

The Ration Shed museum website describes the system at Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement. :

The government administration controlled almost every aspect of the Aboriginal people's lives; the language they spoke, what they ate, what they wore, where they went, for whom they worked and, in some cases, whom they would marry. Aboriginal people, removed to Cherbourg were either placed in dormitories or lived in camps. Large numbers of boys and girls, men and women were brought up away from families in the dormitories. Anyone breaking the strict laws were severely punished – locked up in jail or sent away to other reserves like Palm Island and Woorabinda.

An Aboriginal Training Farm at Cherbourg was established where boys were trained in all aspects of farm work. They then worked on the settlement, or were sent away to work for pastoralists around Queensland.

The girls' and boys' dormitories were a vital element of the Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement, and the removal of people to the dormitories contributed to the social deconstruction of Indigenous groups in Cherbourg. By the early 1930s, 2 out of 3 of all Cherbourg children lived in the dormitories. The first girls' dormitory was built in 1909 and the boys' in 1910. A larger dormitory building for girls was built in 1925 and it stood until 1988 when it burned to the ground. The dormitory was also known as the Stopford Home for Aboriginal Girls. A new boys' dormitory was constructed in 1928.

The boys' dormitory primarily housed younger boys, and the girls' dormitory was for unmarried women and girls over the age of 12. Contact between people in each dormitory was tightly controlled by the settlement matron. The residents 'followed a structured daily routine with few personal freedoms, enforced by harsh discipline (Queensland government, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community histories).

The dormitories were situated in the 'administrative' (white) area of Cherbourg where residents were segregated from others and their lives were strictly controlled. 'Dormitory life was a strict routine of bells, cleaning duties and inspections'. One former resident, Darcy Cummins, remembered the morning inspections at the girls' dormitory in an 1988 interview:

The parade ground consisted of about twelve lines with about twenty abreast. Matron Burke walked along with a big solid five foot lawyer cane. If we were dirty or our clothes were dirty we would be whacked or boxed on the ears and then sent to the side of the dormitory to the washroom. She wouldn't touch a black fellow. She would point to someone who she thought had dirty hair and one of the girls would do the inspection. Five days a week there was an inspection. It was a long observance you had to have clean clothes (source: Cherbourg Memory website).

The dormitory system at Cherbourg was not dismantled until the late 1970s.

After World War Two, the Queensland Government continued to remove large numbers of Aboriginal people to Cherbourg. There were 546 documented removals to Cherbourg made by the government between 1940 and 1971.

The passing of the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders Affairs Act 1965 (Qld), eased some of the government restrictions on Aboriginal people living on reserves and allowed the formation of the first Cherbourg Community Council (CCC) in 1966. At this time the ration system was discontinued and a cash economy was introduced at Cherbourg.

In the 1960s, children from Cherbourg travelled to Melbourne as part of the Harold Blair Aboriginal Children's Holiday Project (Blair was born at Cherbourg). The *Australian Women's Weekly* reported that 50 children, aged 10 to 14, came to Melbourne for five weeks' holiday in January 1963.

The Aboriginal Children's Holiday Project got funding from schools, businesses and other organisations, who sponsored the return airfares for children to travel to Melbourne, and families 'rushed to offer their hospitality'. In a publication from 2000 Anna Haebich writes about a 'tense meeting' between Blair and 1500 Cherbourg residents in 1967. The community was concerned about the Blair scheme's lack of consideration for parental rights.

In 1982, legislation was passed to grant Cherbourg a Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT), the CCC was recognised as a local authority, and the Cherbourg community began managing its own affairs. The Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire Council was granted status as a legally recognised local government in 2004.

Former residents of the dormitories at Cherbourg declare that being separated from their families made them 'mates for life'. The Cherbourg community, comprising people removed from their lands all over Queensland and New South Wales, today describe themselves as 'one big mob'.

Gallery



Opening of the Stopford Home for Aboriginal Girls at Barambah [Cherbourg] Aboriginal Settlement

Description: This photograph comes from the Betty McKenzie Collection at the Queensland Museum and is published on The Cherbourg Memory website.



The Boys' Dormitory at Barambah Aboriginal Settlement c1929

Description: This photograph is from the Betty McKenzie collection at the Queensland Museum and is published on The Cherbourg Memory website.



Cherbourg Girls' Dormitory Reconstruction - 1960 (draft version)

Description: This is a video by Wei Win Loy, a digital reconstruction of the Cherbourg's Girls' Dormitory -1960, produced with Dr. Timothy O'Rourke, School of Architecture, University of Queensland. All content was created from Archive documents and historical photographs. Programs used: Autodesk Revit, Autodesk Recap, Rhinoceros 3D and Unity. Many thanks to the Queensland State Archive and Ration Shed Museum for their support.

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Chief Protector of Aboriginals Office, State Government of Queensland \(25 March 1904 - 12 October 1939\)](#)
- [Director Of Native Affairs Office, State Government of Queensland \(12 October 1939 - 28 April 1966\)](#)
- [Aboriginal and Island Affairs Department, State Government of Queensland \(28 April 1966 - 16 January 1975\)](#)
- [Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement Department, State Government of Queensland \(1975 - 1984\)](#)

Related Legislation

- [Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897, Queensland \(1897 - 1939\)](#)

Resources

- Blake, Thom, *A dumping ground: a history of the Cherbourg settlement*, 2001
- Hegarty, R, *Is that you Ruthie?*, 1999
- Mok, J, *Cherbourg Dorm Girls*, 2005
- Hegarty, R, *Bittersweet journey*, 2003

Records

For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

Records held by other organisations

- [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Records \(1880s - current\)](#)
 - [Child Endowment Cards - Cherbourg \(1960 - 1963\)](#)
 - [Hospital Admissions and Discharges \[Cherbourg\] \(1958 - 1961\)](#)
 - [Social History Cards - Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement \(formerly known as Barambah\) \(1936 - 1986\)](#)
 - [General Correspondence Files - Un-numbered - Barambah/Cherbourg \(1911 - 1987\)](#)
 - [Birth Certificates \[Extracts from Birth Entries\] - Cherbourg \(1968 - 1981\)](#)
 - [Correspondence Files - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs \(1916 - 1999\)](#)
 - [General Correspondence - Torres Strait Islands \(1922 - 1994\)](#)
 - [General Correspondence Files - G Series - Cherbourg \(1939 - 1998\)](#)
 - [Miscellaneous Items and Correspondence - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander files \(1859 - 1997\)](#)
 - [Special Batches \[Correspondence Files of the Colonial Secretary's Office and Health Departments\] \(1852 - 1975\)](#)
 - [Health & Home Affairs/Education Department Batch Files \[Correspondence\] - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander files \(1884 - 1970\)](#)
 - [Photographs and Photograph Albums of Aboriginal settlements and missions \(1940 - 1960\)](#)
 - [Correspondence - Alphanumeric Prefix - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs \(1909 - 1992\)](#)
 - [Cherbourg Population Books \(1895 - 1988\)](#)
 - [Birth Registers - Cherbourg \(1934 - 1987\)](#)
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