

# Channel Island Leprosarium

1931 – 1955

**Other Names:**

- Darwin Lazaret
- Channel Island Lazaret
- Darwin Leper Station
- Channel Island Leprosy Hospital

## Details

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The Channel Island Leprosarium was opened by the Commonwealth Government in 1931. It replaced the Mud Island Lazaret. In 1943 Sisters from the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart took over the nursing duties on Channel Island. An increase in leprosy cases in the 1950s led to problems of overcrowding. Channel Island Leprosarium was closed in 1955 and was replaced by The East Arm Leprosarium on the mainland.

The Channel Island Leprosarium opened in 1931 and took over the role of isolating people suffering from leprosy from the previous leprosarium on Mud Island.

Channel Island had been proclaimed a Quarantine station in July of 1884. In 1885 a Chinese man with leprosy was quarantined on the island in a tent, with food and water delivered weekly, until he could be deported back to China. According to newspaper reports of the time there were Chinese people suffering from leprosy at the quarantine site on Channel Island at least up until 1890.

No permanent structures were put in place until after 1909 when the Northern Territory came under the control of Commonwealth Government. In 1914 a rubble and concrete jetty was constructed along with three buildings, a medical clinic and two wards, one for men and one for women. The station was little utilised in the early 1900s but was used to quarantine a number of patients with influenza between 1918 and 1920.

As criticism of the Mud Island Lazaret grew, plans for a new leprosarium for patients from the Northern Territory and Western Australia were discussed. A mainland site was preferred but when a new quarantine station was established at East Arm the old quarantine station at Channel Island was chosen to be the new leprosarium. In 1930 advertisements for a married couple to fill the roles of Superintendent, or Curator, and Matron of the new facility were placed in newspapers. The annual salary for the Superintendent's position was advertised to be between £324 and £360. An additional allowance of £150 per year was set for the Matron.

Living quarters for the new Curator and his wife were constructed on the island in 1930 and in early 1931 work began on repairing the old quarantine station buildings and constructing eight 'leper huts'. Newspapers of the time noted that special quarters were being arranged for any 'white' patients. Rainwater tanks were also constructed to supply the leprosarium with fresh water. The significant differences between the old Mud Island Lazaret and Channel Island were reported as follows:

*Though treatment formerly accorded aboriginal leper afflicts at the Living Hell Lazaret on the sand spit at Mud Island were notoriously shameful, the conditions at the new lazaret at Channel Island on the site of the old white elephant quarantine station leave little to be desired. There is a thousand gallon tank*

*attached to each of the eight huts for aboriginals as well as water being laid on to each hut from the main supply. The huts are stated to have doors on each side, and plenty of windows ...*

The new leprosarium was up and running by August 1931, caring for approximately 14 Aboriginal and Chinese patients. In October 1931 a boatload of patients from the Western Australian 'Cossack Lazaret' arrived and took up residence. All were Aboriginal with the exception of one Afghan man. They were accompanied by the superintendent of the Cossack Lazaret, Mr Lewyer. The first Superintendent and the Matron of Channel Island Leprosarium were Mr and Mrs Jenkinson. There was only one 'white' patient at this time and he occupied 'a nice room ... equipped with every possible comfort'. By 1932 it was reported that at least two Aboriginal children were living at the leprosarium.

In 1935 Mr and Mrs Jones took over as Superintendent and Matron of the leprosarium.

On 10 March 1937 Darwin was struck by a severe cyclone and many of the buildings of the leprosarium on Channel Island were badly damaged. While repairs were being done problems with overcrowding grew as more patients continued to be sent to the leprosarium.

Two weeks after the cyclone, newspapers reported the first 'white child', a 16 year old girl, being sent to the leprosarium along with her father who also suffered from the disease. By this time the number of patients on the island had grown to 130. Later in 1937 a number of Aboriginal people from a settlement on Groote Island were also brought to the leprosarium after that colony was 'devastated' by leprosy.

A 1938 article reported that a special 'bungalow' had been constructed for the girl and her father:

*a smiling-faced girl of 17 is there, as is also her father. She was a former pupil at the Darwin Convent when it was discovered that she was suffering from leprosy. A charming little bungalow has been erected for the [pair] the interior of which has been painted in cream and the floor is concrete. Another fine building nearing completion is the recreation hall. The natives are 'housed' in tin huts on the edge of the island.*

A year later it was reported that the girl, then 18 was teaching the Aboriginal children at the leprosarium – 'many of whom were born to live and die on the island.'

In 1939 there were 122 patients at the leprosarium, 9 of whom were white. The matron described, in very positive terms, life at the leprosarium and the greater success in treating the disease that gave hope to those isolated there:

*A launch from Darwin twice a week brings supplies of fresh food. Patients are allowed visitors, they receive letters and send them, the outgoing mail being fumigated. The half-caste girls make their own frocks, and delight in fashioning dresses for the smaller children.*

*'A diet of fresh fruit and vegetables plays a large part in the treatment', said Mrs. Jones, 'with, of course, regular injections. Once patients are discharged from the station, there is no reason, if dietary and general health precautions are taken, why there should be a recurrence of the disease'.*

She revealed that some of the Aboriginal people at the leprosarium who were cured of the disease chose to remain rather than be discharged as after five years on the island they had lost touch with their own people on the mainland.

Planned improvements to the leprosarium and the discussion of moving the institution inland were delayed by the start of World War II.

In February 1942 the Japanese bombed Darwin for the first time. Much of the city had been evacuated prior to that first raid. This was not the case, however, for the leprosarium. During the raid many of the island's inhabitants waded to the mainland at low tide and took shelter in the bush. Others remained on the island and gave aid to injured sailors. After the raid the remaining inhabitants of the island, including the superintendent and matron Mr and Mrs Jones, were evacuated.

Sometime after the first raid some of the Aboriginal patients returned to the leprosarium where there was food and water and some chance of medical assistance. It became of concern to the Military Authorities in charge of Darwin that these patients were isolated on the island without regular treatment or supervision. Supplies were shipped over and an army doctor visited when possible. The Military Authorities approached the Bishop of Darwin for help and in February of 1943 two Sisters from the Catholic order the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart were brought to the island. The military constructed new quarters for a visiting priest and later a resident lay Brother. An agreement was made between the Commonwealth Department of Health and the Catholic Church that the Sisters should run the island but that it would remain Government funded and under Government control.

As the site was considered by the Health Department authorities to be temporary, little or no assistance was given to the Sisters in making repairs to the leprosarium. However, several years after the war there was still no sign of the proposed new leprosarium. A charitable organisation in Darwin, called the Leprosarium Committee, raised funds for Christmas treats for the patients on Channel Island. In 1946 they raised over £100 which enabled them to supply gifts for 76 patients including 'dress lengths, combs and mirrors for the adults and toys for the children.'

A Darwin contractor who shipped water to the island was reported in the newspaper in 1949 describing conditions at the leprosarium as 'ghastly'. He said that there were 150 patients on the island including many small children and that they were living 'under the most primitive and insanitary conditions.'

*The island has one 'hospital', a dilapidated building totally unsuited for tropics. It is not even fitted with fly-wire for protection ... This hospital is built within a few yards of the communal kitchen. This, too, is not protected from flies ... And there are millions of sandflies, blow flies, march flies, and house flies round the buildings. Dormitories have been built a few yards away for the single patients. Most of the married black couples live in Government-built corrugated iron huts. These are most unsuitable for the tropics. In summer they are like ovens.*

He was also reported as saying that the patients were receiving little or no medical treatment. He commended the work of the four nuns and lay brother as doing the best they could but stated that the patients on the island should be 'rescued from the hell on earth that is Channel Island.' The article went on to state that the four Sisters remained on the island because no other staff could be found to replace them, and that they were only being paid an allowance of £104 a year between them.

Despite being an improvement on Mud Island, Channel Island was still considered by many as an unsuitable place for a leprosarium. The island was stony and barren and lacked any natural source of fresh water. Rainwater tanks were filled during the wet season but rarely lasted through the dry season necessitating the shipment of fresh water from the mainland by boat. According to newspapers of the time the Director General of Medical Services for the Commonwealth of Australia 'admitted the place is unsuitable'. There was concern expressed that despite this situation leprosy sufferers, including children, were still being sent to the island.

In the early 1950s overcrowding at the leprosarium became more of a problem. Systematic searches amongst the Aboriginal population of the NT were being conducted. Leprosy sufferers and leprosy 'suspects' were sent to Channel Island. Temporary buildings had to be erected to cater for extra patients. In May of the following year it was announced that a new £100,000 leprosarium was to be built on the mainland at East Arm. It would be a 'model leprosarium' and would cater for up to 300 patients.

In October 1952 it was reported that over 200 patients were in residence at Channel Island and that conditions at the leprosarium were 'shameful'. The Roman Catholic Bishop of Darwin was reported as calling the overcrowded conditions 'scandalous' and that the work of the six nuns in residence was 'almost insufferable from the lack of water and shade, and the intense heat'.

For Christmas 1952 the patients at the leprosarium were given a two week camping holiday on the mainland. Those too sick and unable to care for themselves remained on the island. It was reported that amongst those 'on holiday' were 45 children.

Channel Island remained in operation until 1955 when the new mainland East Arm Leprosarium was completed and opened.

## Gallery



### Channel Island Leprosarium 01

**Description:** This image shows huts at Channel Island Leprosarium during the late 1920s or early 1930s.



### Buildings

**Description:** This image shows the administrative buildings of a settlement for people affected by Hansen's Disease (leprosy), identified as the Channel Island Leprosarium.



### Quarantine Station, Channel Island

**Description:** This image shows the Quarantine Station on Channel Island. Shows three people relaxing on verandah.



### Cyclone Damage

**Description:** This image shows the damage to a female ward for on the Channel Island Leprosarium following a cyclone.



### Cyclone Damage

**Description:** This image shows cyclone damage at the Channel Island Leprosarium. It particularly highlights the roof damage to hospital buildings.



### Cyclone Damage

**Description:** This image shows roof and other damage to a male ward at the Channel Island Leprosarium following a cyclone.

## More info

# Chronology

- Mud Island Lazaret (1889 - 1931)
  - **Channel Island Leprosarium (1931 – 1955)**
    - East Arm Leprosarium (1955 - 1982)

## Related Entries

### Run by

- [Medical Services, Health and Aboriginals Branch, Australian Government \(1931 - 1939\)](#)  
Date: 1931 - 1939
- [Department of Health, Northern Territory Divisional Office, Australian Government \(1939 - 1978\)](#)

### Related Organisations

- [Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart \(1885 - current\)](#)  
The Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred heart provided nursing Sisters who staffed the Channel Island Leprosarium from 1943 to 1955.  
Date: 1943 - 1955
- [Roper River Mission \(1908 - 1988\)](#)  
Residents of the Roper River Mission suffering from leprosy were moved to Channel Island from 1931.
- [Oenpelli Mission \(1925 - 1975\)](#)  
Children and others with leprosy were transferred away from the Oenpelli Mission to the Channel Island Leprosarium
- [Derby Leprosarium \(c. 1936 - 1986\)](#)  
Before the establishment of the Derby Leprosarium, some patients were sent to the Channel Island Leprosarium in Darwin.
- [Garden Point Mission \(1940 - 1969\)](#)  
Some healthy children of patients at the Channel Island Leprosarium were transferred to the Garden Point Mission

## Resources

- Kettle, Ellen, *Health Services in the Northern Territory - a History 1824-1970 Volume 1*, 1991

## Records

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

### Records held by other organisations

- [Leprosy Transfer of lepers to proposed lazaret at Darwin \(1929 - 1934\)](#)
  - [Leprosarium, East Arm Darwin \(1937 - 1967\)](#)
  - [Leprosarium at East Arm, Darwin \(Formerly of Channell \[sic\] Island\) - Entitlements of inmates to pensions and allowances \(1944 - 1969\)](#)
  - [Northern Territory - East Arm settlement - General PART 1 \(1949 - 1960\)](#)
  - [Leprosy - East Arm Settlement - admissions discharges births and deaths \(1950 - 1963\)](#)
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You can view this page online by visiting <https://findconnect.efront.digital/entity/channel-island-leprosarium/>