



North Head Sanctuary Foundation Inc

Custodians of North Head

ABN 97093480659 P.O. Box 506, Balgowlah, NSW 2093
northheadsanctuaryfoundation.org.au

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2026 Meetings for your diary!

The NHSF 2026 quarterly meetings have been scheduled for Saturdays: 14 March, 13 June, 12 September (AGM) and 21 November.

All meetings are held in Bandicoot Heaven, North Fort Road, North Head, starting at 2pm. Further details will be sent prior to each meeting.

Our guest presenter for 14 March is the Aboriginal Heritage Office's Education Officer, Karen Smith, who will speak about North Head and its special place for the original Australians. We look forward to seeing you there.

Quarantine Station – one chapter in the story of North Head

Doug Sewell

When North Head was formally reserved for quarantine in 1832, the whole headland was subsumed into a single institutional purpose. Buildings occupied only parts of the land, but the entire landscape functioned as a quarantine buffer. The earliest recorded use of North Head for quarantine was in August 1828, when the ship *Bussorah Merchant* was detained at Spring Cove after smallpox broke out among crew and passengers. This makes North Head one of the first official quarantine sites in Australia, highlighting early responses to disease importation.

Long before European settlement, North Head (Car-rang-gel to the Gayamagal people) was an important landscape for First Nations custodians. Archaeological, ethnographic and environmental evidence indicates continuous Aboriginal use for thousands of years. North Head, a ceremonial place, functioned as a resource-rich headland containing fish, shellfish, seabirds and plant foods in a seasonally managed landscape, shaped by fire, harvesting, and movement.

After 1788, disease, displacement and violence devastated the Gayamagal people. North Head's strategic position at the harbour entrance made it a zone of early colonial control, accelerating Indigenous decline. The first quarantine effectively redefined the entire headland as a place of exclusion, danger and containment. This colonial function echoed, but inverted, Indigenous meaning. From Country cared for it became a land locked away.

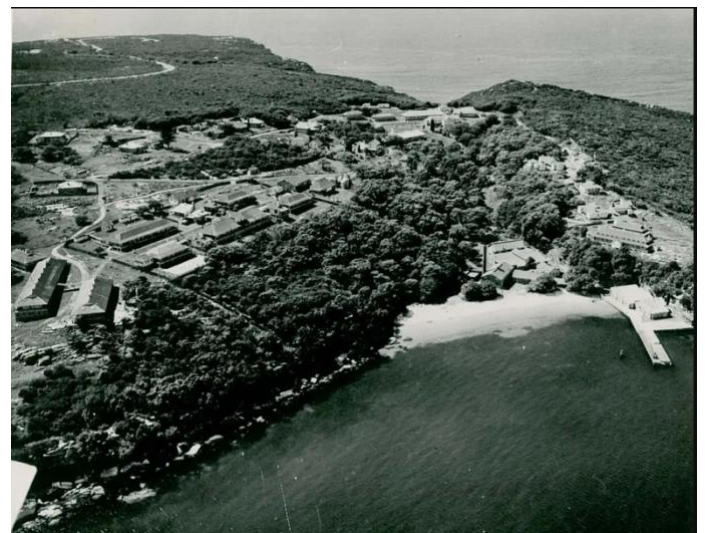
The *Conservation Management Plan (CMP)* work led by Peter Freeman Pty Ltd for the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service around 1999–2000,

highlights that roads, clearings, cemeteries, drainage lines and vegetation changes altered the whole ecology. Introduced species, clearing and construction reshaped soils and water flows. Indigenous sites were damaged, buried or ignored, but not erased.

Ironically, quarantine protection limited urban development. While colonial and later military use disrupted Indigenous heritage, it also preserved large tracts of bushland, prevented subdivision, agriculture and industry allowing remnant ecosystems to survive. This paradox is central to North Head's significance today.

As quarantine use declined after WWII and closed in 1984, the entire North Head landscape—not just the Q Station buildings—became the subject of conservation concern. Under NPWS management and later adaptive reuse conservation strategies aim to protect ecology, archaeology, buildings and the viewsheds of the headland itself. Indigenous heritage is increasingly recognised through consultation and interpretation. The Quarantine Station is now understood as one chapter within the larger story of North Head.

Doug Sewell is an Architect in Manly, Friends of Quarantine Station President and member of the Quarantine Station Community Consultative Committee.



Quarantine Station c1930

Image courtesy of The Office of Environment and Heritage (QS2007.3)

St Barbara and North Head

Jan Ritchie

As a frequent visitor to North Head, I often wondered what St Barbara has to do with North Head and why St Barbaras Avenue, a small roadway within the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust grounds, is named after her. So I went looking.

It turns out that St Barbara was a martyr of the early Christian Church and venerated as one of the 14 Auxiliary Saints or Holy Helpers since about the ninth century. The story goes that her pagan father was so incensed by her adoption of Christianity that he attempted to execute her, but in doing so was struck by lightning and turned to ashes. This legendary link with thunder and lightning led to Barbara becoming the patron saint of those using explosives including artillerymen and miners.

So here we have the link! Given that North Head was the headquarters of the Australian Coast Artillery from 1934 and the home of the School of Artillery between 1946 and 1998, the connection is clear. And since St Barbara's veneration in this locality is on firm ground, I suggest that from now we annually celebrate the feast of St Barbara each 4 December!



St Barbaras Ave from Scenic Dr



St Barbaras Ave corner

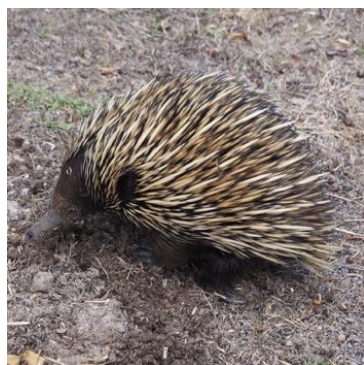


Echidna Sightings!

Peter Macinnis

After seeing only two echidnas in one year, I spotted two in one day recently, one on Scenic Drive opposite the St Barbaras Avenue exit, the other near the old "frog pond" nearby.

I was so excited I forgot to post to Echidna CSI.



Echidnas spied opposite St Barbaras Ave



Photos: Peter Macinnis

THIRD CEMETERY – The Mystery of the SS St. George

Kaye Lee

One of the most cowardly of stories to come out of the pneumonic influenza epidemic of 1918/19 concerns the disturbing predicament of the native

crew of the SS St. George. An excerpt from JHL Cumpston's review of Influenza and Maritime Quarantine in Australia (1) states –

"43. St. George.

The steamer St. George was infected whilst lying in Sydney Harbor. She carried a crew of sixteen natives and an unknown number of officers. All the natives were South Sea Islanders. The first case was on the 1st April, and by the 4th, all the sixteen natives had been attacked with influenza. They were all admitted to Quarantine Hospital. The infection was in all cases, severe. There were fourteen cases of broncho-pneumonia. Of the sixteen natives, seven died. No history of the infection is available, as all the white members of the crew had deserted before the sixteen ill South Sea Islanders were discovered on the vessel. The infection was definitely from Sydney, as the vessel had been lying at a wharf for over six weeks."

No details have come to light so far concerning the desertion of the white officers, but all 16 native crew were admitted to quarantine from the St. George on 4 April. Slowly but surely, 7 of those men died - Fireman Kamanti on 7 April, Fireman Tobu, Sailor Tona, and Firemen Terebua and Towia on 9th, Second Steward Takerui on 13th and lastly Seaman Jeremiah of the Gilbert Islands on 15 April⁽²⁾. They are all buried on the eastern side of the Third Cemetery. Whether anybody was ever held responsible for this dereliction of duty seems doubtful - hopefully karma intervened.



Australian National Maritime Museum Collection
<https://dams.sea.museum/fotoweb/albums/aXIHgODK8pkR3zlk/>

The St. George was a coastal steamer that regularly shipped copra from the Gilbert Islands to Australia. She had docked in Sydney on January 17 1919⁽³⁾. Interestingly, one islander crew member named Carwotho had died suddenly on board in February, whilst the boat was moored at Morts Dock, but a postmortem concluded that he had died of natural causes⁽⁴⁾. Perhaps, given later circumstances, this conclusion was incorrect!

1. Cumpston JHL Influenza and maritime quarantine in Australia p.169

<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-192064587/view?partId=nla.obj-192083405>

2. Microfilm copy of Register of Admissions and discharges NAA C525 P.35

3. Daily Commercial News and Shipping List (Sydney, NSW: 1891 - 1954) / Sat 18 Jan 1919 | Page 8 | ARRIVALS.

4. Gilbert Islander's Death <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/239583462>