

## LADY ELLIOT ISLAND

# History

## ISLAND FORMATION

Lady Elliot Island (LEI) is a 42 hectare (100 acres) coral cay at the southernmost end of the Great Barrier Reef (24° 07' S, 152° 43' E). It is part of a group of Islands called the Capricorn Bunker Group and has never been connected to the Australian mainland.

Approximate distance to LEI from:

- Bundaberg 85km north-east
- Hervey Bay 120km north-east
- Gladstone 135km east-south-east



By geographical standards, LEI is considered young. During the last Ice Age, the coastal plane on which today's reef and cay developed was completely exposed. Early in the Holocene Period (around 10,000 years ago) the sea level began to rise and stabilised at its present level around 6,000 years ago. The LEI reef flat then began to expand and provide the site for the formation of the cay. The Island first appeared above sea level roughly 3,500 years ago as a coral rubble spit.

Over the next 3,000 years, storm deposited shingle ridges known as 'berms' and coarse coral rubble provided a suitable resting point for various seabirds. The seabird droppings provided nutrients for vegetation to establish. This provided the conditions needed to form the mature, vegetated coral cay seen today. Lady Elliot Island is classified as a shingle coral cay, which is different from sand coral cays. Sand coral cays form from low energy tidal deposition and consist of fine material.

## INDIGENOUS HERITAGE

The data available indicates there are no identified Indigenous affiliations with Lady Elliot Island. However, the locality and the surrounding area are culturally significant to the Taribelang Bunda, Bailai, Gooreng Gooreng, and Gurang Aboriginal Traditional Owner groups.

## EUROPEAN HISTORY

Lady Elliot Island has a long history of European settlement. On Captain Cook's voyage in 1770 (which was the first official discovery of Australia), they travelled between LEI and the mainland, but did not see the island. The first reference to LEI was recorded in 1803 as 'The Southernmost Cay'.

Prior to the official discovery of the Island, Beche de mer (Sea cucumbers) harvesting occurred on the LEI Reef in about 1805. These were considered a delicacy in Asian countries at the time, they were dried and smoked before being exported to Asia. This practice did not last long as the sea cucumbers were quickly depleted.

In 1816, the Island was officially discovered and named by Captain Thomas Stuart aboard the vessel 'Lady Elliot'. In historical documents, the Island was sometimes referred to as Lady Elliott's Island.

The Island was first occupied and used by Europeans from 1863 - 1873 when guano mining began with 30 Chinese and Malay workers. After thousands of years of seabird nesting, the island was recognised as a rich source of guano. Guano is an accumulation of seabird excrement (bird poo), which was a valuable fertiliser and gunpowder ingredient. Guano was dug, put on trolleys and bought over near the lighthouse where it was dried and bagged. It was then transferred to ships by small boats and transported to Sydney, Tasmania and New Zealand.

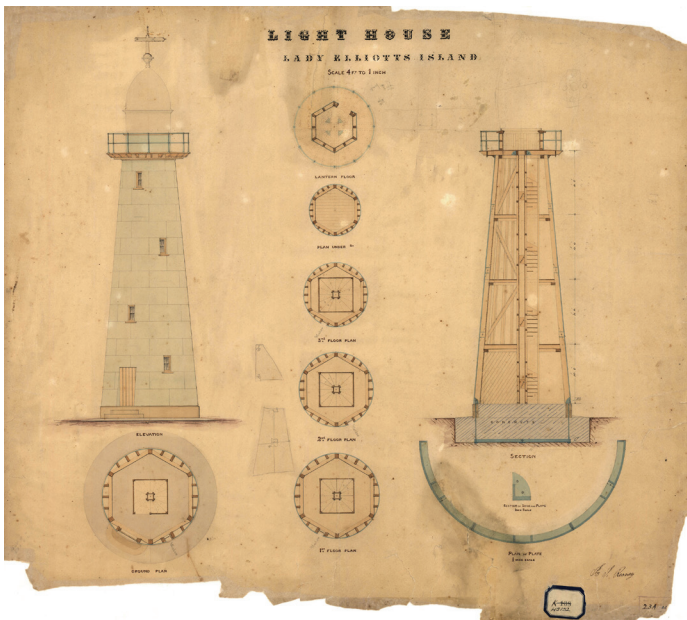
This practice resulted in the removal of all the vegetation except for eight Pisonia trees which still remain today near the pool. Roughly three feet of surface soil (20,000 tonnes of guano) was removed from Lady Elliot during this period.

## LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS

To assist with ship navigation, a temporary lighthouse was positioned on the Island in 1866 and was manned by the guano miners. It toppled in a severe storm in 1872 and in 1873 a new light station was established.

Standing at approximately 17 metres, the white and red Lighthouse which you see today was pre-made in England and shipped to the Island in pieces.

It was the first lighthouse in Australia with a timber frame and weatherproof cast iron external cladding.



Contract drawing of Lady Elliot Island lighthouse, signed in 1872

The original lighthouse keepers' cottages, built circa 1873, were demolished in 1925 and immediate construction of the three existing lighthouse keepers' cottages, boatshed, lighthouse maintenance shed and storage shed commenced.



Lighthouse built in 1873

The LEI historic lighthouse precinct represents an important stage in the establishment of navigational aids along the Queensland coast and the history of lighthouse technology, accommodation and associated services. The historical significance of the Lady Elliot Island Lighthouse has been recognised by its inclusion on the Commonwealth Heritage List.

The lighthouse keepers and their families received food and other supplies by boat from Bundaberg. In the early days this was only once every four months but increased to each fortnight later on.



Lighthouse Keepers' Cottage circa 1900

They used rainwater for drinking and washing, and kept chickens and goats for fresh eggs and milk. A diesel generator was installed in 1953 to provide power to the houses. During this time the goats would eat any vegetation that would start to grow (even the algae from the reef flat at low tide) and the Island remained barren. There are two graves on the Island, located near the old lighthouse keepers' cottages. One is of the 30-year-old daughter of the first Lady Elliot lighthouse keeper, "Miss Phoebe Jane Phillips, who caught a cold, which developed into pneumonia. She passed away on 2nd August 1896. The other is that of Suzannah McKee, the wife of Thomas McKee a lighthouse keeper. It is thought that Suzannah suffered from severe loneliness and isolation and committed suicide by drowning herself on 23rd April 1907.



Lighthouse Keepers' Cottage circa 1950



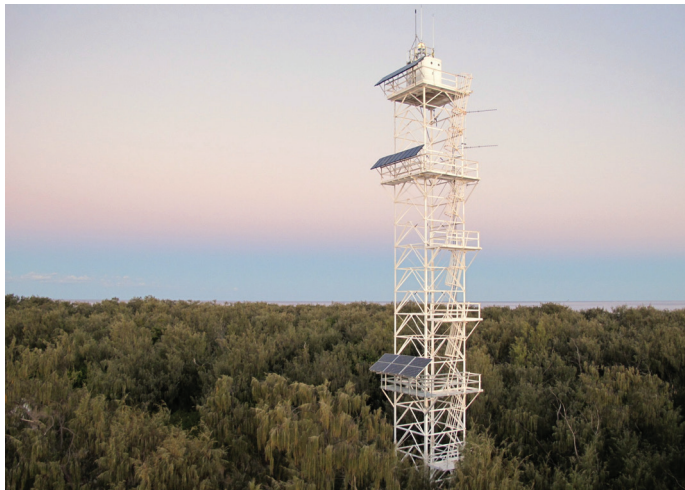
Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter

# INTRODUCTION OF TOURISM

In 1969 a keen aviator, Mr Don Adams, commenced tourism and conservation on the island. Under an agreement with the Commonwealth Government, his company built the airstrip and established tourist accommodation. He also began a revegetation program using shrubs and seedlings of native plants from other islands on the Great Barrier Reef close to LEI and the mainland (such as Pandanus, Casuarinas, and Coconut Palms). Don's conservation initiatives have made Lady Elliot the beautiful wildlife sanctuary it is today. In 1994, he received a conservation award for his efforts in revegetating the island.



Don Adams on the airstrip, 1970



Light Tower, built in 1995

By the late 1980s the revegetation program had become so successful that trees began to obstruct visibility of the lighthouse beam. In 1995, a new 34 metre fully automated, solar powered light tower was built. Six rotating beams of light can be seen from 40 kilometres off the island. This marine navigation light is managed by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA).

## DID YOU KNOW?

Lady Elliot Island was once known as Shipwreck Island. Despite the presence of a light station, the LEI reef has claimed at least twenty ships from in the last two centuries. There could be many more unrecorded wrecks.

The Severance (1998), Apollo I (1980), Thisbe (1980) and the Tahuna (1975) are among those recorded.

With the exception of the Severance, very little evidence remains of these wrecks today, however, the remains of some including anchors and engines can be seen when exploring the island's beaches and surrounding reef whilst snorkeling or diving.

## ECOTOURISM ON LEI

Tourism continued on the Island and in 1984, the Government permitted the development of a low key resort, which opened in July 1985. The pre-fabricated buildings that now serve as accommodation for guests were transported by barge from the mining town of Blackwater. The current owners took over the Island Lease (now issued from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority) in 2005. LEI Management is constantly reviewing and improving quality standards of the resort operations and implementing eco initiatives to make the island a role model in best environmental practice. As a result, Lady Elliot Island Eco Resort has been awarded Advanced Eco Certification by Ecotourism Australia. The Resort has been recognised as one of the leading ecologically sustainable tourism operators on the Great Barrier Reef, providing guests with an opportunity to experience and learn about the Island's unique ecosystem with minimal impact.

The owners' commitment to minimising the resorts carbon footprint is evident when you visit the Solar Power Station, which was completed in December 2008. Since the inception of the station, diesel use and carbon emissions have been reduced by more than 70%.

To learn more about LEI's intriguing past visit the Island Reception to purchase Anthony Walsh's book Lady Elliot Island, Great Barrier Reef, Australia (2006) or join our island Activities Team on a tour.

Content acknowledgements: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, Anthony Walsh, Lady Elliot Island Lightstation Heritage Management Plan (March 2012), National Australian Archive, Australian Maritime Safety Authority  
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