

Short History of the Stanage Area  
By Neville Kayes

The earliest activity, apart from fishing, seems to have been the mining of iron ore on Iron Island about 12 miles off the coast in the Duke Island Group, starting in May 190?. The ore was sent to Rockhampton in two boats, the "Timaru" and the "Civility", and railed to Mount Morgan to be used as a flux in the smelters. The blasting could be heard as far away as Banksia (?) halfway down the road.

The workforce consisted of 60-80 men and was considered a rest camp or holiday camp for miners from Mount Morgan suffering from miners' phthisis. From the accounts I have read of how they picked up the ironstone rocks, it was certainly no holiday camp.

In the 1918 cyclone a vessel en route from Percy Island to Marble Island was wrecked. One of the crew was taking a cup of tea to the captain when at the wheelhouse door, the vessel capsized and he was the only survivor out of a crew of nine. He eventually came ashore on Tynemouth Island and could see people moving about on Marble Island, but was unable to attract their attention. There was no shortage of water as the beach was littered with cans of water and oysters were plentiful. After eleven days he completed a raft made of pieces of driftwood and copper nails hammered out with a rock. When he launched the raft it started to drift out to sea so he jumped off and swam ashore. He built another raft but this only took 9 days. This one drifted the other way out through Lola Montez Passage, but when ½ mile out to sea, the tide turned and brought him ashore on Marble Island.

He was rescued by Mr Grant, the manager, who came from America with a terminal illness bringing his coffin with him, but in the event, his wife predeceased him, so the coffin was used for her. Mr Grant survived for some time, but the story goes that he died when his medication was delayed by floods.

Marble Is. was leased by the Hansen family who survived the 1949 cyclone which wrecked everything else on the island. It was later taken over by the Field family. Mrs Field died out west when a petrol iron exploded. Mr Field advertised for a housekeeper with money (??) and they reared a son. In about 1957, she disappeared mysteriously, thought to be lost in a dinghy which went missing from the jetty. After a long police search she was never found although I believe the dinghy was later found in Shoalwater Bay. Another advertisement appeared and a fairly young woman answered, but after several months the police escorted her away.

The group was then taken over by Rex Jones and managed by Peter and Jan Roberts now of Langham.

The Vaughan family has been connected with the area since the 1920's when Harold and Edwin took over the base from the Rogers Family of Stanage, who ran weaners on Long Island. Charlie and Cliff spent all their school holidays there. At that time the mail run only came as far as Stanage Homestead, so they had to carry their suitcase to Plumtree and light the signal fires for someone to come and pick them up.

Charlie used to tell me of riding up from Yeppoon for the shearing. It was a 2 day ride to Plumtree, they then swam the horses and dogs across Porters Creek, then across the elbow to Quail Island, ride along the Island, then across the channel to Long Island.

There are two graves on Long Island, one for a Mr Atherton and the other for Alex Martin, who passed away on 14 March 1930, both aged 80 years.

Charlie and Vena took up Quail Island in 1940, the day after their wedding (with about 2/- left in their kitty) and remained there until 1945 when it was sold to Charlie and Olive Jennings. Things were very tough in those early days, travelling up in an old truck, and with no tinnies or outboard motors, only a pair of "paddle sticks". Vena tells me that Charlie built a dinghy but could not wait for the planks to soak up before a trial run to Pier Head. She says it leaked like a sieve and she could see blue water through the floor boards, and she had never bailed so hard in her life. Eventually, Charlie made a sail which he waterproofed with beeswax & kerosene, giving it a brown colour.

One fine Sunday they decided to visit the Buchanan Family at Stanage. But on arrival at Plumtree, it was such a beautiful day that they continued on by boat. They were met on the beach by the VDC detachment who thought they were a landing party of Japs. One of the soldiers who carried the baby (Alan) up the beach was Mick Donnellan (?) who later ran a pie stall in Musgrave Street. The VDC manned a lookout on Copper Knob, and the remains of the dugout are still there. The arrival of the "Japs" caused quite a stir, with Mrs Buchanan and her ports loaded into the utility and ready to bolt. Apart from the VDC party the only other wartime activity was a forced landing by a Catalina Flying Boat in the channel between Long and Quail Islands. It took about a week to replace the motor.

After shearing was completed here the shearing party took the Buzacott engine across to the Duke Islands to do the shearing on Bamborough, Hunter, Tynemouth and Marble Islands. The wool was taken across to Iron Island in a 36' ketch, the "Virginia", 9 bales at a time and stored in sheds there until picked up by a Burns Philp steamer and taken to the wool sales in Sydney. These steamers had names starting with "B" ie "Babinda" and "Baralaba".

Charlie and Vena built up here again in the 1960's up near the Foreman's and near the old iceworks. If you were ever up that way near smoko time, you would be invited in to try some of Charlie's fresh bread which he cooked every morning in his coke stove or camp oven. As Charlie was a mailman up here for a few years, he knew all about wet roads. He should have been a weather man, because whenever he left after the holidays, he would drain and clean

out the 1000 gallon tank and that Sunday night it would invariably rain and overflow the tank again. He would bolt at the first spit of rain and even managed to get out on the Australia Day weekend in 1978, when 16 cars and 63 people got caught at Halfway Creek for a fortnight.

In the mid 1960's, a newly married couple of 18 year olds, George and Elizabeth Kelly, arrived to manage Quail Island and reared a family of five over there before moving on to Yenyarandi. George is still in the area and is a source of valuable information and knowledge of these waters. I remember he could run barefoot over beds of oyster rocks. Nothing ever fazes George and when the old Landing Barge sank up near the cattle yards and he needed to use it, he just put a length of hose in and siphoned the water out and next day removed the spark plugs, cranked the water out, added fresh oil and away he would go.

The next managers were John and Aileen Stanton. He surprised us as when asked to a barbeque, by grabbing a handful of eggs and breaking them one by one onto the plat. It was also the first time I had seen bananas apples and potato patties done on a barbeque (he later told me he was an ex navy cook). John also built 7 dams on Quail Island. He did everything at a flat gallop, but his health gave out and he retired to Mt Morgan, recovered and took up wood turning.

There was very little crabbing activity until the mid 1970's when a couple of Frenchmen arrived and caught so many, they kept them in cages near the boat ramp. They did not even know how to tie them up until shown by one of our sons. They had a heap of sack bags and brought them home 1 to a bag. Of course the word soon leaked out and the influx began. Their names were Claude and Henri and whenever they came to dinner, they brought along a flagon of burgundy and insisted on us helping them to finish it before they went. Other early crabbers were Jim Cocop, now on Quail Island, Alan Knetter, now at St Lawrence, Mal Ibbotson, now retired, Ted Samuels, Lilly Mitchell and others until at one stage there were 17 or 18 working here.

Another was Alan Shepherd who has retired to Rockhampton and now spends his time babysitting his grandchildren. Shep had some interesting experiences in his few years up here. He arrived back from a crabbing trip one day and sitting down to lunch, and looking out his window, he saw what he thought were logs floating past, and realised they were heads in the water. He promptly launched his boat and picked up 6 or 8 persons. There were a fencing crew with all their gear going down to Long Island, and when trying to pass through the elbow they were swamped and being carried out to sea, losing all their gear, chain saws, crowbars etc.

The owners of Long Island at that time were Gordon and Beryl Champnes(?), and Gordon couldn't resist a bargain at the Army Disposal sales. He bought army bridging ponts which were no match for the current in the elbow. He also landed up here with 120 folding chairs and 100 pairs of airforce boots, size 9, that fitted no one up here. I always called him the Sundowner as he always arrived at sundown with a lot of trouble.

The family invited us down for dinner, again on the darkest night of the month. After sweets, Mrs C asked if we knew what was wrong with the tapioca. It appears there was an open packet of naphthalene in the grocery cupboard. I know I burped naphthalene for a week.

Other invitations included one to Marble Island. We were camping on Tynemouth and decided to go and visit the Roberts family on Marble Island and of course were pressed to stop for dinner. They also had a visitor, Bill Ward of Keppel Bay Motors at Yeppoon, and again it was the darkest night of the year. Bill produced a bottle of plum wine and to my protests said "you'll be alright – we'll switch the beach light on". Of course as soon as we passed Iron Island the light was gone and we had to find our way home by the lightning flashes from a big storm over the mainland.

Another identity was Tom Teale, the Rockhampton Ambulance Super who had a lease of half of Collins Island with 27 oyster leases.

I am often puzzled as to how the early fishermen kept their catch and transported it to market, in those early days of poor roads and wet weather. There were about six sets of traps in the local neighbourhood with the stumps still visible. One was on Stanage Beach, one at Pier Head, Plumtree, another at Porters Creek and the far beach.

In 1948, Charles Foreman, uncle of Gilbert, sold the family grocery business in East Street and moved to Plumtree to build a fish trap and ice works. It was a going concern until a cyclone which wrecked Carmila in 1950 also wrecked the trap. The ice works stood idle for some years until removed in the 1980's. It used ammonia as a refrigerant and was powered by a 10 horsepower Southern Cross Diesel, which is still being used by George Kelly down near Yenyarindi. The insulation was pumice stone, sawdust and newspapers.

Gil had a boatshed at the highwater mark at the foot of the cliff. He had concrete tracks down to the water and marked for all the tides. He had built his shack first above the iceworks, and had a most commanding view right down Thirsty Sound. They had all their holidays there and we had many cups of tea in those large fine china cups that Frances would always produce.

Gil was always interested in history especially the voyages of Captain Cook and Matthew Flinders. He and Jim Wolfe led the re-enactment of Captain Cook's climb to the top of Pier Head at 4:30am in 1970 through the cobwebs covered in dew with which we were all saturated. Gil also installed a plaque on the top of Pier Head on 10.12.59 and together with Jim Wolfe made a pact to celebrate the visit of Matthew Flinders in 2002 and it is a pity he did not live to celebrate this gathering having passed away recently. Just imagine the effort required to carry the plaque, concrete etc to the top of Pier Head, and I believe he had to do it again to procure a masonry drill as the rock was too hard.

Our family's first visit to Thirsty Sound was on a visit in 1964 for a picnic with the Murray Family of Pine Mountain and to visit the Foremans at their shack near the ice works.

The only other resident then was Cec Saunders, a crabber who lived in a shed without walls, and built in a clump of mangroves. He kept a continuous fire going to combat the mosquitoes and bities.

On our next visit the population had increased somewhat Bert Rasby and Skippy Williamson and his dog Sam and who operated the fish trap on Plumtree Beach. The other resident was Arthur Cash, a retired dogger, with his partner Connie, and who owned 2 large wolfhounds that would pinch anything left unattended and about 1 dozen fowls that were covered in stickfast fleas. He also grew the best bisexual pawpaws that I have ever tasted.

Others were Bob Collins and his partner Betty who lived in a small house at Alligator Point. They lived a hard life picking oysters and used to row across to Pier Head in a clinker hulled fibre glass dinghy, rowing side by side with an oar each. Once a week, they took their oysters to town in a large plastic rubbish bin with a couple of freezer blocks in with them. After selling their catch they had a few ales and started for home. Of course, that took a couple of days, with a full cargo and numerous breakdowns. They always had old cars. As the rego ran out they would trade it in and buy another, with a few months rego left. They were here for several years until George (a returned soldier) contracted throat cancer and passed away. The last I heard of Betty, she was in Mackay.

Their house was appropriated by Ivan Bell, nicknamed "Teddy Bear" being covered with hair and a large flowing beard. One day he was escorted away by the constabulary over money matters in Adelaide. He must have been a star footballer as he left behind quite a collection of football blazers from New Zealand football clubs.

Jim Cox was our mailman for quite a few years. They ran the servo and Post Office at Kunwarara. Jim did not mind a bit of Xmas cheer or a New Year's Eve party, and I was often surprised that he reached home intact in the condition he left here.

Another character of the early days was Jim Smith and his mate. He built a boat here (about a 30 footer) and we promptly nicknamed it the Yellow Submarine because he used yellow paint and everyone was sure it would never float. He made trips across to Blair Athol in an old Series II Zephyr utility and returned with a load of spotted gum planks. As it progressed using only a small hand breast drill more like a child's toy and a hand saw, away he went for another load of planks. On completion it was winched sideways with a trewalla jack, borrowed from Evan George on Long Island. As an anchor, they used Mangrove trees on the opposite side of the creek. By the time the boat reached the water, they had just about run out of mangroves. All the audience expected it to sink but next day it was still afloat and off on a trial

run. It was powered by a 10hp Southern Cross diesel. The coupling on the shaft broke so he wound a piece of manilla rope through the broken studs and spun the engine. As far as I know he was still using it like that several years later. His partner deserted him soon after and he worked alone. There was no bunk on anything inside and he slept on the bare hardwood floor. He had a 4 gallon drum half full of sand with a bit of diesel in it for cooking, and he had 3 cartons of old Women's Weeklies in the corner. He wandered around the area in the roughest of weather, causing a lot of anxiety in the cyclone season but he always turned up OK. Several years later I saw the boat beached in Ross Creek at Yeppoon and I heard that he had got tangled up with some woman.

We weathered a few cyclones over the years. I suppose the worst would have been cyclone David which wrecked Rosslyn Bay boat harbour when it was still 200 miles away off Mackay. We had a small boat anchored off the boat ramp, so with an army of volunteers we were at the ramp at daylight to put it on the trailer. What a nightmare. There were waves and rocks racing up and down the ramp around over bare legs and after many futile attempts a large wave pushed the boat right up the trailer and half full of water. High tide that day was at 12:20pm, but the tide was full at 9am and splashing the door of Cec Rendall's(?) hut up on the bank of the creek. Monstrous waves roared up and down the beach and up into Plumtree Creek. We went back to town at about 2pm. ?Imore Burns, Bob Robertson and Ken Thompson were trying to fish in Porters Creek. I say trying because one minute the beach was bare and the next a wave would chase them up into the scrub.

Another twisted all the trees off up the creek where the shop is now. One sat over Arthur Point for 30 hours and Merv Bloxsom, a visitor with Alan Shepherd, was lying in a bunk alongside an open shutter, watching the rain pouring down and the next minute was lying outside on the foam mattress having been blown bodily out through the window.

A yacht at Hunter Island rode out the blow about midnight and were congratulating themselves when the eye passed over and the wind returned and pushed them right up between the Casuarina trees. It took a bulldozer to dig a channel and two trawlers to pull him back into the water.

Alan Shepherd was well known here and had a hut near the notice board opposite the shop. He manned the C.G. Radio for some years with the call sign "Red Lion". One night he broke down between Long and Quail Islands and put out a call on his small radio and it was picked up by "Zulu" Base in Rabaul. They called Canberra who go onto Yeppoon. Reg Fehlhaber, the Commander, who was at his daughter's 21<sup>st</sup>, came to the rescue. Reg arrived at 1 am to find Shep sitting down to a late tea, having been rescued by someone else. Alan also did a bit of crabbing and prepared his salted baits the night before. Getting an early start next morning half his bait were missing. Arousing his next door neighbour, they found bits of tie were sticking out of the sand, the missing baits. It transpired that his neighbour's pet Labrador had been running a shuttle service all night and burying the baits. The dog certainly drank a lot of water that day.

A windy weekend (Easter) in 1971 had its consolations. We rounded up some volunteers and surplus cement and concreted the boat ramp. Previous to this, we launched our boats in Plumtree Creek but often got bogged. One day we had a visitor who turned out to be an ex-navy explosive expert on his way to Marble Island to blast rocks of 1 ton to armour plate the airstrip. Over a cup of tea, we asked about drilling some holes for our boat ramp and he said if you get the compressor down there, I'll work until the barge comes in. He no sooner said this than 6 kids had his compressor hooked up to the old Holden and on their way.

At that time there was no road to the ramp. The only access was along the beach. The road came later when another good Samaritan arrived with a small bulldozer. He drilled 77 holes and showed us how to wire up the gelignite and nitropril (?). We started blasting one weekend and nicely asked a couple of boaties to move their boats and cars but they refused. Anyway, after a couple of bangs and rocks whistling through the trees and into the water, they soon jumped to attention. Everything went off well with only one rock through the roof of Les Nito's hut.

It wasn't very long before we had a visit from the fish inspectors, after someone dobbed us in, but over another cup of tea, Glen Daniels, the inspector, said "Hurry up and finish the bloody thing so I can use it". As you can see everyone had a cup of tea at our place those days. We must have done a good job because the Transport Dept Engineers building the present ramp said it was a perfect foundation.

In the 1950's and 1960's it was more or less an unwritten law that no one, apart from people living along the road attempted to travel up the road. For the first 3 months of the year creeks were all running and the stretch from Lyndon to Frog Rock was a lake about 9" deep. It had a good bottom. Mrs Murray from Pine Mountain always called it the lily pond. I remember one Easter in the 1960's we got to Torilla in 4 hours but then took another 4 hours to get another 1 km to Wadellah Creek. In those days it used to really rain. The ground became so water logged it was suicide to move off the two wheel tracks and some stretches were just wheel ruts bouncing over the roots of gum trees. Even in the Xmas holidays, Tilpal Creek would flood often for 3 weeks at a time and when we ran out of fuel we went to the creek and Jim Cox would bring a few drums to the creek. We waded over and floated the drums across. Then came the accumulated bread and mail bags with the request to "just drop these off on your way back". You still had to get across Wadellah and Coonyan Creeks which at that time only had oak saplings lying on the sand. The current would scour the sand away underneath and you would fall into the hole. Remember, no 4-wheel drives in those days. The road was closed for 2-3 weeks in May 1977. Halfway Creek flooded for 2 weeks on Australia Day weekend in 1978 trapping 16 cars and 63 people on this side. A few returned to Stanage and the Army came to the rescue flying most out by helicopter. They erected large tents on the road and stocked them with Army rations. Frances Forman and Gordon Kelly and another family stayed with the cars.

On the next weekend Gil Forman asked if I would like to go for a flight to Halfway Creek to drop some supplies. From Rockhampton to Tilpal was a sea of water, all the way. We did a couple of passes over the cars and lined up to drop the gear. Gordon was on the road near the creek, but when the pack came whistling down I've never seen his short legs moving so fast.

These days our pet whinge is still the condition of the road, but really as time goes on the better the road, the faster we want to go and this talk of 1 hour to the bitumen is a bit excessive.

In March 1974 we took 4 hours to Waratah from there the road was completely washed out after 3 weeks of steady rain followed by a 9" downpour. Then further on the concrete at Johnson's Gully was sitting 4' above the ground. I managed to get across further up with the assistance of an endless chain. From there on George Kelly had cut another track that day, and winding from side to side of the road, I had to walk ahead of the car with a torch to find his new track and suddenly the torch went flat, and while trying to find the car again, I was suddenly in the middle of a mob of wild pigs. We finally made it up here after a 7-hour trip.

*These reminiscences were written in 2002 by Mr Kayes in response to a request by the CQ Collection Librarian. Mr Kayes had spoken at a celebration at Stanage Bay earlier in the year.*