

Administration

From Antipodean Isolation to World Heritage

Although control of Lord Howe Island was first vested in the British Crown, and later in the Parliament of New South Wales, the earliest settlers appear to be too distant to warrant much attention from the authorities. When Surveyor Fitzgerald visited the Island in 1876, he found a relatively harmonious, self-regulating community. His letter to the Colonial Secretary states that 'Politics are simple and satisfactory. Anyone may call a meeting and minorities give way to majorities.'

The first resident government official, Captain Armstrong, arrived in 1878 after the Island had been proclaimed a Forest Reserve. A retired sailor of the Royal Navy, Armstrong held the multifarious posts of Forest Ranger, Resident Magistrate, Clerk of Petty Sessions, Postmaster and Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages. An energetic administrator, built the Island's first road, encouraged the infant palmseed industry, collected specimens for the Australian Museum, and planted eucalyptus trees for wood. One visitor to the Island wrote of him, 'Fortunately in Armstrong the Government of New South Wales have one who is exactly fitted developing to the utmost the resources and capabilities of the region'.

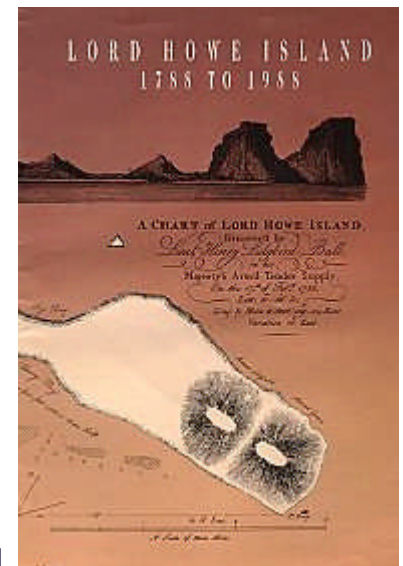
Alas, Captain Armstrong also came into conflict with a section of the Island community. Local complaints were soon heard on the mainland, and in April 1882 the Hon. J. Bowie Wilson was sent to investigate the situation. He recommended Armstrong be removed from the Island though the Captain was vindicated by two Select Parliamentary Committees of Inquiry. The final verdict appears to have been that Armstrong was deliberately 'framed' by certain Islanders because he threatened to compete with them in the newly established palmseed trade.

During these proceedings, Captain Armstrong had departed the Island and, incredibly, the Island community did not get another resident administrator until 1940 - some 58 years later! In the years following Armstrong's departure, Island affairs were supervised by a series of visiting magistrates including Henry Wilkinson, Mr Icely, J. Brodie and Frank Farnell. These men usually visited the Island annually unless there was some particularly urgent matter that required their attention, in which case they came as required. In 1890, Government House was built to house visiting magistrates like Frank Farnell. Among Farnell's achievements was the reopening of the Island school in 1902, and repeated efforts to help the Islanders with the palmseed industry, culminating in the formation of a collecting and marketing cooperative in 1906.

When the State Government finally came to investigate fully the affairs of the Island via two Royal Commissions in 1911 and 1912, the following recommendations were accepted:

'That the Board be immediately appointed to take charge of the affairs of the Island ... That such a Board consist of three persons to be appointed by the Government ... That the Board should appoint a certain number of Islanders to act as a local committee to supervise the affairs of the Island under its control ... (Recommendations 3,4 and 6 of the Bevan Royal Commission, 1912).

These simple recommendations remained the fundamental basis for Island administration until quite recently though, naturally, some modifications were made to adapt administration to the times.



The formation of the new 'Board of Control' was notified in the Government Gazette of February, 1913. The chairman was the undersecretary of the Chief Secretary's Department, and the other two members were connected with the Department of Agriculture. The new Board was strictly Sydney-based, carrying out most of its deliberations on the mainland. Board decisions were conveyed to Island residents by circulars sent out about three or four times per year. Once every year the Board went through the ritual of visiting the Island, making courtesy calls on every Island family to solicit local views on the controversial issues of the day.

Meanwhile, back on the Island ... Islanders were given a surprising amount of freedom to manage their own affairs under the Board's watchful but distant eye. A three-man local committee was established to advise the Board on all matters connected with the Island, and to carry out policy decisions arising from the Board's deliberations. All positions on the Local Advisory Committee were held in an honorary capacity by Islanders. The Chairman of the Committee, W.S. Thompson ('Uncle Willie'), was the permanently appointed chairman, who gave 41 years of unstinting service to the local community. The other two committeemen were elected, usually on a biennial basis.

This delicate balance between mainland and Island interests was maintained until August 1940, when the Board took the unprecedented step of appointing a Superintendent - the first resident administrative official since Captain Armstong's departure in 1882. During the emergency of wartime, palmseed sales had slumped to nothing, and the fledgling tourist industry had all but disappeared. To bolster a flagging Island economy, the Board appointed first Mr C.E. Ahrens and then Mr E.T. Kennett, both agricultural experts, to oversee Island affairs. They initiated a programme of agricultural improvement that made the Island more self-sufficient and more help to the Australian war effort generally. After the war, the office of Superintendent was retained, and the old Local Advisory Committee lost much of its influence, though it continued to function in a more limited capacity as advisor to the Board.

Legislators Lend a Hand.

All earlier administrative arrangements for the Island were based on Government proclamations. In 1953, the system was finally cemented into place by Statute Law, with the passing of the Lord Howe Island Act (subsequently amended in 1981). For the most part, the earlier arrangements were retained with some modifications. A brief summary is included below:

Lord Howe Island Act (1953)

The Lord Howe Island Board was reconstituted to include five instead of three members. For the first time, Islanders were allowed to elect one representative to the Board. Of the other four Board members, two were ministerial appointees, one was the local member of State Parliament, and the Chairman was the under-secretary of the Chief Secretary's Department. The old Island committee was retained to advise the Board, and comprised four elected Islanders. Alas, the new system did not work perfectly, The Island Board member at times disagreed with the Island Committee about what was best for the local community, so that conflicting advice was tendered to the Board. In addition, a small group of mainlanders, who had bought into the Island since World War II, felt that the Act discriminated against them, as they were denied representation on the Island Committee, and had more limited land rights than other residents.

Lord Howe Island Amendment Act (1981)

The old Island Committee was completely abolished and, in its place, Islanders were given three elected positions on a five-man Board. This was the first time in history that Islanders had held

the majority of seats on their own local government authority! The Board Chairman is now a ministerial appointee from the Department of Local Government. The fifth Board member is a representative of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. Political and land rights have also been extended include any settlers resident on the Island for ten years.

Island Administration Today

Today, as in the past, the Lord Howe Island Board is responsible for all local government functions on the Island. Included in this plethora of responsibilities is electricity generation, aerodrome operation, maintenance of public roads, buildings and tourist facilities, and supervision of the Island's two main industries - tourism and palm production. To carry out these functions, the Board employs a permanent staff of around 22 people.



Amazingly, Island administration has now become a matter for international concern. In 1982, the Island was placed on the United Nations World Heritage List. All signatories to the World Heritage convention, including the Australian Government, have agreed to conserve those areas of the world considered to have outstanding cultural or environmental qualities. Lord Howe Island is privileged, indeed, to be included on this list of the world's irreplaceable heritage.

Naturally, World Heritage listing has given the Lord Howe Island Board a weighty responsibility with respect to the care of the Island's environment. Guidelines were laid down in the Lord Howe Island Amendment Act (1981) to try to ensure that future administrative decisions would be compatible with environmental values. Firstly, the Act proclaimed a Permanent Park Preserve over the untouched nature reserves at the north and south ends of the Island. The Preserve is managed under a code called the 'Plan of Management' prepared by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. A senior Service ranger is seconded to the Board, and he and his assistants oversee environmental management Island-wide.

To control development in the settled, central area of the Island, the Amendment Act brought the Board within the provisions of the NSW Environmental Planning and Assessment Act (1979). This requires that a 'Regional Environmental Plan' be prepared to guide and control all future growth in the settlement area. The effects of the proposed Plan - to strike a balance between development and conservation - have already produced considerable controversy on the Island and on the mainland.

In 200 years, Lord Howe Island has come from being an Antipodean curiosity to a priceless part of the World's heritage. It can only be hoped that Island administrations of the future will strive to preserve intact the World Heritage qualities of what J. Bowie Wilson described in 1882 as 'this gem of the sea...'



Government House was constructed around 1890 to accommodate the visiting magistrates who supervised Island affairs between 1882 and 1913.