

The *sequent occupance* of Norfolk Island

Ian Bowie, October 2021

Norfolk Island is a tiny (35.3 km², 3530 ha) island in the remote Australian Territory of the same name. It has a resident population of about 1750 and, seasonally, 350-1000 visitors at any time. Despite its small size it has been extensively studied, particularly by historians because of a history which has been tied to that of New South Wales on the Australian mainland for nearly 250 years, but which has other significant and enduring links to the South-Western Pacific.



Small, remote, isolated and an island: Norfolk Island from the south

Bruce Baskerville has written about different ways in which historians have addressed the history of Norfolk Island¹. Each of these have influenced the interpretation of – and conservation of physical fabric in – the landscapes on the island but, for me as a geographer and planner, there is another way which is more explicitly concerned with land cover, land use, subdivision patterns and physical development (buildings and works).

In 1929, the American geographer Derwent Whittelsey proposed *sequent occupance* as a conceptual framework which would enable geographers and historians better to understand contemporary landscapes and the elements in them². I have adopted this approach for presenting a course on Norfolk Island for the University of the Third Age (U3A) in the Southern Highlands of NSW in 2021.

Broadly speaking and until the last seventy years the island's human history may be viewed as a sequence of 'settlements', by people who mostly had little knowledge of those who had gone before and scant regard for the remains, the landscape expressions, of the earlier occupations. This has led to different emphases over time in the interpretation and conservation of the cultural landscapes.

The first comprehensive settlement of the island was that of a Polynesian people, probably from New Zealand, between the 13th and 15th (possibly 17th) centuries³. Both then-Commander James Cook during his second voyage to the Pacific in 1774 and Philip Gidley King less than two decades later⁴ observed physical evidence that suggested earlier visitors, but it was not until 1995 that actual evidence of an earlier settlement was discovered at Kingston.

The second settlement was a British military occupation of the island, initially under the command of King. Although it began as a harsh penal settlement it evolved into a hybrid of convict prison at Sydney (now Kingston) and free settlement which involved widespread construction of buildings and infrastructure and clearing of a third of the island's native vegetation for crops and pasture between 1788 and 1814⁵, after which the island was abandoned and much of the built development levelled.

A decade later the British returned to establish a second penal settlement, this time under civil control albeit under military protection, similarly harsh and periodically brutal. The ruins of earlier buildings and infrastructure at what was known as Kingston by 1834⁶ were reconstructed, secondary growth and invasive weeds were cleared for grazing and convict gardens and substantial new buildings were constructed, but little new land was cleared⁷. This settlement lasted from 1824 until 1856 when it had been reduced to a small caretaking party.

The fourth settlement was by descendants of HMS *Bounty* mutineers who were relocated from Pitcairn Island to Norfolk Island by the British Government in 1856. After a short (fortnight-long) orientation the *Pitcairners* were left to fend for themselves in the buildings at Kingston (renamed unofficially as *Daun'taun*⁸), and on land which had been granted to them along with the crops and some thousands of sheep and cattle as well as other livestock which were roaming across the island⁹.

The first generation of *Pitcairners* did little more than harvest the bounty of grain and invasive plants and the feral livestock left on the land allotted to them, living communally in buildings which were strange to them. Nor did they occupy the island exclusively for long, for in 1866 the Melanesian Mission of the Church of England then based in New Zealand started developing a 418-hectare tract of vacant land northwest of Kingston that had been granted to it by the Crown.

The Melanesian Mission was headquartered on the island between 1867 and 1920 and built extensively, often using materials recycled from buildings of the second penal settlement, also renewing agricultural development in the southwest corner of the island. The Melanesian Mission was supported by charitable funding, and interactions between it and its Polynesian-background *Pitcairner* neighbours encouraged cultural development including of a nascent cash economy¹⁰.

Over time, later generations of *Pitcairners* and others who settled on the island cleared further native vegetation – eventually doubled to around eighty per cent of the island – and built new homes on small rural allotments, again often using recycled materials, but much the cleared land was allowed to revert to secondary growth and invasive weeds and there was little success in the few attempts to establish commercial agriculture¹¹.

By the time that Norfolk Island became a Territory of the Commonwealth of Australia (1913) subtle and perhaps inexorable changes were coming to the island as it became better connected to the wider world after 1897 when it became a Territory of the Colony of New South Wales (after being offered to New Zealand) and 1902 when the island was connected to the Pacific Cable. By then, about 35 per cent of the islanders had family names that did not come from *Pitcairners*¹².

The second world war brought a further albeit brief occupation after 1939 by military forces from Australia and (mainly) New Zealand which not only repurposed many earlier buildings and constructed military installations, often using recycled materials and other local resources, but also created a large (118 hectare) aerodrome which obliterated many landscape traces of the Mission and earlier penal settlements but brought closer ties between the island and the outside world.

Since the departure of the last military personnel in 1947, and with a progressive opening-up of the island to commercial flights, there have been great changes to the island's way of life.

With immigration (including a spike in 1966-68 that included families from England¹³) and emigration, residents born on the island have come to be outnumbered by those born elsewhere (mainly Australia and New Zealand) from the 1950s, while residents with a *Pitcairner* ancestry have come to be outnumbered by 'outsiders' from the 1980s¹⁴. Visitor numbers also have risen, albeit uncertainly, reaching seasonal peaks as high as numbers of residents¹⁵.

These demographic changes have exacerbated long-standing tensions between some descendants of the *Pitcairners* and governments based in Australia, which were considered by a Royal Commission in 1976 in a report which castigated the Commonwealth Government for its neglect of the Island while also noting that the people of Norfolk Island taken collectively could no longer be regarded as *Pitcairners*¹⁶.

Since 1976, the Commonwealth has sought to address some of the concerns of what has evolved into an *Islander* community¹⁷. However, problems of governance have remained, highlighted by the failures of a Legislative Assembly (1979-2015) established to oversee the functions of the Norfolk Island Government and of a Regional Council established in 2016 to administer some of these functions (but put into administration in 2020)¹⁸.

Many of the issues identified in 1976 remain, while more recent demographic changes have accelerated impacts on the island's landscape including on the attractions of the island through subdivision for closer rural settlement, extensive commercial developments in Burnt Pine, and particularly buildings and infrastructure to meet the need of tourism which is the island's only significant source of income (other than public sector funding)¹⁹.

Until the end of the twentieth century the story of Norfolk Island was presented largely as that of the *Pitcairners*. With growing awareness since the 1960s²⁰ of the place of Norfolk Island in Australia's convict history, documentary and archaeological evidence has established that the 225 ha KAVHA (Kingston and Arthurs Vale Heritage Area) site is of world heritage significance as part of the suite of Australian Convict sites²¹ as well as of ongoing significance for cultural and civic life on the island.

Tourism has focussed on the built fabric and other works of the penal settlements at Kingston²², but the island does have other attractions, including amenable outdoor environments and landscape expressions of its occupation by Polynesians, the Melanesian Mission and wartime military forces, and by *Islander* descendants of the *Pitcairners*. All of these require management to avoid degrading the very features that make the island attractive to tourists.

A key to management is environmental conservation, for which the island simply does not have sufficient resources. In recent years the Commonwealth Government has provided increasing funding for conservation of its more 'natural' features as well as for KAVHA. But other cultural features which are important for the island's story, but perhaps not for the world, remain largely untouched and unfunded.

The island does not have resources for conservation because as well as shoring up its economic base it needs to meet desires to maintain traditional ways of living and to access the fuller range of public services expected by both residents and visitors. This was recognised in 1976 and it remains the case (reflected in many official reports since²³), giving rise to a heavy underwriting by the Commonwealth Government of public expenditure²⁴.

In the absence of any other likely source, the Commonwealth may be expected to continue this underwriting because Australia has obligations towards a site of international heritage significance whose history has long been tied to that of eastern Australia²⁵. However, the question of just how much external funding – which the island shares with most small, remote, and isolated communities across the world – begs questions about responsibilities.

For more than 150 years there have been questions about the governance of the island. The questions remain unresolved, with some *Islanders* resenting that their voice is not heard but the Commonwealth reluctant to hand over funds without strings. If there is no generally accepted resolution of questions about governance here can be no certainty about conservation or about the future of a tourist industry that relies on the island's attractions.

What makes Norfolk Island attractive is its outdoor environments, its cultural uniqueness, and the built and natural features of its landscape. These need to be better understood. An understanding of how its landscapes reflect its occupation by people who had little understanding or appreciation of what they had inherited from people who went before them offers a perspective within which to plan conservation and development on the island.

Endnotes

¹ M R B Baskerville (2011). 1, 2, 3 *History: Norfolk Island's inconvenient history*, paper to Kingston and Arthurs Vale (KAVHA) Research Centre. <https://historymatrix.wordpress.com/2013/07/06/1-2-3-history-some-thoughts-on-writing-history-on-norfolk-island/>

² Derwent Whittelsey (1929). 'Sequent Occupance', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 19: 162-165

³ In their comprehensive survey, Atholl Anderson and Peter White, editors (2001), *The prehistoric archaeology of Norfolk Island, Southwest Pacific*, Records of the Australian Museum, Supplement 27, note the early observations of land clearing at Kingston (p 6) and traces of wildfires at Charlottesfield (p 133). This Record also documents extensively the physical evidence of Polynesian settlement at Kingston.

⁴ Norfolk Island Government (2008:13). *Kingston and Arthur's Vale Historic Area Conservation Management Plan*

⁵ Colonial Office (1807), *Norfolk Island Muster with land details*. The National Archives, CO 201.44:292-7.

⁶ GML Heritage (2019:15), *Kingston and Arthur's Vale Historic Area Cultural Landscape Management Plan*, Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development and Cities. https://kingston.norfolkisland.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/KAVHA_Cultural_Landscape_Management_Plan_September_2019.pdf

⁷ This conclusion is drawn from comparing details in the 1807 Muster with the details of land cover and buildings on John Arrowsmith (1842), *Map and chart of Norfolk Island from actual survey, 1840*.

⁸ Joshua Nash (2011), *Insular toponymies: Pristine place-naming on Norfolk island.... and Dudley peninsula....*, University of Adelaide, PhD thesis.

⁹ Thomas. Kennedy and, George Jamieson (1860), *Norfolk Island, diagram of allotments*, NSW Lands Department, Sydney.

¹⁰ M K Treadgold (1988) *Bounteous bestowal: the economic history of Norfolk Island*, Pacific Research Monograph 18, Research School of Pacific studies, Australian National University, Canberra, gives a comprehensive account of economic and social development under this and later settlements. https://books.google.com.au/books?id=fKEwAAAAMAAJ&printsec=copyright&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

¹¹ A M Maude (1961), 'The development of the Pitcairner Settlement on Norfolk Island 1856-1959', *Australian Geographer*, 8:103-115.

¹² According to Treadgold (1988: 85).

¹³ The television series 'Whickers' World' is said to have encouraged 100 English families to migrate during the 1960s as well as to have promoted the Pitcairner story on Norfolk. http://www.norfolkislander.com/images/12th_April_2014.pdf.

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- ¹⁴ See my tabulations of data from Commonwealth, Norfolk Island and Australian Censuses at <https://ijsbowie.wordpress.com/>. Identity reflects other cultural traits than birthplace and ancestry, of course, including ability to speak as language as Pitkern-Norf'k and exogamy by intermarriage.
- ¹⁵ Based on bed capacity. See Norfolk Island Government Tourist Bureau Annual Report for 2014-5 http://www.norfolkisland.gov.nf/sites/default/files/public/documents/NIA_Tourism/NIGTB%20General%20Manager%20FY%20report%202014-15.pdf.
- ¹⁶ John Nimmo (1976) *Report of the Royal Commission into Matters relating to Norfolk Island*. Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra. <http://www.norfolkisland.gov.nf/sites/default/files/public/documents/ANIRports/ExternalReports/1976%20Royal%20Commission%20Nimmo.pdf>
- ¹⁷ See especially M K Low (2012), *Putting Down Roots: Belonging and the Politics of Identity on Norfolk Island*. Unpublished University of Western Australia PhD thesis. https://api.research-repository.uwa.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/9451462/Low_Mitchell_Kenneth_2012.pdf.
- ¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norfolk_Island has a helpful introduction to island history and current issues.
- ¹⁹ Centre for International Economics (2017), *KAVHA Economic Feasibility Study*. Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development, Canberra https://kingston.norfolkisland.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/kavha_economic_feasibility_study.pdf
- ²⁰ Lucy Frost (2011), 'The Politics of Writing Convict Lives: Academic Research, State Archives and Family History'. *Life Writing* 8 (1):19-33. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14484528.2011.542327>)
- ²¹ UNESCO (2010), Australian Convict Sites in *World Heritage List*. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1306/>.
- ²² See Brad Duncan, Martin Gibbs et al (2014). *Norfolk Island archaeological remote sensing report*. Commonwealth Department of Environment, Canberra. https://www.academia.edu/9205542/Duncan_and_Gibbs_2014_Norfolk_Island_Archaeological_Remote_Sensing_Project
- ²³ Such as Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories (2003), *Report Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes?. Inquiry into Governance on Norfolk Island*. Australian Parliamentary House, Canberra. Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories (2004), *Norfolk Island, Review of the annual reports of the Department of Transport and Regional Services and the Department of Environment and Heritage*, Australian Parliament House, Canberra. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Completed_Inquiries/ncet/norfolkgov/report
- ²⁴ Commonwealth Grant Commission (2019), *Norfolk Island Inquiry*, Canberra. https://www.cgc.gov.au/sites/default/files/norfolk_island_inquiry_2019_final_report.pdf
- ²⁵ A history that may predate European settlement. See Peter White, Christian Reepmeyer and Geoffrey Clark, 'A Norfolk Island basalt adze from coastal New South Wales', *Australian Archaeology* 79(79):131-136