Torrens Island Quarantine Station, South Australia

Quarantine and its administration in Australia

Quarantine derives from a Venetian practice of 40 days detention or compulsory isolation for ships and people to prevent the spread of contagious diseases. Quarantine stations were established at each of the major ports of entry to Australia in colonial times and for many migrants the quarantine station was their first experience of a new life in Australia.

Torrens Island Quarantine Station

A proposal for the establishment of a quarantine station for the colony of South Australia on Torrens Island is recorded as early as 1850. Newspaper reports indicate the station was operating by 1855. The location of Torrens Island at the mouth of Adelaide's Port River, but isolated from the main settlement, made it ideal for a quarantine station. It could be reached only by launch or barge, and had to provide its own facilities (including power, water and sewerage) until 1962, when a bridge was constructed from the mainland to enable a power station to be built for the Electricity Trust of South Australia.

Torrens Island was run by the South Australian government throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, but with the proclamation of Commonwealth quarantine legislation in 1909 it passed to the Australian Government. At this time the station covered 551 acres and had accommodation for up to 224 people.

During World War I (1914–18) the quarantine station was used as an internment camp by the Australian Army. Additional information on this aspect of Torrens Island is provided in *Fact sheet 106 - World War I internee, alien and POW records held in Adelaide.*

Following the declaration by the World Health Organisation of the eradication of smallpox in 1979, Torrens Island closed as a human quarantine station. It remains a facility for animal and plant quarantine.

A cemetery is located within the station complex. Records indicated there were 10 burials in the cemetery between 1887 and 1932.

Records of Torrens Island Quarantine Station

The National Archives Adelaide Office holds a significant collection of records of Torrens Island Quarantine Station dating from as early as 1857. A selection of these records is listed in the table below.

Collection references

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
Historical records about South Australian quarantine and Torrens Island from the Allen Green Gallery, Torrens Island	1857–1984	D2166
Register of graves and index to hospital register	1887–1932	D2303
Visiting book – Torrens Island Quarantine Station	1892–1957	D3186
Register of admission and discharge – TSS Boonah hospital ship (at sea 1918–19) and Torrens Island Quarantine Station	1918–22	D2304
Register of admission and discharge – Torrens Island Quarantine Station hospital	1923–70	D2305
Correspondence files – two number series with 'PA' (Port Adelaide) prefix	1923–39	D2244
Photographs albums	1924–45	D3185
Nurses' report book – Torrens Island Quarantine Station	1942–65	D3184

Other records about Torrens Island Quarantine Station

The National Archives also holds records about Torrens Island Quarantine Station created by a number of other Australian Government agencies. These include the Department of Health, the Public Works Branch, and the Chief Property Officer. A selection of records held by the National Office, Canberra, the Adelaide Office, and the Sydney Office are listed below.

Canberra

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Quarantine Station Torrens Island – sites and survey	1911–28	A1928, 878/5
Quarantine Station Torrens Island – arrangement with state government regarding treatment at station of cases of infectious diseases discovered on immigrant ships	1912	A1928, 878/4
Quarantine Station – Torrens Island – water supply	1912–38	A1928, 878/8 section 1
Torrens Island Quarantine – general file re organisation of execution work	1915–16	A164, SA 16/662

Adelaide

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Quarantine Station Torrens Island – administration block and miscellaneous buildings – built 1878 (39 drawings)	1878–1938	D1051, folder 54
Quarantine Station Torrens Island – Isolation hospital – built 1866 (23 drawings)	1879–1929	D1051, folder 55
Torrens Island Quarantine Station – cottages – built 1866 (27 drawings)	1884–1927	D1051, folder 56
Torrens Island Quarantine Station – site plans and services layouts – built 1878 (47 drawings)	1880–1957	D1051, folder 57
Torrens Island Quarantine Station – jetties and tramways – built 1891 (14 drawings)	1891–1929	D1051, folder 58
Torrens Island Quarantine – property and survey	1909–38	A877, CL4303

Sydney

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Quarantine Station – definition of area (contains a short history of the island)	1955–77	D761, 160/8/2 part 1
Torrens Island Quarantine Station – photographs for master plan	1968	D3481, Torrens Island panoramic views

Locating further information

Search the collection to identify additional records relating to Torrens Island Quarantine Station. Keyword searches for items using the terms 'torrens island' and 'quarantine' will find items of interest.

Fact sheets:

- *Fact sheet 143 - North Head Quarantine Station, Sydney*