A Short History of Orchid Beach

Orchid Beach Village is the largest village on Fraser Island. Its history originally began in 1963 when land was set aside for the construction of a resort. Within a few decades that resort had failed financially. Much of its land had been lost due to beach erosion with remaining buildings being demolished and removed at considerable cost to the Queensland taxpayers. However due to political machinations a block of freehold land on the western side of Fraser Island on Wathumba Creek Estuary was exchanged for a larger area adjoining the Orchid Beach resort. The rezoning proved just as questionable.

This 2012 FIDO Backgrounder No 57 is a history of how those two developments merged to become the current village.

History of the Wathumba freehold land

In 1907 67 ha (160 acres) of land on the southern shores of the Wathumba Creek estuary was freeholded in a scam to a company headed by Captain Kent. Kent had previously some association with the Bogimbah Aboriginal mission. He obtained the freehold and a lot of public investment to establish a "shark factory" at Wathumba Creek on Fraser Island. Some machinery was taken to the island but the factory was never built and the entrepreneur absconded with the bulk of the money. No shark was ever caught or processed by the company. The freehold land subsequently sold to various land speculators and eventually became a centre of a long land use conflict.

In 1971 to appease public disquiet over the sandmining controversy, the first installment of the Fraser Island National Park was declared. It extended from Sandy Cape to just behind Indian Head. It failed to include any surfing beach or eastern foredunes. They were then covered by mining leases. Because the whole estuary was included in the park, the Wathumba freehold land was completely surrounded. Because the Wathumba block had remained untouched and in a pristine state without any proposals to change the land-use for more than 60 years, it was presumed it would remain that way for more years.

In early 1973 a subdivider applied to rezone 160 acres of freehold land at Wathumba Creek into 425 residential blocks. The proposal was supported by an environmental impact study prepared by Dr. Ted Coaldrake who had recently left CSIRO and subsequently prospered by putting his name to such documents for "developers". The subdivision was bitterly opposed by FIDO. Objections were lodged with the Burrum Shire Council.

In August 1973 the Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate visited Fraser Island spending 4 days on a FIDO Safari inspecting the whole island. As a result of their intervention the Wathumba subdivision proposal stalled. The Commonwealth Government offered the Queensland Government money to acquire this block of land to be added to the National Park. The then Conservator of Forests who was responsible for Queensland's National Parks refused to take the money to acquire it because he believed the price to be offered was unreasonably high and too generous. Details of his rejection were suppressed for many years. Proposal to develop the Wathumba Creek block were abandoned for a time.

On 18 February 1976 the owner of the land at Wathumba Creek advertised the Wathumba freehold for sale by auction. FIDO formally wrote to the auctioneer advising him to alert any prospective buyers that any applications for rezoning will be vigorously opposed as well as other impediments to any development for speculative reasons. Notwithstanding this the land was acquired by Mr. Snow Richards of Island Air Pty Ltd for $158,000. Island Air almost immediately sought to exchange the land for vacant crown land next to the Orchid Beach resort. At the end of 1976 FIDO's focus was all on sandmining especially in the latter part of the year with the release of the final report of the Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry. Thus the negotiations for this outrageous land deal was proceeding while FIDO was distracted with the cessation of sandmining.

Deputy Director-General of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Clive Price, negotiated with Snow Richards to swap the 67 hectares of swampy, mosquito and sandfly infested land adjacent to Wathumba Creek on the western side of Fraser Island for 69.9 hectares adjacent to Orchid Beach that Richards then controlled. The NPWS which had no money to acquire the land did not want the inholding at Wathumba Creek. (Richards received almost an extra 3 hectares as a bonus as well as land with much greater amenity). Richards said that he wanted the land to be at Orchid Beach *"for possible future expansion"*.

The Bjelke-Petersen Government approved the land swap in 1977. This land became the site for the subsequent Orchid Beach village. It wasn't until 1979 that the Queensland Lands Minister advised FIDO that Portion 2, Parish of Wathumba had been exchanged for Portion 19.

History of Orchid Beach Resort

Hereditary baronet Sir Reginald Barnwall moved to Hervey Bay in the early 1960s. He had a private aircraft and a passion for flying (particularly commercially). Don Adams, a former Childers cane farmer also with a passion for flying, had begun an agricultural aerial service, Queensland Airplanters which was engaged increasingly in providing air charters to Fraser Island. Adams and Barnwall formed Island Airways and developed this business. During that time Barnwall began lobbying to obtain land on Fraser Island near Waddy Point even though virtually the whole island was gazetted as a State forest. He wanted a site where he could locate an airstrip next to the beach. He chose Orchid Beach because of its proximity to Waddy Point that was then a major magnet to the few privileged fishers who knew it. It was remote and exclusive. Barnwall was then mainly interested in its appeal to fishers. He then pleaded his case to be allowed a large lease in the Fraser Island State Forest. He had an ally in the local Parliamentary Member for Isis, Jack Pizzey, a senior cabinet Minister and future Premier.

His lobbying coincided with many other applications for land to build houses up and down the east coast of Fraser Island. The Forestry Department which was not keen to get involved in such matters sought to rid itself of the eastern strip.

During 1962 and 1963 the Lands Department surveyor Geoff Andrews plotted a layout for the villages Happy Valley and Eurong to better regulate the demand for residential blocks and to restrict all future land releases to these two villages. At the same time the Lands Department surveyed off the Orchid Beach area for the mooted resort and airstrip.

During 1963 the first new subdivisions at Eurong and Happy Valley (where a number of fishing shacks were already located) were auctioned off in Maryborough. Any lessees of other blocks outside the villages on former State Forest leases at Poyungan Valley, The Oaks, and Yidney Rocks were allowed to become Lands Department leases with options to be converted to freehold. There were no leases at Indian Head or Waddy Point.

Barnwall obtained the lease of the Orchid Beach block and work almost immediately began to start creating the resort. Barnwall's first project after completing the airstrip was to build two "Angler's Lodges" which would enable anglers to fly in and fly out. He later built smaller units to cater for other visitors. All of the buildings were for self catering groups (i.e. all tenants had to do their own cooking). Because it was virtually impossible to reach Orchid Beach along the beach from the south due to the steep and loose surface at Middle Rocks, all construction material was taken from Maryborough to Wathumba Creek and then trucked across the island. Much of the freight was carried by Sid Melksham in the *"Lady Fraser"*, a boat he had salvaged from the bottom of the Burnett River.

During 1968 Barnwall decided to advance his grand plans further and to move from the small-self catering units to a big resort. He had decided to build his buildings based on the shape of the Samoan fales based on his Samoan experience. The new central building, the "fono fale", served as the dining room, bar and central amenities area. The new enlarged and extended resort opened. Beryl and Charlie Sinclair (as well as their daughter Margaret) were working there at the time. Larry Anthony (brother of Doug Anthony, then Deputy Prime Minister) was publicity officer.

While offering a pleasant if demanding lifestyle the resort wasn't the financial success he had hoped and so about 1972-73 Barnwall sold out and a new syndicate began to run the resort. It began to deteriorate. The biggest problem was erosion in the Zeta Curve from Waddy Point to Sandy Cape. Cyclone Dinah (February, 72) sliced away more than 50 metres of the foredune in front of the resort. The swimming pool was left perched precariously over a precipice. (After more than a year it cracked and dropped to the beach.) The ambiance of Orchid Beach was rapidly degrading. The cost of flying in most of the supplies took most of the profits. Toowoomba entrepreneur, Snow Richards, who ran Island Air (a successor to Island Airways) provided the main transport. Eventually about 1975 he acquired the resort itself. Despite its decay, it was still promoted as an up-market resort. It was the only place on Fraser Island where there was any casual accommodation available with catering included.

During 1975-76 Island Air prospered during the brief term of sandmining by Dillingham-Murphyores because Island Air had the contract for taking workers between Fraser Island and the mainland with the change of every shift. With the cessation of sandmining at the end of 1976, this lucrative source of revenue for Island Air ended. However while the money was flowing, Richards acquired the Wathumba freehold.

In 1978 the Queensland Government released a Recreation Management Plan for Fraser Island. No mention is made of swapping land at Wathumba for Orchid Beach nor its impact on the recreation on Fraser Island even though the plan recommended the acquisition of freehold blocks at North White Cliffs and Moon Point but then the government failed to provide any funds for the implementation of any recommendations of the Plan. The plan failed on this very critical point.

Development of Orchid Beach Village

In 1979 new Hervey Bay City Council by-laws requiring all rezoning applications to be advertised came into being. Island Air wanted to rezone Portion 19 and anticipated objections from FIDO if FIDO heard about the application. So, even though this new by-law existed, with a complicit Council in 1980 Island Air post-dated its rezoning application to allow Council to deal with it without coming to public attention.

When in 1980 FIDO discovered the application had been post-dated, FIDO challenged its validity. First though, FIDO had to establish legal "standing". In a landmark Supreme Court case FIDO was able to establish that because it was in the business of running safaris to Fraser Island, it had a vested interest and therefore was legally entitled to be an objector. The he application was then deemed invalid.

A company called Belgravia Hotels Pty Ltd lodged a new application for rezoning in 1982. FIDO objected. The Hervey Bay City Council predictably dismissed FIDO's objection and approved the rezoning. FIDO's appealed to the Local Government Court. This frustrated Island Air so it lodged another application for rezoning but the application was invalid because of the appeal still pending for the same land.

While FIDO's appeal to the Local Government Court was still pending in 1983, FIDO was alerted by a "deep throat" that Island Air had substantial legal debts and that Local Government Minister, Russell Hinze, was planning a ministerial rezoning to bail them out. Events moved quickly and soon the Deputy Commissioner for Taxation petitioned for the winding up of Island Air. *(Island Air was profitable only while sandmining continued but had financial problems when it ceased).*

With Minister Hinze ready to rezone pending, FIDO took expensive action in the Queensland Supreme Court seeking an injunction to restrain Minister Hinze on the grounds that he was not acting in the public interest. After a 3-day hearing the Court refused the injunction and the ministerial rezoning went ahead. Minister Hinze unsuccessfully sought to recover over $4000 of Crown costs from FIDO.

The ministerial rezoning allowed for about 75% of the area to be rezoned as Residential with the conditions as proposed by the council that there would be corduroy roads throughout the subdivision, and that no water, power or sewage services would be required to be provided. 29 hectares were zoned for *Special Facilities — Resort.*

During 1984-1991 most of the subdivided land was sold off. Very little had any ocean view. More than half was located in a closed valley with little air circulation to the west of Orchid Beach.

After a year long inquiry headed by Tony Fitzgerald Q.C., the Commission of Inquiry into the Conservation, Management and Use of Fraser Island and the Great Sandy Region recommended in 1991 (page 58, paragraph 1) that: *"Any development on the island should be directed away from the northern half which has extremely high conservation values and is already substantially national park. To the maximum extent practical, the northern half of the Island should be preserved in its natural condition, and activities there confined to wilderness experiences".* The Queensland Government commissioned a study of the options to implement this part of the Fitzgerald Report. The consultants recommended that of the options available, the small resort was the least intrusive on the wilderness qualities and even if a second resort were built (as was threatened) it would not be as intrusive as the more extensive subdivision which was the only alternative without a rezoning.

Queensland's Department of Environment spent $6 million acquiring an unprofitable and dilapidated and from every account unviable resort. It then sneakily negotiated to have the remaining 16 hectares on the hill behind the resort rezoned from "Resort" to "Residential". The DoE didn't explain to any stakeholder groups, other than the beneficiaries (the subdividers) just how they were going to accomplish this by private negotiation with the Hervey Bay City Council. If they had FIDO would have sought to stop it.

The Fitzgerald report was said to be the reason behind the Goss Government's actions although it turned out to be ill-advised thanks to the machinations of the Queensland white shoe brigade which was still alive and well. Environment Minister Tom Barton explained: *"The Government spent $6 million in 1992 to prevent resort development at Orchid Beach and since that time, Orchid Beach has developed into a small holiday/residential township in a wilderness setting."* He couldn't have envisaged the mess that Orchid Beach would become. It is anything but *"a small holiday/residential township in a wilderness setting.)*

Environment Minister, Pat Comben described the negotiations by the DEH Director-General, Craig Emerson, to acquire the former Orchid Beach Resort as normal *"wheeling and dealing"*. The subdividers, QRRP, were required to contribute $1 million to the Queensland Government as they sold off the allotments.
Great Sandy Region Management Plan released in 1994 stated:
"The townships of Orchid Beach, Happy Valley and Eurong primarily are holiday communities with small resident populations providing accommodation and support services for visitors to Fraser Island. (p 85)
"... future development could include development required to serve the visitor population and the residential community associated with visitor activity. It would not include residential development unrelated to economic activity generated by Fraser Island. (p87)
"... The ... airstrip will be taken out of service and part of the area redeveloped as a public helipad." (p99)

There are now estimated to be fewer than 50 residents in Orchid Beach village. The airstrip has never stopped operating.