

Townsville's first plague year – 1900

Trisha Fielding*

The first recorded death from bubonic plague in Australia occurred in Sydney in January 1900. To cope with the potential threat to life that plague posed, the colonial government in Queensland subsequently began planning to erect plague hospitals in towns up and down the coast, including Bundaberg, Maryborough, Rockhampton, Mackay, Bowen, Townsville and Cairns. Over the next three months the disease made its way up the east coast of Australia, infecting coastal ports via the shipping trade. By late April, plague had arrived in Townsville aboard the SS *Cintra*.¹ The existence of the plague hospital erected at Townsville in 1900 has been largely forgotten by the local community. This paper attempts to describe the outbreak itself, and name for the first time all 38 plague sufferers that year, as well as examine the exact nature of the hospital and what happened to it.²

The Adelaide Steamship Company steamer *Cintra* arrived in Cleveland Bay, Townsville on 27 April 1900 with a suspicious case of illness on board. The ship's captain suspected plague and immediately sent word to local medical authorities.³ Dr Ernest Humphry examined the man, who was one of the ship's stewards and he was sufficiently alarmed about the man's symptoms to deny the vessel entry into the port. He instructed Captain Thomson to remain at anchor until he sent word to the authorities in Brisbane. The following day Dr Humphry again examined the patient, 21-year-old Ernest Storm and this time he declared the case of the steward to be one of 'true plague'.⁴ He quarantined the vessel and the *Cintra* made its way to the Quarantine Station at West Point on Magnetic Island, where Storm was immediately removed to the island.⁵ The remaining passengers aboard the *Cintra* weren't landed until the following day, and the process took most of the day. Before the ship's cargo could be landed at the station, it had to be fumigated for 12 hours.

At this time the station at Magnetic Island was occupied by passengers from the *Lady Norman*, a number of whom had measles.⁶ The patients were South Sea Islanders, and this caused some alarm among the *Cintra*'s passengers who objected not only to the inconvenience of being quarantined, but also to being quarantined so near to the measles-stricken 'Kanakas', to quote the language of the day.⁷ Throughout the period of their quarantine, the *Cintra*'s passengers complained bitterly about being detained on the island, citing a shortage of

*Trisha Fielding is currently completing a Masters in History with the University of New England and works for the Townsville City Council. Her publication *Flinders Street Townsville: A Pictorial History* received a High Commendation at the National Trust of Queensland Awards in 2010.

food supplies.⁸ Among them were two members of the Labor party, John Dunsford and Anderson Dawson, of Charters Towers, who went to the extent of complaining to the Premier, Robert Philp, to no effect.

Tensions arose because the ship's passengers didn't believe that the sick steward actually had plague. When another steward, 23-year-old Walter Garde became ill, they still refused to believe that bubonic plague was the affliction. The first patient, Ernest Storm was recovering from his illness, so it probably seemed unlikely to those quarantined on the island that he had ever had plague in the first place. Disagreement among the local medical profession as to whether or not the sick man had plague only added to the confusion. Dr Humphry was adamant that Garde had bubonic plague, while the quarantine medical officer Dr William Routh believed that Garde had typhoid, not plague.⁹ Routh's diagnosis was not surprising considering Townsville had never experienced an outbreak of plague before.

Plague is a disease found in rats caused by the bacteria *Yersinia pestis*. It is spread to humans through infected fleas. In humans, there are three different



SS Cintra, 1979 tons.

(Photograph by Allan C Green, courtesy State Library of Victoria)

types of plague:
b u b o n i c
plague, which
infects the
lymph glands;
s e p t i c a e m i c
plague, where
the infection
invades the
bloodstream;
and pneumonic
plague, where
the infection
reaches the
lungs. Bubonic
plague is
c o n t r a c t e d

when bitten by an infected flea, or by handling an infected animal. Symptoms such as swelling of the lymph nodes (causing painful lumps known as 'buboes'), fever, headache, chills and extreme fatigue can occur within days. In the Middle Ages, a disease known as the 'Black Death', which was thought to be bubonic plague, killed somewhere between one-third and half the population of Europe. The word 'plague' itself carries connotations of fear and horror and has incited panic throughout history, so it is surprising that north Queenslanders reacted to the disease with such apathy. The colonial government however, did take the threat of plague seriously.

Dr Alfred Jefferis Turner arrived in Townsville under government



Portrait of Dr Alfred Jefferis Turner, n.d.
(Picture Queensland Collection, State Library of
Queensland)

instructions in mid-May. Turner was a paediatrician and amateur entomologist who was also the first resident surgeon at the Hospital for Sick Children in Brisbane. At this time, Turner had already been influential in helping to reduce the mortality rate of Queensland's children. He introduced the diphtheria anti-toxin in 1895, and in collaboration with John Lockhart Gibson diagnosed hookworm-induced anaemia in 1892 and lead poisoning in 1897.¹⁰ He later played an instrumental role in establishing an infant and maternal health care system in Queensland. Most importantly for Townsville, Turner played a pivotal role during the 1900 outbreak of bubonic plague.

By the time Dr Turner arrived in Townsville, Walter Garde had died and been hastily buried at West Point.

The *North Queensland Herald* voiced doubts about the cause of death:

During last week a plague patient died at the Townsville quarantine, and a rat with bubonic bacillus in its blood was found in that town. We speak of the deceased man Gard [sic] as a plague patient though the opinion is held by many that typhoid fever was the cause of death.¹¹

The local media sought Dr Turner's opinion as soon as he arrived, but he refused to comment on Garde's case as he had not been able to examine the man while he was alive. On the question of the possibility of exhumation, Dr Turner remarked, quite matter-of-factly, 'It is useless to exhume the body. The man has been dead six days.'¹² However, Dr Turner did test the first patient's blood (Ernest Storm) and found plague bacilli, proving that Dr Humphry's diagnosis was correct.¹³

Typhoid is listed as the cause of death on Walter Garde's death certificate and as a consequence he may not be counted in official figures for plague cases

but it remains a possibility that Garde had plague. Humphry's diagnosis of the first plague patient had been correct and Garde's high fever was accompanied by glandular swellings, a classic symptom of plague.¹⁴ Additionally, both Garde and Storm were stewards aboard the *Cintra* and may have slept in close proximity. Although bubonic plague cannot be spread through person-to-person contact, the fleas from infected rats may have been amongst the stewards' personal effects and sleeping gear aboard the ship.

Dr Turner was concerned about the quarantine arrangements at West Point, should any cases occur on the mainland. The station, which had been in use since the 1880s, was particularly difficult to access in bad weather and Turner felt it would be unfair to transport a dangerously sick patient across the harbour to West Point.¹⁵ Consequently, on 17 May an officer of the Works Department in Brisbane was sent to Townsville to supervise the erection of a plague hospital. The site chosen by the municipal health committee was an area of 50 acres, described as being 'on Three Mile Creek' on the Town Common.¹⁶ The area was considered suitable as it was hilly and had a good supply of water. Until the plague hospital could be built, a dozen tents were sent over from the quarantine station on Magnetic Island to temporarily house any further plague patients.¹⁷ This initial tent-phase of the plague hospital appears to be the way the community in Townsville remember the hospital, with little or no memory of the buildings that were erected later that year.

The cost of constructing and equipping the plague hospital was to be borne by the Government, along with a two-thirds contribution towards the cost of maintenance, including salaries.¹⁸ The Works Officer, William Munro arrived in Townsville on 22 May and set about assessing tenders for construction of the hospital. The hospital was to consist of two wards with ten beds each, nurses' quarters, kitchen, doctor's quarters and offices.¹⁹ The tender was awarded to a local contractor, Arthur Reid, who agreed to erect a ruberoid building within just three weeks, for a cost of £500.²⁰

No further cases of plague were diagnosed until early June, although two men were quarantined in May as a precaution after they had been in contact with an infected rat. One of them was actually bitten by the rat. The *North Queensland Register* described the episode as 'a dangerous lark':

A sensation was caused in town today when it was reported that a plague-stricken rat had been captured in the vicinity of the Queen's Park Hotel, North Ward. The excitement was further intensified when the news was circulated that Mr Monteith, a well-known local British Association football player, had been bitten on the hand by the rat. It appears that a number of lads were chasing the rat, all eager to obtain the coveted sixpence, and several men also became engaged in the 'lark'. Monteith seized the rat, when it turned and bit him on the knuckle of the fore finger of the right hand. He became alarmed, and went to Dr Bacot, at the hospital, who cauterised the wound, and allowed Monteith to leave. The rat was also sent to the hospital to be analysed and Dr Bacot made an examination of it, and discovered as the result a quantity of plague bacillus.²¹

A man named John Christiansen also came into close contact with the rat during this incident, and while Dr Bacot was confident that the men would not contract plague, they were quarantined at West Point for approximately a week.²² The ‘coveted sixpence’ referred to a bounty on rats offered by the local authorities in order to decrease the rat population and hopefully reduce the risk of plague getting a foothold in the town.

On 6 June, the first case of plague in Townsville itself was discovered.²³ The patient was a seven-year-old boy named Glendinning, who was the son of the proprietress of a boarding house in Sturt Street. The Health Officer Dr Linford Row alerted Dr Turner, who confirmed plague after a bacteriological examination. Mrs Elizabeth Glendinning’s family and guests, which included five women, three children and 10 men were immediately isolated. The boy Glendinning was sent off to the unfinished plague hospital and attended to by Dr Routh who had been engaged at £30 per week to attend those quarantined.²⁴ Security at the hospital was considered especially important and two special constables were sworn-in to guard the quarantine area.²⁵

Mrs Glendinning’s boarding house was located next to the Hollis Hopkins warehouse in Sturt Street, and a dead rat found in the vicinity of the house a few days earlier was thought to be the possible source of infection. The boy’s case was only a mild one and he recovered from the illness but nevertheless the boarding house was condemned to be burnt down.²⁶ It is unclear whether the entire building was destroyed, or just part of it. On 21 June, the *Brisbane Courier* reported:

The Townsville boarding-house where the first case of plague occurred was burned tonight by the Fire Brigade, canvas screens having been erected to protect the adjoining buildings, which were kept drenched.²⁷

There is little evidence to suggest that destruction by fire was the usual course of action for dealing with infected premises in Townsville, although it may have happened more than once. To compensate for the destruction of furniture and goods during the disinfection process, Elizabeth Glendinning applied to the Town Clerk for the sum of £22 2s.²⁸

Dr Turner was dismayed at the unsanitary condition of Townsville streets and he advised the municipal council that the duration and impact of the plague outbreak in Townsville would be determined by their efforts at making rapid improvements. He recommended the wholesale poisoning of rats, the distribution of information leaflets to householders, and the clearing of the city of rubbish.²⁹ In a letter to the Mayor and Aldermen of the Townsville Municipal Council dated 8 June, Dr Turner was scathing in his assessment of the council’s efforts:

Your sanitary staff is ridiculously defective. You have only one inspector of nuisances, who is also, I am informed, inspector of water-taps, inspector of dogs and goats, collector of sanitary rates, and has other duties also. Further-more, at the present critical juncture he has been ill, and I am not aware that any deputy

has been appointed in his place.³⁰

Turner further scolded the council for not implementing recommendations that Dr Row had made in March, urging the cleansing of the city:

Not a single backyard has yet been cleansed by the municipality. Notices have been sent to householders, some of whom have done some cleaning up. Others have done nothing whatever, but not a single householder has yet been fined for his neglect. In the same letter the removal of rubbish from vacant allotments was advocated. Nothing has as yet been done in this direction. He has given advice regarding cleansing of drains. In spite of this the other evening, walking down Flinders-street, the main street of your city, I observed such a variety of stenches as I have not met since I visited the Chinese city of Shanghai.³¹



Ross Creek, Townsville, n.d.

(Photograph courtesy of City Libraries Local History Collection)

Turner's observation of the filth in Flinders Street is probably fair and workplaces in the street were the suspected source of infection for many of those who contracted plague. However the occurrence of plague in Townsville had more to do with the conditions that prevailed at workplaces, such as wharves and shops than with domestic living conditions. The majority of plague patients in Townsville in 1900 worked in hotels, grocer's shops, wharves or nearby; or they lived in close proximity to Ross Creek, where ship's cargo was unloaded regularly. As would be expected given the general makeup of the workforce at this time, the victims were overwhelmingly male, and three of the five women who did contract the disease had husbands whose jobs were in these industries.

The first person on the Townsville mainland to die from plague was George Frank, a 64-year-old night watchman at Burns Philp and Co.'s wharves. There is probably little doubt that the wharves were the source of his infection, however, coincidentally Frank lived almost opposite Elizabeth Glendinning's boarding house, in Sturt Street.³² Doctors Row and Bacot diagnosed plague and moved the sick man and four other contacts to the plague hospital. On 24 June, after only four days at the hospital, George Frank died and was buried in the grounds of the plague hospital.³³ About six weeks later, John Wright, who had been in contact with George Frank, applied to the Town Clerk for £10 compensation for goods destroyed during the disinfection of the house Frank had lived in.³⁴ The house may have been fully or partially destroyed, as with Glendinning's boarding house.³⁵

After a relatively slow start, the plague outbreak became more serious in July, as another eight people contracted the disease. On 10 July, the Reverend Ward, from St James Cathedral was diagnosed with a mild case of plague and moved to the newly completed plague hospital on the Town Common. The contacts were isolated at the rectory, and included Canon Boag, Reverend Morris and a servant. *The North Queensland Herald* was quick to suggest that there was no room for suspicion that the rectory was the source of infection, so it was, in their view, perfectly acceptable for the clergyman's contacts to be isolated at the rectory, rather than quarantined at the plague hospital.³⁶ The inference here was that the plague was a disease that only affected unclean, or poor, people. Asian races were particularly singled out in the press as the perceived source of infectious diseases. Before the outbreak began in the north, the *Brisbane Courier* carried this report from the *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, on 7 March 1900:

In North Queensland ports, where the disease may now any day appear, it is assuredly incumbent on the local authorities to carefully watch those neighbourhoods where Asiatics and Polynesians congregate. We stand in greater danger from the bubonic plague here than do other portions of Australia, because of the larger proportion of these races in our population.³⁷

Reverend Ward recovered but the next two cases were fatal. Peter Backland was a 33-year-old yardman at the *Imperial Hotel* who was well enough to still be working on Tuesday 24 July, but whose condition deteriorated so rapidly that he died the following night.³⁸ Hotel employees were particularly vulnerable to contracting plague because part of their duties involved collecting and transporting guests' luggage to and from the wharves. When Backland was diagnosed, the *Imperial Hotel* was quarantined and 35 guests, 16 servants, and seven members of the licensee's family were isolated.³⁹ This must have been inconvenient for all concerned, particularly the hotel's licensees, Mr and Mrs Edward Byrne, who could not trade during the five-day period of quarantine. Mrs Byrne expressed her frustration in a letter to her son:

For a few days while the fumigation business was going on we breathed phenyle, swallowed nothing else but abominable fumes, and everything and everybody was stamped with a look of sulphury and melancholy dejection.⁴⁰

The next case was a Chinese man named Chong Yeong, a 22-year-old fruiterer. Dr Row reported the case on 25 July and noted that Chong had contracted the disease at his place of employment, Ah Coo's shop.⁴¹ Despite being initially reported as a mild case, Chong Yeong died on 31 July. The other cases that followed in July were: William James Walsh, 25, employed by the Defence Force at the Magazine Island fort; John O'Connell, a merchant's clerk at Rooney & Co.; James Waldie, a firewood merchant; John Thompson, a boarder at a local hotel; and a man named Kennedy.⁴² All were taken to the plague hospital with the exception of Thompson who reportedly gave a false name and promptly disappeared.⁴³ William Walsh, who had been diagnosed on 27 July, was discharged as recovered on 17 August, only to relapse and be sent back to the plague hospital.⁴⁴

The height of the outbreak came during August, with 24 cases diagnosed. The first case of the month resulted in death. A man named William McBurney, a labourer who resided at the *Great Britain Hotel* in South Townsville was found dead under a tree outside the hotel.⁴⁵ A disagreement ensued about the handling of the body, particularly regarding who should bury the man. The undertaker, Francis Heatley, along with the assistance of two local constables – Jackson and Langdon – removed the body to the morgue but after Doctors Row and Humphry conducted a post-mortem examination and diagnosed plague, Mr Heatley reportedly refused to conduct the burial.⁴⁶ It seems the local police were expected to arrange to bury anyone found dead in a public street. No information has been found on where McBurney was laid to rest. Strangely, McBurney's death certificate is almost blank, recording little more than his name, and his death wasn't registered until the following year, on 31 May 1901.⁴⁷

The non-fatal cases that followed were: a 9-year-old boy named Long; a man named Ford; a 23-year-old man named George Smith, who worked at Johnson and Castling's butcher shop in Flinders Street, near Victoria Bridge; Mrs Fanny Healy, 65, who resided opposite the State School in German (now Belgian) Gardens; Mrs Henrietta Walker, 49, who lived near Hof's brickyard in West End; Bryan Connors, a recent arrival from Sydney; Bernard Christopherson, a 33-year-old Norwegian sailor who had deserted from his ship; Albert Selly, a 45-year-old storeman; and Hannah Neal, a 16-year-old servant girl.⁴⁸

The next death was a Chinese gardener named John Hang, who resided near the *Rising Sun Hotel*, on the road to Ross River. After a bacteriological examination, Dr Turner confirmed plague and ordered the man be taken to the plague hospital. The resident surgeon Dr Routh thought that John Hang's condition was unlikely to improve and ordered that a coffin and two attendants

be sent to the plague hospital, in anticipation of the man's swift demise.⁴⁹ On 20 August the *North Queensland Register* reported that the Townsville newspaper the *Star* found this amusing, and suggested that John Hang was doing as well as could be expected and was likely to pull through:

That even the bubonic plague can occasionally give rise to a little humour has been demonstrated during the last few days. It appears that the condition of the Chinaman, John Hang, was such on Tuesday as to lead Dr Routh to conclude that his case was hopeless. With the view to expedite the patient's burial in the event of death the doctor wrote suggesting that a coffin and two men be sent out to the Hospital to attend the interment. Dr Row in due course had the request complied with, but when the grave diggers with the coffin arrived on the scene John's temperature had fallen, and he soon showed signs of reviving.⁵⁰

Far from being amusing, John Hang was dead before this particular edition of the Register even went to print. A small mention was made of his death in the supplement of the same edition. He was interred in the burial ground attached to the plague hospital.⁵¹

The next six cases that followed were all non-fatal: Bernard Stevens, a 40-year-old labourer from Palmer Street; William Hansen, a 32-year-old employee of the Cardwell meat works; John Burke, a 35-year-old labourer employed to erect fencing at Cluden; Francis Hipworth, an 8-year-old boy from South Townsville; a man named Phillip James, who arrived from Cairns aboard the steamer *Aramac*; and John Septimus Satchell, a 28-year-old storeman from Stagpole Street in West End.⁵²

The next death was another Chinese man, named Ah Wah, who lived alone in a humpy at Acacia Vale, four miles from town. When Ah Wah was found, he had been without food or water for three days.⁵³ His case was described as serious and a week later he was dead.⁵⁴ Three more non-fatal cases followed Ah Wah. They were: Mrs Mary Flannery, 22, from Philp Street, Hermit Park, whose husband was an orderman for a local butcher; William Rickers, a 35-year-old labourer from Bell Street, South Townsville; and Jeanette Vigne, a single, 27-year-old woman residing at the Immigration Depot on Ross Island.⁵⁵ Jeanette had arrived in Townsville on 10 August from France aboard the *Duke of Norfolk*.⁵⁶

On 25 August, Thomas Maclean, the 37-year-old proprietor of the *Commercial Hotel* in Flinders Street was diagnosed with plague by local medical practitioner Dr Jack.⁵⁷ He isolated Maclean at the hotel, as the man was considered so ill that moving him would have endangered his life. The entire hotel was subsequently isolated.⁵⁸ Maclean was dead within days and instead of being interred in the grounds of the plague hospital, was buried at the West End Cemetery. The burial register records that Maclean was buried an 'extra four feet deep'.⁵⁹ The extra depth of the grave involved further expense for Maclean's family. The normal cost of the burial was £2, and the extra depth cost another £1 1s.

The last plague death to occur in Townsville that year was Jane Duffy, a 36-year-old married mother, from Tully Street in South Townsville.⁶⁰ When Jane died, she left behind three daughters: Mary, 13 years, Annie, 11 years and Jane, 8 years. Her husband Charles, who was employed by the Adelaide Steamship Company, was left to care for his three daughters alone. Six years earlier, Jane had given birth to twins Charles and Katherine, who both died within days of their birth. There seems to have been some controversy over Jane Duffy's treatment, particularly involving Dr Turner.⁶¹ Newspaper reports describe a protest meeting attended by 2000 people on 1 October where Charles Duffy was invited by the Mayor to discuss the circumstances in connection with his wife's case.⁶² Emotions were running high and public opinion was such that at this meeting, a resolution was passed to urgently appeal to the government for the recall of Dr Turner.⁶³ The widespread denial about the nature of the disease and the simmering resentment that had been building in the town ever since the first discovery of bubonic plague had built up into outright distrust.

The last three cases of plague in Townsville in 1900 were all non-fatal, they were: Charles Kennedy, a 12-year-old boy from Palmer Street in South Townsville; Lawrence Killian, a railway employee from West End; and a 25-year-old man named Cockerill, a blacksmith living in West End.⁶⁴ This case created a sensation in the town when the man's father, Henry Cockerill, refused to allow his son to be taken to the plague hospital. The plague cart, along with two doctors and the sergeant of police, attempted to remove the patient, but a crowd of between 300 and 400 onlookers assembled, cheering on Henry Cockerill for resisting the removal of his son.⁶⁵ Cockerill sent for Dr Bacot who had previously treated his son for a broken leg but police refused to allow him to enter the house. Eventually, the doctors and ambulance cart went home with the standoff unresolved.

Cockerill Jnr remained quarantined in his own home for 10 days under the guard of four police constables. In the early hours of Wednesday 26 September the plague ambulance was sent to Mr Cockerill's house and shortly afterwards Drs Row and Turner, accompanied by Inspector Meldrum, Sergeant Moylan, and two constables; arrived at the house, intent on taking the sick man to the plague hospital. This time Henry Cockerill heeded the advice of the police, who by this time numbered eight, and offered no further opposition to the removal of his son.⁶⁶ Despite both Dr Row and Dr Turner having diagnosed plague, Henry Cockerill wanted a third opinion, that of Dr Bacot, from the Townsville Hospital. Why he thought that Dr Bacot would be any more qualified than the two doctors who had already attended his son, is something of a mystery. Dr Bacot had treated the young man previously, so the father may have wanted the opinion of someone that he already trusted. The most likely reason is that Henry was probably terrified that if his son went to the plague hospital, he might never see him again. The families of plague victims

were forbidden to visit their relative at the plague hospital and in the event of death, were denied the opportunity to attend their funeral and mourn at the graveside. Cockerill Jnr made a full recovery, but the circumstances of his case only served to increase Turner and Row's unpopularity.

The Central Board of Health subsequently received a telegram from Dr Row complaining that Dr Bacot had sent a letter to the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* ridiculing the plague precautions. He also said that Dr Bacot's actions throughout the epidemic had been 'most embarrassing, and the principal cause of trouble in Cockerill's case'.⁶⁷ The incident sparked considerable discussion about the powers of health officers, particularly the powers of Dr Turner and Dr Row. Ultimately the Central Board of Health decided that unless Dr Row, as Health Officer, agreed to quarantine in a private house, the patient must go to the plague hospital.



Adelaide Steamship Company Wharf, Townsville, c.1900.

(Photograph courtesy of City Libraries Local History Collection)

The *North Queensland Herald* argued that after the incident with Cockerill and his son, people would no longer be willing to allow their family members to be taken away from them to the plague hospital. Since the police did so little to enforce the regulations, the newspaper was of the opinion that people should be allowed to be quarantined in their own homes. On 24 September the

North Queensland Herald reported:

Mr Cockrell's action has, however, precipitated matters; for it is not to be expected, after his success in forcing the hand of the Health Authorities, that others will submit to having their nearest and dearest taken from them unnecessarily when sick, to fight with the disease in the 'egg incubators' on the Town Common.⁶⁸

The unflattering comments about the facilities at the plague hospital did not go unanswered by Dr Turner who felt that the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* (which was the most likely source of this information for the *North Queensland Herald*) had been unfair in its reportage. He wrote:

The leading article published in yesterday's *Bulletin*, contains statements regarding the Plague Hospital which are misleading and can only raise unreasonable prejudice among the public. These wards are at present cool and comfortable, and after the projected alterations now being completed will be superior to those of any other Plague Hospital in Queensland, with the doubtful exception of that in Brisbane, which I have not seen. It should be tolerably well-known in Townsville that the 'Bulletin' is inspired in medical matters by Dr Bacot, and it is in fact his mouthpiece.⁶⁹

Public memory of the plague hospital at Townsville in 1900 is of a tent-hospital only and this is possibly because archival records relating to the plague hospital are so scant. However it is known that Arthur Reid received £500 to build a hospital that could accommodate 20 patients. In September improvements were made to the original hospital by a contractor named Dawson. This included the construction of 270 feet (over 82 metres) of verandahs and covered ways, the alteration of over 50 fixed skylights to movable ones, and the painting of the building inside and out with refrigerating paint.⁷⁰ The staff of the hospital consisted of: resident surgeon, head nurse, assistant nurse, wardsman, cook, assistant cook, messenger, water carter and ambulance carter.⁷¹ The grounds included stables for the ambulance horse and cart and the hospital was connected to the town by a telephone line.⁷²

The most telling evidence about the possible size of the plague hospital lies in the list of buildings and equipment sold at auction in May 1903. In March that year cyclone *Leonta* destroyed virtually all that was left of the abandoned plague hospital. Auctioneer, RA Wakeford reported on the condition of the buildings after the cyclone:

The windmill is now lying flat on the ground and is more or less damaged, the main building is completely wrecked, and the other buildings are more or less rendered useless, except as old building material. The whole of the furniture and bedding has been wet and although now dry and covered, the damage is very noticeable, the wire mattresses and stretchers being rusty and the fibre mattresses are all slightly spotted with mildew.⁷³

Before the cyclone Wakeford had reported to Dr Humphry that the buildings were in fair order and condition but that white ants were present and in some of the buildings the ruberoid was considerably damaged.⁷⁴ After the cyclone

he recommended that the sale be held on site, rather than going to the expense of bringing the furniture and building materials into town. Included in the account of sale were seven buildings, 67 window sashes, 37 fibre mattresses, 12 canvas stretchers, 19 wire stretchers, 22 blankets, 14 tents, 4 copper boilers, 2 water tanks and a windmill. The building noted as 'Building no. 1' was sold for £24 and was probably the 'main building' referred to in Wakeford's letter to Dr Humphry. Buildings two and three fetched £6 and £7 each respectively, suggesting possibly doctor's and nurses quarters, while the remaining four buildings only fetched a few pounds between them. These were probably just small outbuildings, one of which may have been the remains of the stables. In total, the sale raised £81 7s.⁷⁵

Albert Burry may have been the wardsman at the plague hospital as he was allowed to stay on with his family after the 1900 outbreak in exchange for looking after the property. He remained as caretaker until after the buildings were sold at auction. Burry was paid £3 12s for labour costs for arranging for the sale of furniture and buildings at the hospital.⁷⁶ In keeping with the relative silence that surrounds this first outbreak of plague in Townsville, a living descendant of Albert Burry cannot recall ever hearing her grandparents talk about plague or of their having been caretakers at the hospital on the Town Common.⁷⁷ Despite the fact that plague had a significant effect on the lives of many people at this time, the subject of plague became taboo within these families, effectively shrouding this era of Townsville's history in almost complete secrecy.

The precise location of the plague hospital and its associated cemetery is unknown. The cemetery was never officially gazetted. A hand-drawn map exists that shows the plague hospital at Three Mile Creek but for a number of reasons it is difficult to judge the authenticity of this document.⁷⁸ Firstly, the map is not to scale. Additionally, the map was drawn in 1981 from a sketch made of the area in 1907, seven years after the plague hospital was built and four years after what remained of the hospital buildings had been sold at auction.⁷⁹ The cemetery that was located in the grounds of the plague hospital may contain the graves of at least seven bubonic plague victims but for now the location of the graves remains a mystery.

Endnotes

¹ *Brisbane Courier*, 30 April 1900.

² Official number of plague cases recorded was 37, but this may not have included Walter Garde, as his death was recorded as typhoid.

³ *Brisbane Courier*, 30 April 1900.

⁴ *North Queensland Herald [NQH]*, 30 April 1900.

⁵ *NQH*, 30 April 1900.

⁶ *Brisbane Courier*, 30 April 1900.

⁷ *Brisbane Courier*, 1 May 1900.

⁸ *Brisbane Courier*, 9 May 1900.

⁹ *Brisbane Courier*, 8 May 1900.

- ¹⁰ John M Thearle, 'Turner, Alfred Jefferis (1861–1947)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/turner-alfred-jefferis/883/text15601>, accessed 20 April 2011.
- ¹¹ *NQH*, 14 May 1900.
- ¹² *NQH*, 14 May 1900.
- ¹³ *Brisbane Courier*, 16 May 1900.
- ¹⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald* [*SMH*], 3 May 1900.
- ¹⁵ *NQH*, 14 May 1900.
- ¹⁶ *NQH*, 21 May 1900.
- ¹⁷ *NQH*, 21 May 1900; *Queenslander*, 26 May 1900.
- ¹⁸ Queensland State Archives [QSA], 18166, Letter from Mr Willmett to the Joint Epidemic Board, 14 July 1900.
- ¹⁹ *NQH*, 28 May 1900.
- ²⁰ *NQH*, 4 June 1900.
- ²¹ *North Queensland Register* [*NQR*], 14 May 1900.
- ²² *Queenslander*, 26 May 1900.
- ²³ *Brisbane Courier*, 7 June 1900.
- ²⁴ *Brisbane Courier*, 7 June 1900.
- ²⁵ *Brisbane Courier*, 9 June 1900.
- ²⁶ *NQR*, 18 June 1900.
- ²⁷ *Brisbane Courier*, 21 June 1900.
- ²⁸ QSA, 18166, Letter to the Home Secretary from Townsville Town Clerk, 10 August 1900.
- ²⁹ *Brisbane Courier*, 22 June 1900.
- ³⁰ *Brisbane Courier*, 22 June 1900.
- ³¹ *Brisbane Courier*, 22 June 1900.
- ³² QSA, 18166, Telegram from Linford Row to Home Secretary, 20 June 1900; *Brisbane Courier*, 21 June 1900.
- ³³ Death Certificate of George Frank, Registration no. 1900/004301.
- ³⁴ QSA, 18166, Letter to the Home Secretary from Townsville Town Clerk, 10 August 1900.
- ³⁵ *Brisbane Courier*, 22 June 1900.
- ³⁶ *NQH*, 16 July 1900.
- ³⁷ *Brisbane Courier*, 7 March 1900.
- ³⁸ *NQH*, 30 July 1900.
- ³⁹ *SMH*, 26 July 1900.
- ⁴⁰ *Cairns Morning Post* [*CMP*], 1 August 1900.
- ⁴¹ QSA, 18166, Record of Cases of Bubonic Plague, week ending 28 July, 1900, signed by Dr Linford Row.
- ⁴² QSA, 18166, Record of Cases of Bubonic Plague, week ending 28 July, 1900, signed by Dr Linford Row; *Brisbane Courier*, 1 August 1900; *Queenslander*, 4 August 1900; *SMH*, 23 August 1900.
- ⁴³ *Queenslander*, 4 August 1900.
- ⁴⁴ *SMH*, 23 August 1900.
- ⁴⁵ *Townsville Daily Bulletin* [*TDB*], 13 September 1900.
- ⁴⁶ *TDB*, 13 September 1900.
- ⁴⁷ Death Certificate of William McBurney, Registration no. 1901/4554.
- ⁴⁸ *SMH*, 3 August 1900; *NQH*, 13 August 1900; *SMH*, 13 August 1900; *NQR*, 27 August 1900.
- ⁴⁹ *NQR*, 20 August 1900.
- ⁵⁰ *NQR*, 20 August 1900.
- ⁵¹ *NQR*, 20 August 1900.

- ⁵² *NQH*, 20 August 1900; *SMH*, 20 and 23 August 1900; *Brisbane Courier*, 21 August 1900; *The Argus*, 22 August 1900; *NQR*, 27 August 1900.
- ⁵³ *SMH*, 23 August 1900.
- ⁵⁴ *The Argus*, 29 August 1900.
- ⁵⁵ *NQR*, 27 August 1900.
- ⁵⁶ QSA, 13086, Register of Immigrant Ships Arrivals, Rolls M471, M473, M1075, M1696–1710.
- ⁵⁷ *NQH*, 27 August 1900.
- ⁵⁸ *SMH*, 27 August 1900.
- ⁵⁹ West End Cemetery Burial Register, held by CityLibraries, Townsville City Council (TCC).
- ⁶⁰ *NQH*, 3 September 1900.
- ⁶¹ Michael J Thearle in his PhD thesis (1987) ‘Dr Alfred Jefferis Turner (1861-1947): His contribution to medicine in Queensland’ believes that Dr Turner stopped Jane Duffy’s funeral and ordered that her body be taken to the Plague Hospital for burial.
- ⁶² *Brisbane Courier*, 2 October 1900.
- ⁶³ *Brisbane Courier*, 2 October 1900.
- ⁶⁴ *SMH*, 3 September 1900; *SMH*, 17 September 1900; *NQH*, 17 September 1900.
- ⁶⁵ *SMH*, 17 September 1900.
- ⁶⁶ *NQH*, 1 October 1900.
- ⁶⁷ *Brisbane Courier*, 20 September 1900.
- ⁶⁸ *NQH*, 24 September 1900.
- ⁶⁹ *NQH*, 24 September 1900.
- ⁷⁰ *NQH*, 24 September 1900.
- ⁷¹ *NQH*, 24 September 1900.
- ⁷² *NQH*, 24 September 1900.
- ⁷³ QSA, 18166, Letter from Wakeford Bros to Dr E Humphry, 15 April 1903.
- ⁷⁴ QSA, 18166, Letter from Wakeford Bros to Dr E Humphry, 15 April 1903.
- ⁷⁵ QSA, 18166, Account of Sale of buildings and furniture (old Plague Hospital) sold by order and on account of Dr E Humphry, Govt. Health Officer, 30 May 1903.
- ⁷⁶ QSA, 18166, Payment slip, Wakeford Bros. – Auctioneers, 26 May 1903.
- ⁷⁷ Private communication with author via telephone, 19 November 2010.
- ⁷⁸ TCC, Historical Plan number TPH24.
- ⁷⁹ To date, the original sketch on which this later map was based has not been located.