

Peat and Milson Islands Mental Hospital

1936 – 1973

Details

Peat and Milson Islands Mental Hospital was a government run institution established in 1936. It was previously known as the Rabbit Island Mental Hospital. It was run by the Inspector General of Mental Hospitals until 1958. In 1973 it had a name change and became known as Peat Island Hospital.

Peat and Milson Islands Mental Hospital was an institution for people considered to be 'mentally defective' or 'feeble-minded' to use the language used at the time.

Early on there was no attempt to provide anything more for inmates than the basics of shelter and food. 'Treatment' involved cleanliness, but there was no physical or emotional support or therapy, or rehabilitation. Indeed, those who were able were expected to carry out heavy labour to maintain and improve the facility.

The stone causeway which connected Peat Island to the mainland in 1957, for example, was constructed by inmates with assistance from the Public Works Department. This was hard physical labour involving timber cutting, quarrying, and lifting and dumping rubble.

Patients were there to be controlled rather than given care. Laila Ellmoos lists some of the practices in use; they included the use of straitjackets (euphemistically called 'camisoles'), sedatives like paraldehyde, and chloral hydrate mixed with bromide and opium, and at the extreme end, physical violence directed by staff towards patients.

The first school on the island for boys was not opened until 1948, with classes given by the nursing staff. A Department of Education school opened in 1951.

Laila Ellmoos describes the prevailing conditions at the institution in the first part of the twentieth century in terms of numbers:

There were 601 boys and men admitted to Rabbit and Milson Islands between 1911 and 1930, 60 percent of whom were aged between 16 and 30. Of the overall population, over half died while in care, while a third of those who survived were transferred to other institutions. Only 48 were discharged. Most of those who died while in care had limited or no contact with their families.

At its peak in the 1950s there were 610 men and boys living on Peat Island. Over 3,000 people lived in the hospital during its century of operation.

From the middle of the 1960s onwards there was a shift towards both professionalisation of nursing staff, and to a different understanding of care for the residents on Peat and Milson Islands. The dependence on patient labour

was phased out, and patients began receiving rehabilitative and therapeutic care, as well as education and training.

In 1971-1972 the Milson Island facility, which was obsolete and a fire risk, was evacuated.

More info

Chronology

- Rabbit Island Hospital for the Insane (1910 - 1917?)
 - Rabbit Island Mental Hospital (1917? - 1936)
- **Peat and Milson Islands Mental Hospital (1936 – 1973)**
 - Peat Island Hospital (1973 - 1989)
 - Peat Island Centre (1989 - 2010)

Related Entries

Run by

- [Inspector General of Mental Hospitals \(1917 - 1958\)](#)
- [Director of State Psychiatric Services \(1958 - 1973\)](#)

Resources

- Sutton, Candace, [Haunting pictures from inside the secret island asylum that was Australia's 'One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest' where naked young patients were once kept caged and spent their whole lives banished from society](#), 29 October 2014

Records

For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

Records

- [Rabbit, Peat and Milson Island Mental Hospital records, State Archives NSW \(1910 - 1980\)](#)

You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/peat-and-milson-islands-mental-hospital/>