

Island in the middle

Mar 1, 2002 - © [Philippa Jane Ballantine](#)

Wellington harbor is surely one of the most beautiful in the world; an almost full circle, with only a relatively narrow. But at the center of the harbor are two islands. One of which Matiu/Some Island has developed a mysterious, and haunted legend.

The legendary Maori explorer Kupe found this like the rest of Wellington, and it was named Matiu. The tribes who followed after him, saw the island as an excellent place to live, for both its defensive capabilities and it's sloping hillsides, which made excellent places to grow kumara (sweet potato).

But with the coming of European settlers to the area, that all changed, and very dramatically for the island. Least of all was the imposition of an English name upon it, Somes Island, after the English brothers who were responsible for funding the immigrant ship Tory. These newcomers placed guns atop Somes Island in an attempt to frighten the local Maori.

For the next few decades the island remained a public reserve, mainly used recreationally. In 1865 Somes hosted the first harbor light in Wellington harbor, and a series of lighthouse keepers made sure that the flame kept burning. One of the most personable was the delightfully name Captain Lancelot Holmes, who became a local celebrity. He was a magnificent seaman, and one of the first to see Somes become a quarantine station.

When he boarded the ship England and found cases of smallpox, he was sworn in as a special constable, and Somes declared a quarantine hospital. It was the beginning of the island's new occupation, one that it would have for many years. Immigrants were cleared through Somes Island before being allowed onto the mainland. The new nation was keen to guard against diseases as measles, typhoid and smallpox. New arrivals were put through a smoke house, to purge them of these afflictions. Many people, especially children, died on the island.

One of the worst stories that the island holds is of an immigrant from China who arrived in 1903 Kim Lee. It was discovered he had leprosy, and those already on the island were terrified of the disease. As a result he was put on an isolated inlet, where flying fox delivered his food. He was pretty much denied human contact, and died alone.

During the World War One, the island was used to keep Germans confined. Germans had been a large immigrant group in the previous years, but with WWI jingoistic fever gripped the nation. New Zealanders saw spies everywhere, and so those Germans who the authorities considered dangerous took over the abandoned quarantine stations. There were of course escape attempts, even some successful ones, and a lot of suggestions of officers treating the prisoners badly.

And when World War Two rolled around, it was used once more. Some of the people, who had been interned there the first time, were forced to return for a second sentence.

After the end of the war, the island became a maximum-security quarantine station for animals mostly, and so it remained for decades. Finally in the 1990s people realized that this was a fantastic place, right in the middle of their capital city. The need for a quarantine station had dwindled, so instead the Department of Conservation took it over. Trees were planted, the island was freed of rats, and the native animals began to make a come back. But the crowning glory of the island was the arrival back of the tuatara- a small lizard, a relic of the age of dinosaurs.

Now the people of Wellington can travel to the island, enjoy both its history, and its own unique beauty.

For more about this fascinating island check out *Island of Secrets*, by David McGill.

The copyright of the article **Island in the middle** in [New Zealand History](#) is owned by Philippa Jane Ballantine. Permission to republish **Island in the middle** in print or online must be granted by the author in writing.