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REMOVAL OF THE OCCUPANTS OF COON  
ISLAND

INTERVIEW WITH HENRY AND  
CATHERINE NICHOLLS

INTERVIEWER PETER WINSOR

RECORDED 28TH AUGUST, 1989.

## TAPE SUMMARY

Henry and Catherine Nicholls were the last of the "squatters" to be removed by the Lands Department from Coon Island. They finally left the island in June, 1989.

Mrs Nicholls' grandfather settled on the island in the 1920's and she has been holidaying at Coon Island since her birth. She is now in her late forties. She recalls the house her grandfather lived in and the times her family spent holidaying on the island. She says that over sixty of the members of her family used the house at Coon Island at one time or another. She recollects how at one time there was twenty two members of her family sleeping in the house.

Mr. Nicholls talks of continual pressure exerted on the residents of the island by the Department of Lands who wanted to clear the island to allow it to be developed for a public recreation area. He recalls the steps the residents of the island to preserve their homes.

They came to live permanently on Coon Island in 1974. When their small business collapsed, they were declared bankrupt and their house at Wyoming, on the Central Coast, was sold to pay their debts. With four young children to support they saw Coon Island as their haven. At first they were not accepted into the Coon Island community and were treated as social outcasts by residents of the Swansea area. Their children were embarrassed to live on the island and lost many of their friends when they discovered where they lived.

Many times they tried to see Politicians to plead their case to be allowed to remain on the island only to be ignored. Mr. Nicholls believes Labour Governments were more sympathetic to their circumstances and turned a blind eye to their occupation for some time.

Coon Island was notorious as the home of a group of petty criminals. The Police were regularly required to call on these people for various reasons. Some of the tales Mr. Nicholls tells about these people are rather tragic but certainly humorous. Not all the occupants of Coon Island were of this ilk. They came from all walks of life. Some were pensioners, some were quite wealthy, and others were chronic unemployed. In the 1970's they all banded together to resist the State Government and to preserve their lifestyles with support from the Trades Hall Council and the Unions.

The residents formed a committee and lobbied politicians in order to stay on the island. When the crunch came they were united and thwarted the menace of the bulldozers. Despite the hostility of their campaign the residents all loved Coon Island. To them it was home and a very peaceful and beautiful place.

The Nicholls story is tragic but one feels it has a happy ending. Bankrupt and with four young children to support they pursued every possible avenue to acquire shelter for their family and saw Coon Island as their haven. For fourteen years they fought the Government and the local community in order that their children may grow up together and have some stability in their lives. They lived with the constant threat of eviction and the continual harassment from some of their neighbours.

Today they live in a caravan on their own block of land at Fassifern and their children have now grown up and living their own lives. Despite the insecurity and drama of their past their family has survived unscathed and looking forward to happier and less traumatic times ahead.

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REMOVAL OF THE OCCUPANTS OF COON ISLAND

Transcript of interview recorded 28th August, 1989.

Interviewer: Peter Winsor.

Interviewees: Henry and Catherine Nicholls.

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SIDE A

016 PW: *What is your full name?*

HN: Henry Phillip Nicholls

CN: Catherine Mary Nicholls

PW: *Your Age?*

HN: Late Forties

CN: Late Fortie

020 PW: *When were you married?*

HN: 1963

PW: *How many children did you have?*

HN: Four children

PW: *How long did you live at Coon Island?*

HN: We were at Coon Island for approximately 14.5 years.

PW: *Can you explain where Coon Island is?*

HN: Coon Island is on Swansea peninsular, north of Swansea just past Swansea Gardens Caravan Park.

040 PW: *Can you describe the island?*

HN: The island it's surrounded by water with a little bridge that gives you road access onto the island, the road becomes flooded in high tides and it is sitting right on Swansea Channel, you have

CN: access to fishing and boating from the island.

PW: *What do you know of the early settlers of the island?*

CN: The early settlers were granted leases, bought their leases from their war allotments and they lived there during the depression years and after the depression was over they used their houses as weekenders and went back to their various occupations, mainly which was mining.

060 PW: *So what sought of structures did they build there?*

HN: Mainly boatsheds, later on they were added to and made livable residences but first off they were just boatsheds, weatherboard boatsheds with louvre windows and that sort of stuff.

PW: *Did they have leases from the Crown do you know?*

HN: They were granted leases after a while and just went on from there and whatever.

080 PW: *When did the Lands Department first decide to clear the island?*

HN: As far as I know there was a definite trend in the sixties, or a definite move in the sixties to clear the island, which was ongoing from the sixties till right up until now.

PW: *What reasons did the Lands Department give for clearing the island?*

HN: It was supposed to be park, recreational ground for the use of, for the public to use, for the public to have access to for recreational purposes.

100 PW: *How many houses were in existance on the island at this time?*

HN: At the early stages there were in the vicinity of 70 houses which ranged all the way down to the point, to the peninsular all along the channel bank.

PW: *How many people would you say were involved?*  
HN: Well there were 70 families at least and all their relations and their relations and their relations and it, it went on.

PW: *So would you like to estimate a figure?*  
HN: No, I wouldn't like to estimate a figure because I wouldn't know the amount of people that were there.

120 PW: Okay  
CN: Just about everyone in Swansea had something to do with the island over the years.

PW: *How do you mean, did they have relatives who lived there or friends that they visited?*  
CN: They had either been associated with the island personally or had relatives or friends or whatever living there, everybody knew about Coon Island or so it seemed.

PW: *So what do you think Coon Island meant to the people of Swansea?*  
HN: In the early days Coon Island meant a lot to the people of Swansea, it, well they had either lived there or been associated with it and they can all recognize with Coon Island and in later years it wasn't that way though.

PW: *How do you mean?*  
HN: Well in later years the majority of people in Swansea just were happy to get it cleared so that everybody would have access to it.

140 PW: *Right - Did the occupants of the structures have leases from the Lands Department around in the 1970's - 60's sorry - in other words were all the houses there in the 1960's, were they legal?*  
HN: No, I think there was an ongoing thing with the Lands Boards at that time, a lot of people, some people had leases which the Lands Board were endeavouring to cancel and a lot of people there were there without leases and the Lands Board were trying to clear the island of these people.  
CN: A lot of people had leases which were handed down from father to son and they weren't the original lessees.  
HN: The Lands Board just didn't recognize leases which that were handed down from father to son as mlsay and these people were deemed unauthorised occupants.

160 PW: *Right - were there any people on the island that didn't have to move?*  
HN: At this stage there is two people left there that don't have to move until they die, they have been granted leases until they die.

PW: *In say the sixties do you know how many people would have had leases for the rest of their life?*  
HN: In the sixties, I don't know, in the sixties I think the later ones were granted in the early seventies to the pensioners who were allowed to stay until they died.

PW: *So it was pensioners only who were allowed to stay there?*  
HN: Yes, to the best of my knowledge yes.

180 CN: Pensioners who didn't have another home and that was their only home.

PW: *So how many of the original houses were proposed to be removed?*  
HN: The Lands Board wanted to clear probably as many as 50 or 60 people from the original 70 or so.

PW: *And what did the residents think of the Lands Department decision?*  
HN: No one was really impressed. No one was really impressed at all there was demonstrations and deputations to the Minister, all sorts of action being taken for a reprieve..... to try and get a reprieve to stay on the island.

200 PW: *What steps did the Lands Department take to remove the residents from their houses?*  
HN: They brought in contractors to flatten the houses and it just didn't go down real well cause the Trades Hall got behind the residents and the unions got behind the residents.  
CN: The residents barricaded the dozers which were to remove, to push down the houses.  
HN: It just didn't work out at all as far as the Government was concerned or the Lands Boards they just didn't get very far at all.

PW: *So they just landed on the island with the bulldozers one day and expected everyone to move did they?*

HN: *That's about right - yes they landed there and met a wall of protesters. Finally the contractor I think he went back into negotiations with the Lands Boards, I think he gave up.*

CN: *The unions placed a blackban on the island and the contractors weren't allowed to doze any of the houses.*

220 PW: *It was just the residents of the island that blockaded the island or the local community as well?*

HN: *No, mainly the residents of the island and their relations were involved in whatever action they had to take to stop the dozers from pushing down the houses. There was no consideration given at that time they just wanted to clear the island and get rid of everybody. They thought they were going to do it but it didn't work out that way.*

PW: *So what happened after the big confrontation, the contractor threw in the job, what happened then did the Lands Department go away or did they try other means?*

HN: *Well the Minister granted leases to the pensioners that were living on the island fulltime to stay there for the rest of their life and the rest of the people just..... they were just going to move them as soon as possible.*

240 PW: *When did they take action, did they just continue to lob up there and kick people out or?*

HN: *It was pretty well ongoing in the sixties and seventies and until they got a lot of the houses to go as soon as people would go home from the houses and come back find vandals or someone flattened the houses, knocked the windows in, knocked the doors down, kicked the places down. It got to that stage that you weren't game to go home or you weren't game to go away from the place. Anytime you turned your back someone was breaking into your house or knocking it down on you. Who the persons responsible were never caught but there were suspicions of where the action had come from but mainly put down to vandals.*

PW: *These vandals were they locals or did they come from out of the area?*

CN: *They came from out of the area, as a result of all the newspaper coverage of the happenings on the island a spate of visitors came to the island, more or less sticky beaks and at night they came down and broke into the houses and took all the old fashioned furnishings, furniture, old fashioned brass beds and all those type of things.*

260 PW: *How did the residents feel about this publicity?*

HN: *They did everything possible to keep the island, some were of the opinion that they had to get media assistance to keep the island but on the other hand with everything being highlighted in the papers it brought trouble to the island from people, from people out of town, visitors, sticky beaks, anyone pilfering the places, it, it works both ways.*

PW: *Did the residents take any action to try to prevent this pilfering and vandalism?*

HN: *Well, finally the houses, well some of the houses, probably 25 or 30 of them were left in that way that they had to be finally pulled down anyway because they were just bashed to pieces. So, the northern end of the island just went in a matter of a couple of years, probably 25 or 30 houses mainly from which the publicity had brought undesirable visitors to the island from time to time.*

PW: *What the Lands Department just went in there and cleaned up what was left did they?*

HN: *The Lands Department just went in and cleaned up what was left, yeah!*

280 PW: *Were any of the residents physically thrown out of their houses.*

HN: *Yes, there was two families thrown out in 1988, there was a couple of families virtually, physically thrown out. The Lands Board turned up with the police and the electricity mob and everything else and gave them forty five minutes or three-quarters of an hour to get out of the place and just started bashing the place down as soon as the furniture or belongings were out.*

PW: *So the people left, they didn't resist in anyway?*

HN: *I don't think they had a chance to resist. I think the police were there to stop it and just tell them to go.*

- PW: *How did you feel about that?*  
HN: I felt I was probably happy to see one lot of the people going but possibly not happy the way it was done. The people were...., I know everyone's got to live their own life, but the people were, they kind of lived by night and they were, they were always around, you'd go out any hours of the night and there was always people walking in or walking out, which concerned us greatly and but possibly there should have been another body in between to give them a chance for other..... other accommodation, rather than just be thrown out on the street.
- 300 PW: *Why do you think they threw, they physically threw the people out of their houses, these people?*  
HN: There was so many of these people living in this particular house from time to time and they just lived by night. The Police were down there two or three times a week and sometimes two or three times a day. So as far as I can see the Lands Board possibly received a complaint from the Police and acted upon it.
- 320 PW: *Were these people typical of the occupants of the island?*  
HN: They were, no they were not typical of the occupants of the island. These people, there was just so many of them from time to time, they were just active all night and other people went about their business in their own way. Various different lifestyles but nothing compared to these people, of one particular house. In one instant one of the fellas from the soccer club pulled up outside our gate and said "Do you know of anyone down here that would break into the soccer canteen?" They'd, people had evidently broken into the soccer canteen the night before and they'd taken all the drinks that they could carry, which was quite a lot because there was a lot people attached to this house and they left a trail of cans halfway down the island, where they were just walking along and drinking the cans as they went along and just threw them on the ground. So I just told him to go as far as he could and have a look there, I didn't actually name any names but you know you just had to go to the last house. He spoke to them and then I believe he went to the Police Station and the Police just knew of them straight away. It was just because the Police were there all the time. They just gave the place such a bad name and I said to the guy in one case if he didn't pull his shoes up he'd get us all thrown off the island cause he was just doing nothing for the island whatsoever.
- 340 PW: *So these people, they were feared or hated on the island by the other residents were they?*  
HN: They....they didn't do anything to us in anyway, we had a couple of close calls with wood just about to disappear, firewood that is, but they were always there and there was other people that had things had gone missing and they had more or less pointed in that direction, they were suspected of the goods going in that direction. I know that they gave the or I heard that they gave the local caravan park a hell of a hard time too, they were always up there and going through the park and whatever they. Living in a hostile environment as far as the Lands Board were concerned you don't really want anyone there to cause trouble because it only limits your time there.
- PW: *You were on the island for fourteen, fourteen and a half years, I think you said were you?*  
HN: Fourteen and a half years we were on the island permanently for.
- 360 PW: *When did you first go to the island?*  
HN: I first went to the island about 1960 which I liked it very much it was only on the holiday basis, now to now basis that we went there and I really liked the place then.
- PW: *When did you go there, first go there Mrs Nicholls?*  
CN: I first went to the island, well actually I went there when I was born. I was always associated with the island from the time I was born, actually.
- PW: *So relatives of yours were there, was it relations of yours?*  
CN: My grandfather, my mothers father went to the island in 1922-23 and my family had been associated with the island from then on.
- 380 PW: *What were your earliest recollections of the island, can you describe those for us?*  
CN: The island was, well it was my second home. We went there during Easter and Christmas. We swam and went rowing and fishing, did all the things that kids usually do in their holidays it was really a beautiful place.



PW: *Can you describe the house your grandparents had?*

CN: Well it was a very old weatherboard, well a converted boatshed and during the early years there was no electricity, the only service available was the pan service for the toilet, it had an old iron roof which leaked during the rainy times, there was no bathroom, a fuel stove, which I can remember snuggling up close to, to get warm during the cold weather, great big double beds which were full of a hay type of stuff, the walls were made of, the internal walls were made of like a hessian and pasted over with old Womens Weekly's.

PW: *So how many members of your family would you say used that house?*

CN: I would say there would be close to, from the time they first went there there would be close to 60, even more than 60. I don't think I could put a figure on it actually. At one time we would go there for holidays and there would be 22 people staying there and some of us used to sleep under the table on mattresses.

400 PW: *So the island obviously meant a lot to your family?*

CN: Yes quite a lot really. Eventually the house did burn down in 1974 and my father said that it was the end of an era and well it was to all of us really.

PW: *How did the members of the family feel when the house burned down?*

CN: Very, very sad, very upset.

PW: *And later on you went to live there permanently?*

CN: Yes, 12 months later we went to live at No. 18.

PW: *Where did you live prior to that?*

CN: We lived at Wyoming, which is near Bosford.

PW: *Can you explain the circumstances of how you came to live at Coon Island?*

CN: We came to live at Coon Island because we had a small business, we lived at Wyoming, we had a small business which we went bankrupt and we didn't have anywhere to go but to Coon Island. We lost our home at Wyoming.

PW: *How old were your children at this stage?*

CN: The eldest was 11, 9, 7 & 5.

420 PW: *How did you come to buy the house?*

HN: We had to borrow money from a close family member or they actually, what happened they borrowed the money through Waltons for us to buy the house and it was bought in another family member's name. We were unable to borrow money or have any money because we had been bankrupt and you lose everything you have and you can't borrow money unless you get approval of certain people.

CN: You can't have any property in your name either.

HN: You can't have any property in your name, that's right and the particular person that bought the house at Coon Island for us it was in his name and he worked in the Public Service and the pressure we had from time to time with the Lands Board he was worried about his name getting in the paper and him getting the sack. It made it a rather difficult situation.

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SIDE B

- 000 PW: *So did you look for any other housing?*  
HN: Yeah we looked for private accommodation and we had spoken to the Housing Commission and you kindly were informed that you don't get a second chance with the Housing Commission. Once you lose once you don't get a second chance. Normal places, Real Estate Agents or whatever of renting a house, once they know your bankrupt or were bankrupt you just didn't even get a hearing it was very hard we just had absolutely nowhere to go at all.  
CN: We had no finances either, we came here with our tail between our legs and just.... you know no money at all, none whatsoever.
- 020 PW: *So a relative borrowed money for you to buy the house, can you give us an idea of how much money?*  
HN: I think it was only around \$500.00 at the time.  
  
PW: *Can you describe the house that you bought?*  
HN: It was a weatherboard place leaning to the north and the constantly southerly winds had put a lean on it one way, iron roof, cause it had originally been a boatshed added onto a room here and room there before we got it. It was pretty rough but it was shelter, we were quite happy in it.
- 040 PW: *When you bought the house were you aware that it was to be demolished?*  
HN: Yeah, we were aware that when it had to go, it would be on us to move it.  
CN: The old people had told us that they hadn't seen the Lands Board for years, so there weren't any worries really.  
  
PW: *Right, so was there some sort of fear was there whenever the Lands Board came down to the island?*  
HN: The Lands Board wasn't very popular, they, whenever anyone saw them coming down or heard that they were down there, they were always wondering what they were up to next or what they were going to do, they just weren't real popular.
- 060 PW: *When you first went to the island were you accepted into the Coon Island community?*  
HN: No, we even though we had been associated with the island for quite a long while we weren't accepted by all people a few that did but a lot of people didn't really want us there.  
  
PW: *Could you elaborate on that, what did they indicate or how did they indicate that they didn't want you there?*  
HN: Oh you felt it when you were talking to people or you saw people, you feel these, you pick up those feelings and also you hear things from different people, so and so says that such and such should'nt be living on the island and all these sort of things.
- 080 PW: *Right and how did your children feel about living there?*  
HN: The kids had a really rough time for a while particularly at school, they were accepted at school until the kids found out where they were living and what the house looked like and then they kind of had friends today and no one tomorrow, that went on for several years until they established themselves in sport and school and in general school activity or sports they were kind of wanted then cause they had sporting ability and different, showed different levels of ability at different things and different clubs were quite happy to have them but there was still people and their children from higher income brackets that looked down on use and the kids and made it a bit hard for living.
- 100 PW: *And how did your children react to that?*  
HN: It didn't do them any good, they were not very impressed cause when, we had an old car, a multi-coloured car at the time and taking them to school of a morning we had to stop half a mile from school so that no one could see the car that we were driving in, they just didn't, it was just one thing on top of another, like living in an old house that was falling down and a funny coloured car, it was just, it was pretty hard on them.  
CN: I think that they also came from a secure environment to something which wasn't really secure.

PW: *Do you feel that people in the local community rejected you personally or was it the occupants of the island generally?*

120 HN: I think in later years I just felt that the island should be cleared of all people and it should be open for the public but then while getting this feeling I also felt that they also wish to live ~~their~~ too, that they felt that they were missing out on a lot of things by not living on Coon Island and in a way they were sorry and trying to take revenge on us for living there cause they couldn't.

PW: *And what was it about Coon Island that you think made people jealous, what was so special about the place?*

140 HN: Coon Island was just a unique place, you have water, tidal water rushing past the front door and summer time temperature you have to really close the front door cause it gets so cold, you go up to Swansea and its forty degrees, you come back home and it's about thirty degrees with a nor-easterly blowing straight in the front door and you had to put a jumper on and close the front door to keep warm. You are right on the water, you can fish, just walk out your front door and fish in there, you know just tie your boat up at the front door virtually.

PW: *And what type of people was it that resided on the island in your time?*

160 HN: There were people, there was various people there, there was pensioners and people from various walks of life, some people had money they enjoyed it as a weekender and one guy that had a place down towards half way down the island, he came out there one day and found that his oven was on and on investigating he found that there was a pie in the oven and the ones next door that who in my opinion wasn't a real good, wasn't of real good character, he found out that they had their power cut off so they broke into his house and put a pie in his oven to heat it up to cook it for tea and he stood at the window for two hours waiting for the guy to come back to get his pie, he wasn't real impressed and said he was just an idiot for doing it, so he went out and grabbed hold of the other fella and said now listen here, I don't know what came of that but I don't think he used the oven again.

PW: *Yes - what did the pensioners with the leases think of the squatters generally?*

HN: They thought that we or they were of the opinion that we the squatters generally brought or the unauthorised occupants brought the Lands Board to the island and made it harder for them.

CN: They thought that they had fought for the island and we came in and reaped the benefits.

180 PW: *When did you first realise that you would have to leave the island?*

HN: We were there a couple of months in 1975 about June '75 we got there and a couple of months after that we were told to move.

PW: *Can you explain how you were told?*

HN: I think we had a visit from the Lands Boards representative and he, I think suggested we write a letter detailing our position and see what happened from then, I think that's what happened.

PW: *And how did you feel when you found out you had to go?*

HN: Oh, we weren't terribly impressed because we'd virtually with help to buy the place we had to repay the money and it kind of left us where we were before we started with nowhere to go.

200 PW: *And did you start looking for another house?*

HN: At that time we concentrated on negotiations with the Lands Board, just to see what happened from that.

PW: *And what steps did the Lands Department take to find you another house?*

HN: Well they assured us that they were not in the habit of finding accommodation for people, but after we had been there for about two or three years the Lands Board representative marched me off to the Housing Commission office to put in a Housisng Commission application.

PW: *Right - and what were the motives for them doing this do you think?*

HN: To get rid of us, to they were sick of us because by this time, we'd had a lot of ongoing correspondence.

220 PW: *And what action did you take to stay on the island?*  
HN: We just approached our Local Member and asked for his help in seeking a bit of time until our situation improved and this was pretty hard because we had to keep on running for help every couple of months and which it wasn't our way of living at all, we just didn't live that way, we didn't, we never used to live that way, put it that way and suddenly we come into this situation where we've got no money and nowhere to go and we had a Lands Board breathing down our necks every couple or months telling us to go.  
CN: We just couldn't get on with our lives.  
HN: It was just, it was very very hard.

240 PW: *How did you feel having this over your head, can you describe the feeling?*  
CN: We felt that we always had our head on the chopping block, just like a guillotine waiting to come down and decapitate you.  
HN: At one stage we got a letter from the Minister and I think it came about in the last week of the month, telling us to get out at the end of the month.

PW: *So what action did you take then?*  
HN: I think I went and got a handful of money and went down and rang the Sydney Office and had a bit of talk to them.

PW: *And what did they say?*  
HN: He said he'd, I think I spoke to the Minister's Liaison Officer who agreed to have a talk to the Minister about our situation.

PW: *And how many letters would you estimate you got from the Lands Department saying that you had to go?*  
HN: Probably a couple of dozen.

260 PW: *And what did you do when you received these letters?*  
HN: Well everytime we got the letter we'd shudder because we knew it would only be a couple of months extension at the most, if that, if time wasn't just about up when we received the letter, there was no security there at all.  
CN: We spent most of our lives writing for help.

280 PW: *Right and you went and saw Ministers and Politicians often did you?*  
HN: The Ministers that helped us most I feel were the Labor Ministers, Liberal Government helped us in the early stages a month here and a month there and then if it hadn't been for a change in government we would've been forced out earlier in the piece, but due to sympathetic consideration from the Labor Minister, they kind of closed their eyes to us I think for a couple of years.  
CN: We didn't actually seen any of these Ministers, we weren't allowed to see them, we only went through our Local Member who at that time was Mr Harry Jensen who was the Member for Munmorah, the first Minister we were associated with was Mr John Mason and then Fisher and finally Mr Crabtree who was a Labor Minister; we felt that we had better dealings with him, better treatment from him than any of the other Liberal Ministers.  
HN: He kind of, I think they kind of closed their eyes and we got a couple of years out of them, until the early eighties.

PW: *And what do you think stirred up the issue again in the early eighties?*  
HN: We had problems with a neighbour and he was incensed with getting rid of us because he always said he had another place to go to and we didn't and he just contacted everyone from Council through to Church people through to the Lands Board anyone that he could call to make a nuisance or to make it hard for us he did and he called the Lands Board and informed them that we had made some alterations to our house to try to make it weatherproof, so this stirred up the Lands Board again.

300 PW: *And what did they do about that?*  
CN: They sent us a letter and said that all renovations had to cease forthwith.  
HN: And a little while after that they offered us Permissive Occupancy until we had a Housing Commission house, until we'd been granted a Housing Commission house.

PW: *Did you accept this Permissive Occupancy?*  
HN: We were not in a position financially or any other way to accept the house, accept the Permissive Occupancy at that stage. We were tied up, it was very hard, very awkward for us and we had to try by all means to delay the Permissive Occupancy being signed.

320 PW: *So when did you actually finally leave the island?*  
HN: We left the island in June 1989.

PW: *Can you explain what happened or the circumstances which led you to leave?*  
HN: We in November, 1989 we were told to vacate the island in a month, November 1988 rather I'm sorry and this we had a block of land at this stage which we were paying off and we were still in no position as to, to where to go, primely because we didn't have any money and committed to repayments on our block of land, so we still had to buy more time to try to get accommodation, some sort of accommodation, there again the Lands Board still made it pretty hard, we got a couple of months from that until the end of February I think. We seeked an extension from the Minister for Lands Mr Causley, who flatly rejected it, he gave us to the end of the month and that put us in an even worse situation, casue we were unable to go anywhere, we didn't have any sort of accommodation and we were financially committed.

340 CN: We tried to sell our land to get money to buy a house, but nobody seemed to want to buy at the time.  
HN: It was on the market for such a short time that it's very hard to sell something in a matter of a month or six weeks unless it's really cheap, really attractive and we were not about to give anything away when we were in a desperate situation.

PW: *So how may houses remained on the island when you left?*  
HN: Two houses remained on the island when we left, they both have leases till they die I beleive.

PW: *So you were the last of the squatters to leave the island?*  
HN: We were the last of the unauthorised occupants to leave the island.

360 PW: *Looking back what do you see as the highlights and the lowlights of your life at Coon Island?*  
HN: The, it was a very hard time, Coon Island is just a place where you could really enjoy yourself under different circumstances, you'd get up and the sun shining in the front door, the waters beautiful and green, blue all the, the, the, it was just a part of our life that had to be, it's very hard to say, what was good and what was bad.  
CN: I feel that the lowlights were the constant harassment from the Lands Board, in the beginning possibly not being accepted by other people which we had never known that before we came to the island. The highlights I think are the years our children were growing up, the racing around with them to different sporting activities and school activities, the fact that they turned out okay in spite of all our problems we had on the island, actually when you think of Coon Island you think of the afternoon breeze in the middle of a heatwave, it was really beautiful, I think as soon as we started to live on Coon Island we, we got an injection of saltwater in our blood and we just found it very hard to leave.

380 PW: *Do you ever regret going there?*  
HN: No - we had to go there, we had no other choice, we, it was very hard to accept the conditions under which we lived under but I no I don't actually regret going there.  
CN: No - I don't regret going there. It may have been very hard but it was beautiful really.

PW: *Okay - I think that's about it, I'd like to thank you very much for the effort and the time that you have put in, on behalf not only of myself but also the University, thanks a lot.*  
HN: Thank you.  
348 CN: Thank you.

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UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

1989

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permission to Archmuty Library + University  
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Signed ~~Henry Nicholls~~ C Nicholls

Date 28-8-89

Interviewer P. Wain

A6971vii

PETER WINSOR

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE 1989

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY  
TUESDAY 1-3P.M.

REGIONAL HISTORY RESEARCH  
PAPER

*"The Removal of the Occupants  
of Coon Island."*

5th September, 1989.

*"The Removal of the Occupants of Coon Island."*

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Coon Island is located at the northern tip of the Swansea Peninsula on the Swansea Channel. Today the island is almost completely cleared of any human existence. Twenty years ago the island was inhabited by some seventy families. Most of the houses on the island were used as holiday "weekenders", however, some were occupied permanently. To the residents, the island was a unique place of peace and tranquility and a very relaxing holiday atmosphere prevailed.

However, this peaceful exterior was only a facade. Coon Island was the centre of a bitter fight which lasted for many years. On one side were the island's residents, a proud group of people, of mainly mining stock, prepared to go to any length to preserve their occupation of an area they considered paradise. On the other side, the State Government, determined to see the residents removed and the area developed as a recreation reserve for the public at large.

Around the turn of the century the island was popular with picknickers and campers and amateur race meetings were held on the island's crude racecourse.<sup>1</sup> After World War I people began settling on Coon Island as it was a popular location for fishing, boating and holidaying. The early settlers were mainly miners and their families from the nearby Coalfields. They built small weatherboard "weekenders" or boatsheds which were occupied at weekends and holiday periods. In 1920-21 the Department of Lands began granting tenancies, known as Permissive Occupancies, to the owners of the structures, to authorise their dwellings.

During the Depression years many people went to live permanently on the island. Due to the prevailing economic climate there was no suggestion of evictions by the Lands Department at that time. The residents began adding additional rooms to their houses to make them more conducive to permanent living.

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1 Lake Macquarie Herald, 10th June, 1971.



In September, 1944, the Minister for Lands, J.M. Tully, advised the residents not to erect additional substantial structures and that further transfers would not be permitted. If the occupants so elected, they would be allowed preference in obtaining sites in the nearby Swansea subdivision.

The island was zoned as "Recreation" in the Northumberland County Council's Planning Scheme in 1952. The Minister for Lands at the time, F.H. Hawkins, met a deputation of Coon Island residents and advised them that the older residents (pensioners) would not be disturbed, but the younger residents should look for alternative homes. He further advised the residents that it was the government's policy to clear waterfronts of occupations of this nature and it would not be possible to grant any new tenancies on the island.

In 1965, Tom Lewis, Minister for Lands, announced that the Government intended to clear all waterfront reserves of occupations to permit free and unimpeded access to the public. The Lands Board at East Maitland sought the co-operation of Lake Macquarie Shire Council in demolishing the buildings on Coon Island once the original Permissive Occupancy holders were dead. An inspection of the buildings by Council's Chief Health Inspector in 1966, revealed that none of the buildings complied with Council's minimum standards for residential buildings.<sup>2</sup> Despite this the Council declined to assist the Department of Lands in any way.

The president of the Swansea Branch of the Old Age & Invalid Pensioners Association, Mr. W. Quinn, threatened demonstrations and protests by the Newcastle District Pensioner Council, the Newcastle Trades Hall Council and residents if any attempts were made to remove residents and demolish their homes. It was reported that there were more than 100 people living on the island at this time, many of whom were descendants of the original settlers.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners Advocate, 27th April, 1966.

3 Lake Macquarie Herald, 27th February, 1969.

The most significant move came in April, 1970. Mr. Lewis, the Minister for Lands, terminated all Permissive Occupancies on Coon Island and the occupants were directed to remove their homes within six months. The decision provided that fresh Permissive Occupancies be offered to the nineteen pensioners in permanent bona-fide occupation. These occupancies were not transferable and expired on the death of the holder. Provision was also made for the other occupants to be given the opportunity of applying for blocks of residential Crown Land in Swansea. Only eight of the residents chose to do so.<sup>4</sup>

The island's residents formed what was called the Coon Island Reprieve Committee with Mr. W. Standing, a retired miner and former union leader, as its President. The Committee sought a meeting with the Minister and forwarded an eighteen point circular to the Premier, Mr. Askin, Mr. Lewis, and all northern Federal and State Parliamentarians and interested organisations. The Premier conveniently side-stepped the issue by saying it was not possible for him to meet a deputation of residents due to the pressure of duties with the forthcoming session of Parliament and preparation of the budget. The Premier advised the residents that it was appropriate for representations to be directed to Mr. Lewis.<sup>5</sup>

Mr. Lewis did receive a deputation in November, 1970, comprising of residents and Mr. K. Wilson, Secretary of the Newcastle Labour Council. The deputation sought to gain a reprieve for those residents who were required to leave the island. The Minister assured the deputation that only permanent residents who were pensioners would be permitted to remain on the island.<sup>6</sup> The Minister met another deputation of residents with similar results in September, 1971. A small minority of residents did comply with the requests of the Lands Department to vacate their homes, however, the majority stood firm and refused to leave.

4 Lake Macquarie Herald, 6th August, 1970.

5 ibid

6 Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner's Advocate, 5th November, 1970.

On 7th July, 1972, a contract was signed by Messrs. Jackson and Ellis of Kurri Kurri to remove thirteen of the houses on the island. Early on Monday 10th July, 1972, Mr. Jackson arrived at Coon Island, to commence work, accompanied by Mr. Col Redman, a Lands Department Inspector. They were greeted by a group of angry residents supported by the Secretary of the Newcastle Trades Hall Council, Mr. Wilson, and several other union representatives. The residents had barricaded the only bridge onto the island with a car and stood there defiantly waving placards and shouting slogans. Several residents explained to Mr. Redman that the work had been blackbanned. Mr. O'Beirne, Northern Organiser of the Builder's Labourers Union threatened to call a strike of the union and get the men to act as vigilantes and turn over any equipment the contractor tries to bring in. Mr. Redman and Mr. Jackson then left the island to confer. Mr. Jackson returned to the island and told the residents he was not going to proceed with the work and ceremoniously tore up what he claimed was the contract.<sup>7</sup>

The Lands Department later entered into negotiations with Mr. Jackson in an attempt to get him to perform his obligations under the contract. On 17th July, Mr. Jackson returned to the island. Watched by a large group of residents and Police he commenced removing furniture from some of the buildings in preparation for full scale demolition. Mr. Wilson again threatened to picket if demolition began. The following day the residents and volunteers replaced the furniture and trade unionists picketed the island. The Police were again in attendance to keep the peace. Mr. Jackson then abandoned the job and handed the residents a statutory declaration to that effect.<sup>8</sup>

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7 Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner's Advocate, 11th July, 1972.

8 Sydney Morning Herald, 19th July, 1972.

The residents' action received a great deal of media coverage with significant consequences. The publicity brought many people to the island, and houses which were vacant were vandalised and furniture stolen.<sup>9</sup> The Police were powerless to prevent this vandalism. A number of the residents became scared and decided to abandon their homes. Others "sold" their homes to demolishers for materials only to find other people moving in. The majority of these "squatters" were no-hopers looking for a cheap place to live, however, a few were young families who had fallen on hard times. The Department of Lands continued to monitor the situation preferring to remove houses as they were vacated or upon the death of the occupants, rather than confronting the residents and unions with large scale evictions and demolitions.

By 1985, there were only twenty remaining homes on the island. The Manager of the adjacent Swansea Gardens Tourist Park, Max Gallard, complained to the Department of Lands, Lake Macquarie City Council and the media claiming the squatters of Coon Island were driving tourists from the area. Mr. Gallard claimed the squatters were using the access road as a speedway and in summer they had late night drinking parties.<sup>10</sup>

This adverse publicity signalled the beginning of the end for Coon Island's squatters. The Department of Lands began regularly visiting the island and applying pressure to the squatters to leave. Notices to vacate were issued and gradually and steadily the houses began to be removed.

In September, 1988, the Regional Manager of the Department of Lands, John Osmond, arrived on the island with demolishers and ordered the occupants of two houses to remove their belongings to permit demolition of the houses. The squatters offered no resistance and demolition proceeded unimpeded watched by Police and a number of residents. Mr. Osmond indicated that the occupants had failed to comply with Lands Department orders to vacate issued twelve months earlier and it was hoped that the action would give the remaining squatters an incentive to leave.<sup>11</sup>

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9 Sydney Morning Herald, 20th February, 1974.

10 Newcastle Herald, 24th May, 1985.

11 Newcastle Herald, 3rd September, 1988.

Removal of the remaining squatters and their homes proceeded with little resistance. In June, 1989, the last of the remaining unauthorised occupants, Henry and Catherine Nicholls and their family, left the island.

Today, there is two remaining homes on Coon Island, occupied by pensioners in their nineties under Permissive Occupancy from the Lands Department, the only relics of the hundreds of people and generations of families who once enjoyed their weekends and holidays there. Development of the island as a recreation reserve has still not commenced.

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## Lake not to do 'Govt. job'

It was about time the Government did its own dirty work and stopped getting local councils to do it, the Shire President (Cr. Pendlebury) told Lake Macquarie Shire Council last night.

Cr. Pendlebury was commenting on a request from the Land Board at East Maitland for the council to cooperate in the demolition of buildings on permissive occupancy leases near Swansea.

The District Surveyor told the council the buildings would be demolished only when a lease was terminated on the death of the original holder of the permissive occupancy or his wife.

The Deputy Chief Health Inspector (Mr. Hansen) said there were 48 buildings on permissive occupancy leases at Coon Island and 23 at Little Cooney.

None of these complied with the council's minimum standards for a building intended for residential purposes.

### No blocks offer

The Health Inspector (Mr. Toby) recommended that the council cooperate with the Lands Department in demolishing buildings in the two areas once the original leaseholders were dead.

Most of the buildings were hostels that had been converted to dwellings.

Cr. Toby said the matter was similar to an earlier approach by the Land Board on permissive occupancy dwellings at Swansea Heads.

The council had refused to cooperate in that case, he said.

Mr. Hansen said the leases were not transferable. Beneficiaries of the original leaseholders were given sufficient time to remove their belongings from the dwellings once the leases expired.

Cr. Toby said the Government was not even offering the people blocks of land in exchange. Blocks had been offered to similar cases at Pellican and Blacksmiths.

Cr. Durie said Cr. Toby was trying to confuse the issue. The board was not trying to evict anyone. It merely wanted to remove sub-standard dwellings from the localities.

Cr. Pendlebury said many of the dwellings had been developed into homes anyone could be proud of. He did not see why they had to be moved.

Mr. Hansen said the Land Board wanted the land for parks and public recreation.

Cr. Toby moved an amendment, seconded by Cr. Jones that the Land Board be advised the council was not prepared to undertake demolition of buildings once they became vacant.

The amendment was carried.

## Shire Council on bad ground

LAKE MACQUARIE Shire Council has taken a peculiar attitude on the Lands Department's request for "cooperation" in the removal of buildings from permissive occupancy sites in the shire on the expiry of leases. The Council decided on Tuesday night to have nothing to do with these demolitions, even after the accommodation has been vacated and contents removed.

In the Council's view, the State, having ended the tenancy by not renewing the lease on the death of the original holder, and not recognising hereditary title or right of transfer, should see the process through by tearing down the structures.

The Council's hand-washing decision might be strictly correct in terms of legal responsibility, the shire not having been the source of the permission to occupy. But the righteous stand is also self-defeating.

The Lands Department has no urgent interest in getting buildings off the land and the sites made available for the development of parks and playgrounds. It is the Council that has the clear stake in the hastening of access to land for community purposes.

The department's request for "cooperation" (the official way of asking the Council to undertake demolitions as buildings become vacant) was based on the reasonable assumption that the councillors would appreciate the strict enforcement of the lease-termination provisions by a remote authority and be eager to see that the resulting advantage gratuitously given would not be lost through delay.

By rejecting the department's request, the Council went against the advice of its Health Department, the officers of which see the wisdom of gaining control of the timetable for clearance.

## Below standard

The Deputy Health Inspector (Mr. Hansen) pointed out that none of the 71 buildings on permissive occupancy leases on Coon Island and Little Cooney complied with standards for residences. His superior (Mr. Ray) recommended that the Council cooperate with the department when the original holder of the non-transferable leases were not living.

It would have been thought that the Council, in the light of its own experience of difficulty in enforcing standards or getting people to leave tenanted and similar emergency dwellings, would respond eagerly to outside help for the reduction of the problem. Instead, cooperation has been refused in a way that suggests disapproval of the departmental policy.

There is the further intimation that the department is wrong in attributing to the Council a desire to replace sub-standard dwellings on expired leases with parks and playgrounds.

The onus of clearance has now been thrown back to an authority that will be in no hurry to effect demolitions. The department could well hesitate to offend the Council by taking an action which the Councillors find objectionable. So long as the buildings remain there will be people who, from preference or temporary need, will move in. The problem then would be for the immediate authority, the Council, which is responsible for the standard of dwellings, to solve. The Council's health officers are aware of this, even if the councillors are not.

For the shire this is an important question, not to be disposed of by hasty decision on short-sighted arguments over-influenced by legalism and resentment. The fact that there is a precedent for non-cooperation with the Lands Department for the clearance of buildings on expired permissive occupancy leases does not override the obligation of councillors to accept responsibility to do something which is in the interest of the shire and within its capacity.



## District and suburban

# MINISTER SEES EROSION TOLL

The Minister for Lands (Mr. Lewis) said yesterday that he would find out whether Government money could be made available to build up "break-through" sections of the retaining wall on the Swansea Channel side of Coon Island.

If that could not be done, other preventive action would have to be examined.

He would have talks with the District Surveyor (Mr. Higgs), the Minister for Works (Mr. Hughes), and Lake Macquarie Shire Council.

Mr. Lewis said if eroded sections of the retaining wall in the channel could not be restored he would consider altering the system of permissive occupancies to allow children of present owners to remain in occupation of homes on the island.

However, this was most unlikely, he said.

Mr. Lewis met a deputation, introduced by Mr. Stewart, M.L.A., and which consisted of the President of the Coon Island Residents' Committee (Mr. W. Standing) and Mr. J. Harrison, President of Swansea branch of the Liberal Party (Mr. G. Harris) and Cr. Toby.

He inspected Coon Island, which is a public recreation reserve area, and met residents.

Mr. Standing said that once

the residents were shifted, the measures taken to prevent erosion of the channel would end, and water would sweep over much of the reserve.

At their own expense, residents had built along the channel bank a rock wall set in concrete to hold back tidal water.

"Once the houses are gone, the water will take over quickly," Mr. Standing said.

"Evidence of erosion and silting is seen in the narrowing of the entrance of the backwater stream from the main channel."

On the opposite side of this stream a road and footpath had been eroded, leaving homes standing on the brink of the channel.

After seeing the first major break in the retaining wall about 150 yards from the eastern end of the channel, Mr. Lewis asked whether council could help.

Cr. Toby: Council will not have money for the next 20 years to stone this area.

### Three bad areas

Mr. Standing said there were 59 buildings on Coon Island. A husband could pass on the occupancy permit to his wife, and vice versa, but once they died the building had to be demolished.

In discussion with residents the Minister was told that most of the homes had started as week-enders. One occupant had lived on the island for 46 years.

One family had paid \$200 to provide a protecting wall. There were three major areas where erosion had swept through.

Often high tidal water crossed the island's sole road. It also still seeped under the verandah of one home.

Mr. Stewart supported the claim to allow the occupancy pass on to children.

He said the council would not develop the area for recreation for many years.

He agreed that once the people were forced off the island tidal water would soon sweep across the old oak swamp into the reserve.

Mr. Lewis said the frontage to the dwellings would have to be improved. He would ask if the work would be expensive and what money could be made available to mend the broken sections of the wall.

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# Plea for people on Coon Island

Mr. Stewart, M.L.A., will ask the Minister for Lands (Mr. Lewis) in Sydney to-day to withhold action that threatens to evict some people at Coon Island, Swansea.

These people occupy dwellings on sites that are permissive occupancies granted by the Lands Department.

Departmental policy does not permit the lease to be transferred to next of kin on the death of the lessee.

Mr. Stewart said the families affected at Coon Island had been told that unless

they vacated the area by Friday, their property would be demolished.

Mr. Stewart said: "This is a policy that the department has persisted in for several years, and now a number of pensioners are involved.

"The pensioners bought those dwellings years ago not knowing the lease was not transferable.

## 'Some may stay'

"To make matters worse, it seems that some occupiers have been given permission to stay on."

Mr. Stewart said the President of Swansea Pensioners Association (Mr. W. Quinn) had expressed concern at the threat to Coon Island residents.

Mr. Lewis had inspected the homes and had agreed they were well kept.

"I will urge that the people be allowed to stay there till either the Government or Lake Macquarie Shire Council spends a lot of money to prevent the island from being submerged," Mr. Stewart said.

"The island is still there only because the occupiers have built retaining walls to counter the swift-moving tidal water in Swansea Channel."

"I will ask that the District Surveyor be directed to withhold action till a final ministerial decision is made," Mr. Stewart said.

# THE LAKE MACQUARIE Herald

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 1969.

## PLEA TO SAVE COON IS. HOMES

**Any attempt to demolish homes on Coon Island would be met with a mass demonstration of protest, Mr W. Quinn said.**

Mr. Quinn, President of Swansea branch of the Old-age and Invalid Pensioners' Association, was referring to an edict by the Lands Department that some people on the island must vacate their dwellings by to-morrow.

The dwellings are on permissive occupancies but the lease cannot be transferred to next to kin on death of the original holder.

Mr. Quinn said four families had been told they must have their belongings out of the homes by to-morrow, for it was intended to start demolition of the dwellings on Monday.

"I have reported this threat of action to Newcastle District Pensioners' Council and Newcastle Trades Hall Council," Mr. Quinn said.

### People angry

"If anything is done to these occupants, there will be a combined demonstration of protest on the island the day demolition starts."

He said the people of Swansea would be angry at any eviction action. It was believed that other people would face eviction later.

More than 100 people were living on the island and on land north of Wallarah-street, all covered by a permissive occupancy lease, Mr. Quinn said.

### Safe access to road

A safe access to Mt. Waring-road via Jindalee-street had been made possible by reconstruction in that street and closure of the top end of Cook-street, Toronto West, Cr. Smith said yesterday.

The closure would remain permanent to end a long-standing hazard at the intersection of Cook-street and Mt. Waring-road, Cr. Smith said.

Residents aware of the danger took precautions but often strangers unknowingly took risks.

Construction was still in progress, involving a substantial amount of earthwork.

This work included raising the top end of Jindalee-street to create a barrier against wrong traffic movement.

*Henry Mitchell*

Hansard

3-11-70

what was in the second-reading speech  
by the Deputy Leader of the Opposition that  
this is an increase in uniformity of legisla-  
tion throughout Australia to facilitate the  
processing of share scrip. That  
is all there is in the measure, this was ack-  
nowledged at the introductory stage by the  
honourable member for Liverpool, who led  
the Opposition. When the measure  
was reintroduced, it went into  
formal matter. I commend the bill, and I  
shall not further occupy the time of the  
House with it.

~~REPORT~~  
~~amendment, and report adopted on motion~~

ADJOURNMENT

PERMISSIVE OCCUPANCIES: COON ISLAND

Mr McCaw [12.17 a.m.]: I move:

That this House do now adjourn.

Mr J. J. T. STEWART (Kahibah)  
[12.18 a.m.]: I wish to raise a matter of  
vital concern to invalid and age pensioners  
and their families occupying Crown land on  
Coon Island near Swansea. These people  
have been living there for many years but  
now, by direction of the Department of  
Lands, their permissive occupancies have  
been terminated. Permissive occupancy  
leases are terminable at any time. Often  
we hear from the Government benches  
what Labor did and what Labor did not do  
in its twenty-four years of office. I assure  
honourable members that since the early  
1940s, throughout the twenty-four years of  
Labor Government, it was the policy of the  
Department of Lands to extend leniency to  
pensioners occupying leases in this area.  
No attempt was made to terminate these  
leases. However, in the short space of five  
years this Government, through the Minister  
for Lands and with the assistance of the  
bureaucratic public servants in his depart-  
ment, has resolved to remove these people  
from their occupancies. On 25th October  
the people about whom I am speaking  
held a public meeting to discuss what they  
might do about the matter. In the past they  
have held several meetings about it. They  
decided to form a deputation to present  
their case to the Minister for Lands. Last  
week on their behalf I spoke to the Min-  
ister and he agreed to meet the deputation  
tomorrow. I thank him for his courtesy in  
this matter. These people have nowhere  
else to go. They have received a notice,  
which says:

To the occupier,  
Permissive Occupancy No.....  
held by.....in respect of  
this structure was terminated on 17th April,  
1970, and the occupants advised they should  
be removed by 17th October, 1970. Now take  
notice that this structure is claimed to be  
abandoned and it is proposed to demolish it  
without further notice. You are hereby directed  
to remove all contents and personal effects  
from the structure forthwith and your failure  
to remove same will result in the contents  
being claimed and sold and the proceeds being  
retained towards the cost of demolition.

What a wonderful way to treat aged pensioners! I appeal to the Minister for Lands to give these people a reprieve until after Christmas, which is only seven weeks away. If this plan is put into effect, these people will probably be sleeping in sleeping bags round this area from now until Christmas. People in their eighties would be spending the Christmas festive season sleeping out under the trees. I suggest the Government does not intend to develop this land. The Minister for Lands and the Government, in an attempt to bolster the Government's finances, will subdivide the land or will probably give it to some big developers to subdivide it.

If the Government wants to show its sincerity, it could develop perhaps 100 acres as a recreation area and leave the houses intact until the whole area has been developed. This would take twenty-five years, by which time these people will not be worrying about their permissive occupancies. The Government could then say to these people, if any of them are living: "We have developed all that land. We now want to demolish your premises and we ask you to remove all the contents." I do not think anyone would object in those circumstances. I saw a sorry spectacle with other pensioners at Swansea Heads. A contractor put a wire round the residences and, with heavy motor lorries, pulled them over. They are still living there. No attempt has been made to develop the area at Swansea Heads, and the same thing will happen to the land to which I am referring. At a public meeting on 25th October, Councillor Tobin said that the Lake Macquarie Shire Council had no plan to use the area as a recreation space.

Mr HUGHES: On a point of order, I suggest that the honourable member for Kahibah is completely out of order in raising this matter on the motion for the adjournment. He has already intimated that the Minister for Lands has agreed to receive tomorrow afternoon a deputation on this issue. Presumably the honourable member and the deputation will then have every opportunity of putting this matter before the Minister. I submit that the honourable member is simply using the motion for the adjournment as part of a Labor Party campaign to attack public servants. He has made most derogatory remarks about persons whom he calls bureaucratic public servants, and to officers of the Department of Lands. I submit that this is part of a well-planned campaign by Labor to attack the police and public servants in every department.

CUMMING

XXX-12.25

HUGHES: LOQ.

1  
B.H. 12  
WA 106

I submit that the debate on the motion for the adjournment of the House is not an appropriate time to launch attacks on public servants, especially as the issue with regard to pensioners at <sup>C</sup>Xoon Island is to go before the Minister for Lands tomorrow. A moment ago the h m for ~~WAK~~ Kahiba<sup>h</sup> said that he appreciated that the Minister for Lands was to meet them. Surely what the h m is saying in this debate is the material that will go to the Minister for Lands tomorrow. I submit that it is out of order to use the adjournment debate to attack public servants and I ask you, Mr Speaker, to rule that the h m is out of order.

( Mr Speaker: Order! There may well be considerable substance in what the Minister for Public Works<sup>and</sup> has to say, but I do not think it amounts to a point of order.

796

XXX-2

Mr J.J. T. STEWART: If it is offensive to the  
Minister I shall withdraw <sup>my reference to</sup> ~~any mention of~~ public servants.

I appreciate the action of the Minister of Lands in meeting  
these people, but it is wrong for any Government to demolish  
these homes while the pensioners are occupying them.

If they were to ~~not~~ demolish the whole lot it would be all  
right, but if they are going to demolish one here, one there  
and another somewhere else, there will be no room for them  
to develop the land where the remaining houses are, so  
they might as well go ahead and develop the part where  
there are no homes at the moment and ~~leave~~ leave the homes  
intact for these people to live in.

(Motion agreed to.

870 ) [ House adjourned at 12.27 a.m., Wednesday. ]

357

## Coon Island group sees Lewis

The N.S.W. Minister for Lands (Mr. Lewis) this afternoon received a deputation from residents of Coon Island, Lake Macquarie.

The Minister gave an assurance that all permanent residents who are pensioners would be allowed to remain on the island.

He said restoration work would have to be done on the island's waterfront. Assistance would be given to the pensioners involved to retain the waterfront.

Mr. Lewis promised that engineers would visit the site and that restoration work would be started in the next financial year.

The deputation included the President of the Coon Island and Little Coon Citizens' Reprieve Committee (Mr. W. Standing), the Secretary of the committee (Mr. C. Lamb), the Assistant Secretary (Mr. G. Hallett), Messrs. N. W. Hallett, W. Russell and the Secretary of Newcastle Labour Council (Mr. K. Wilson).

Coon Island is zoned "open space-recreation" in the Northumberland Planning Scheme.

The deputation was to protest to the Minister about the proposal to remove from the island all residents, both permanent and part-time, who were not pensioners permanently residing there.

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**'No gain' in Coon  
Island deputation**

Nothing would be gained by sending a delegation to Sydney to discuss the Coon Island and Little Coonle evictions, the Premier (Mr. Askin) told Swansea branch of the Liberal Party.

Mr. Askin said the policy on the area was laid down long ago — as early as 1944 a decision was made to end some permissive occupancies.

The branch will support residents of the areas concerned provided they use only lawful means, a spokesman said.

110  
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# Goon Is. people have to leave

There would be no reprieve for people other than pensioners residing at Goon Island and Little Coonie, Swansea, Mr. Stewart, M.L.A., said yesterday.

This had been made clear by Mr. Freudenstein, acting for the Minister for Lands (Mr. Lewis), now overseas.

Mr. Freudenstein was replying to requests by a deputation received at Parliament House on November 5.

## Pensioners

The deputation sought an indefinite reprieve for occupiers of permissive occupancies faced with termination of their leases and removal of structures, including their homes.

Mr. Freudenstein said the decision then indicated was now confirmed. That pensioner bona-fide permanent residents would be al-

lowed to stay during their lifetime.

Persons using structures for holiday premises and other people living on the two islands would have to leave according to directions already given.

One member of the deputation, because of special personal factors, would be allowed two years to re-establish his house at Swansea.

The Acting Minister said that so far as the erosion problem involving Swansea Channel was concerned, an engineer would inspect Coon Island and Little Coonie and recommend on restoration work considered necessary.

Mr. Stewart said the reply meant that people other than pensioners would just wait for the final day.

There was a chance of what happened at Swansea Heads repeating itself: demolishers engaged by the Government pulling homes and other buildings down, creating heaps of rubble in places where families had lived for many years.

# Coon Island under survey

In conjunction with the Public Works Department, the Lands Department was conducting surveys of Coon Island and Little Coonie, near Swansea, the Minister for Lands (Mr. Lewis) said.

One purpose was to ascertain to what extent, if any, erosion would take place at Coon Island if occupiers did not continue preservation work.

He was referring to claims of Coon Island Reprieve Committee that once families left the island tidal activity in Swansea would result in serious erosion.

The residents, who for years have occupied the island on permissive occupancies, believe this part of the channel could eventually disappear unless rock walls were maintained.

People living on the two places who are not pensioners have been ordered to quit.

The time limit has expired, and the department has warned that unless the order is obeyed premises not removed will be pulled down, as was done at Swansea Heads.

Mr. Lewis said a pensioner or his wife could stay on the island till they died. He had been asked why could not others retain their permissive occupancy till all pensioners had died.

## Find sites

"If we allowed this, some people would themselves become pensioners before the last one died; thus we would have a continuing problem," he said.

The department had offered to find alternative building sites for those forced to go.

Mr. Lewis said the future of the area had not been forgotten. The surveys being undertaken, in addition to making a determination on the erosion issue, would also plan development of the vacated and adjacent areas as public reserves.

# ISLAND SETTLERS WAIT ON SURVEY

Residents of Coon Island and Little Coonie are anxiously awaiting the result of surveys by Government departments on a substantial area of swamp close to their place of settlement.

A big area of mainly tidal swamp or thick grassland with a motley collection of swamp oaks; some are beginning to topple over with age, the area is estimated to be too costly for a local authority to reclaim and develop.

An inspection on Monday by the President of the Reprive Committee (Mr. W. Standing), who has lived on Coon Island for many years and has an extensive knowledge of Swansea, revealed that reclamation of the low-lying swamp and improvement of the land sections, once popularly known as Wallsend Camp and Scotties, could provide a first-class recreational park and camping spot.

Mr. Standing raised the question of cost. He said one conservative estimate for full reclamation and development was \$500,000 and he asked which government department would be prepared to spend so much on such a project.

"The general belief around these parts is that the area will be made available to a land developer; after all nothing has been done to provide the promised parkland at Swansea Heads since the homes were demolished there," he said.

"There were 21 homes along the foreshore in Wallsend camp section till the Government forced them off in the 1950's," he said.

"There were other buildings, and the whole place was looked after. What has happened since?"

"Nothing. Apart from a section of the park at the eastern end, the area has been neglected, resulting in wild growth."

Mr. Standing said that many years ago the area was popular with picnickers. More than 60 years ago, there was a small race-course for amateur meetings, followed by a trotting circle and then a dog course.

After the Government survey had been completed, the Minister for Lands (Mr. Lewis) had a moral responsibility to produce a plan of development, he said.

He said people first settled on Coon Island in 1924, which would have

been washed away but for the protection provided by residents to prevent tidal erosion by fast-moving water in Swansea Channel.

"We invite the Minister and his advisers to come to the island to test the validity of residents' claims of saving this area," Mr. Standing said.

## Erosion

"In November, Lake Macquarie Shire Council did some rock wall work for the department; but already there are signs of erosion.

"We claim the rock boulders placed in line, without adequate binding, are not able to resist the erosive movement of tidal water now washing through big cracks on to the land."

Mr. Standing said the council had also constructed a small boat ramp along the channel wall of Coon Island in November. Though the area was shallow, the tide was washing sand inwards — a start of bank erosion.

THE LAKE MACQUARIE

# Herald

THURSDAY, JUNE 10, 1971



This is a view of the swampy land to be reclaimed, with the area formerly occupied by housing and sporting tracks in the background. The low-lying area in the foreground is subject to tidal water and separates Coon Island from the mainland.

# COON ISLAND "FOOTBALL"

THE statement by the Minister for Lands (Mr. Lewis) that his department, in conjunction with the Public Works Department, was conducting surveys of Coon Island and Little Coonie reads to all involved in this conflict somewhat like a football match, with the residents of both places as footballs.

I have a map of all the area in dispute drawn up by the Lands Department in December, 1942. The area noted as Swansea North indicates the houses and owners named at that time, with a mention of a 100ft. reservation. This suggests a game of Probables and Possibles being played, remembering that 14 years ago at least 20 structures were removed.

The scars of this match still exist, and still the area has not been developed.

Notations such as mud flats, fairly firm sand, fordable at low tide for medium traffic, foreshore badly eroded and other remarks not decipherable illustrate how slowly the department works to prevent erosion.

The Minister's statement that the department had offered to find alternate building sites for residents forced to go sounds nice, but he omitted to say no compensation was being paid and the affected person must acquire land for special lease. A large percentage of these people are either mine or aged pensioners whose average age exceeds 65. Purchase of

land and transfer of existing buildings, if approved by Lake Macquarie Shire Council, are loaded with problems. It would be almost impossible to these old people to get money from a bank or building society. There is also the anxiety of people of this age group becoming established in a new environment.

What does the Minister seek to achieve? Placing more responsibility on the council to maintain and develop this area, when improvements are needed at many parks under the council's control.

We believe sufficient evidence is visible to show that an erosion problem has existed in the Little Coonie and Coon Island area at all times; it is doubtful the area would still be there but for permissive occupiers protecting their banks against tidal movement of the channel.

The Minister referred to a possible continuing pro-

## TO THE EDITOR

blem if non-pensioners were allowed to stay until pensioners died. Early this year a meeting of people with permissive occupancies decided to press for new leases for all; that pensioners with a structure and not in permanent residence be given conditions enjoyed by permanent pensioners; that persons other than pensioners satisfy the Government that on their death their structures will be removed in the same way as permanent pensioners are required.

We have tried to find a satisfactory solution, but it is not easy to meet the Premier or Minister in such a situation. We agree with the Premier that all people should have security and stability; that is all we have sought.

We hope all details of the surveys will be made public. We are prepared to let the public decide where social justice lies. —  
C. E. LAMB, Secretary,  
Coon Island and Little  
Cooie Reprieve Commit-  
tee.

## Coon. Is. demolition check

Coon Island and Little Coonie Reprive Committee is checking reports that the Lands Department might soon demolish some buildings and jetties at Coon Island.

A number of buildings have been under threat of demolition for some time because of their permissive occupancies (leases) not having been renewed.

The Secretary of the committee (Mr. C. Lamb) said reports received from residents in the area suggested that at least one contractor had made a preliminary survey of the area to ascertain probable costs.

It had been suggested that six homes and jetties would go, as a start.

He had discussed the matter with the Secretary of Newcastle Trades Hall Council (Mr. K. Wilson), who assured promised trade-union support, including pickets, would be given at the appropriate time.

THE LAKE MACQUARIE HERALD 17th JULY 1971

## Inquiry pledged on islands

The Minister for Lands (Mr. Lewis) has promised Mr. Jensen, M.L.A., to make new inquiries about the occupation of Coon Island and Little Coonie near Swansea.

Mr. Jensen had asked Mr. Lewis to meet a deputation

COON ISLAND AND LITTLE COONEY

Mr JENSEN: My question is directed to the Minister for Lands. Did he inform a delegation of residents of Coon Island and Little Cooney, at Swansea, that he would not permit most of them to continue with their Crown land occupancies, some of which had been of long duration and despite evidence that the voluntary efforts of the occupants of the land had held back the adjacent Swansea channel and prevented the water submerging the land that they occupy? Have the pensioners, who, the Minister has stated, will be allowed to stay, expressed concern at their probable inability to hold back the channel in adverse weather without the help of friends and neighbours whom the Minister proposes to evict, and does this endanger their lives and property as well as the subject land? Has the Minister refused to receive a further delegation from those affected by his announced decision, despite requests made to the Minister both directly and through the Premier? Will he again reconsider his decision on this issue and see a delegation representative of those concerned, so that the anguish of those affected may be alleviated and a more sympathetic attitude towards their problems may be discussed?

Mr LEWIS: I should think that some of the information the honourable member conveyed in his question is correct and some of it is incorrect. I did receive a deputation either early this year or late last year, consisting, I think, of three members of the Opposition and of residents of Coon Island. For a great number of years Coon Island was occupied—I think since the time of the depression—by miners out of work and by other people who were adversely affected during the depression. Ministers for Lands in prior administrations—the Hon. K. C. Compton, the Hon. J. M. A. MacMahon, the Hon. R. B. Nott, and the Hon. F. H. Hawkins—all had exactly the same policy, that pensioners would be allowed to retain their property and their spouses would be able to retain occupation until death but that any other person who inherited the places or wanted to pass on or use these houses as weekenders, would not be allowed to continue to do so.

Previous administrations and my own administration offered alternative sites in the area and these offers were extended time after time. These people were asked to take up permanent blocks in the general area of Coon Island; some accepted the offer but others took no action whatever. The policies of all administrations will continue during my administration. These pensioners who have been assured of retaining their property until death will continue to have that assurance—and I am sure any other administration would agree with that view. Other people who are using the Crown as a convenience by occupying weekenders on these blocks, will not be allowed to continue to do so.

The other point raised by the honourable member has some substance, but I remind him, as I believe I reminded the deputation, that should it be necessary to obtain additional finance to hold back the waters to protect the properties of the occupants who still remain in the area, the Crown will find sufficient money to meet the cost of stabilizing the foreshores so that their properties will not be endangered. Ultimately, as the honourable member might know but the House might not, it is intended to restore this area generally to increase the recreation facilities of the area. I am not aware that I have refused to receive another deputation. I shall look into the matter, and if the honourable member wishes me to receive another deputation, in spite of what I have just told the House, I shall certainly comply with his request.

## ISLAND REPRIEVE



Coon Island homes have received another reprieve from demolition.

A contractor for the Lands Department and sub-contractors decided last night not to continue with the demolition of nine homes on the island, near Swansea.

The contractor (Mr Jackson) said he would talk with Department of Lands officials today about the contract.

All of the island's 38 residents other than pensioners, have been given eviction notices by the Lands Board.

Most of the houses were built 40 years ago and since have remained under permissive occupancy.

Yesterday the demolishers removed furniture from some of the houses (see picture) after breaking down the doors with a sledgehammer.

# BEHIND A PEACEFUL EXTERIOR, TEMPERS ARE ON THE BOIL

From a Staff Correspondent

Coon Island on Lake Macquarie. An old lady in a red bonnet sits in the sun near a row of weatherboard houses feeding the squawking gulls. Nearby, an old man with a Rangoon rod baits a hook with dough and prepares to catch some mullet.

It is noon, and the island is still, a place of peace.

But appearances are deceptive, for Coon Island, a swampy stretch of scrubland separated from Swansea by a tiny creek and a rattling wooden bridge, is troubled ground.

Last week amid placards and angry words, Newcastle trade unionists won another round to keep the Lands Department from attempting to demolish 34 cottages which face the mainland in a long tattered avenue.

When a departmental officer and the demolition contractor arrived on the site to begin work last Monday, they found the bridge blocked by a car and a large gathering of irate residents and unionists.

They were told the job had been declared "black." Soon afterwards the contractor made a ceremony of tearing up what he claimed was the actual work document. A little later the two men left.

The department plans ultimately to rid the island of all dwellings, and to reserve the land as a public recreation area. Only the homes of 10 old-aged pensioners, without alternative accommodation, will be spared—temporarily.

The 13 buildings involved in the current tender are occupied only at the weekends and during holidays,



Mr W. STANDING



Mr G. HALLETT

but these will be followed by 21 other houses used by permanent tenants.

Typical of those affected is Mrs Barbara Parkes, 28, the mother of two small children. She lives with her mother and father and a 51-year-old pensioner aunt in the house her grandfather built 55 years ago, the first on the island.

In common with other occupants, the Parkes family held a permissive occupancy lease which

was tenable from husband to wife to son. In 1969 sons were excluded as lessees. A few months later all leases were cancelled.

Said Mrs Parkes: "We can't afford to get another place, we've got no money and nowhere to go. I've been here since I was two years old. Coon Island is my home."

A few doors up the track are the Halletts. They have lived permanently in their comfortable waterfront cottage now for the past 12 years, and estimate it will cost them \$4,000 to move, including the price of transporting their modest home to a new block at Swansea.

"We think it inevitable that these houses will be demolished," Mrs Joy Hallett said. "So we are taking the only way out and are preparing to rehabilitate ourselves while still young enough."

Her 18-year-old son, Graeme Hallett, an Arts student at the University of Newcastle, is strongly opposed to leaving. He became actively involved in the Coon Island Reprive Committee, and is now its secretary and leading spokesman.

He claims the department has no real reason to clear the island. "They are just moving us for the sake of moving us. It's a case of creating hardship where it is not necessary.



Some of the threatened houses on Coon Island.

The houses only occupy an area of 33 feet by 66 feet in one line along the island. That's certainly not stopping the public from coming here."

One of the oldest protesters on Coon Island is pensioner Mr Bill Standing, a resident for 40 years and a former miner and union leader. Although his home is one that will remain, it was he who organised the Reprive Committee.

"I don't like the thought of losing all my friends," he said. "I don't like it at all."

He pointed across a brief area of back lawn to a stone wall against which an incoming tide lapped quietly.

"I am also worried about this wall. My friends and neighbours built it along this avenue to keep back the water,"

he said. "Without this wall the island would be worn away. Who among those remaining will be strong enough to continue maintenance?" he queried.

Mr Standing has twice met the Minister for Lands, Mr Lewis, but found his attitude unpromising.

"We modified our original demands and asked him not to take any action against residents until we old-timers were gone," he said. "We're all over 80 and haven't that long to live. But he turned us down flat, reckoning they'd find other reasons to stay on."

A northern spokesman for the Lands Department, said there would be no change of plans. "The demolition will continue one way or another."

He said places like the

island were occupied when it did not appear it would be necessary to keep such areas. "But now all that is changed, and the pressure of urban development and population growth makes such occupancy untenable. The land can be used later for park and a recreation area, with Lake Macquarie Shire Council as guardian."

Yesterday afternoon two sub-contractors broke into several vacant houses on Coon Island and started moving out furniture in preparation for full scale demolition today.

A large group of police and pensioners stood by while the men worked. The secretary of the Newcastle Trades Hall Council, Mr Wilson, has promised to picket the island to make sure the men do not begin demolition.



## Island homes receive reprieve

Thirty-four houses on Coon Island, Lake Macquarie received a temporary reprieve from demolition yesterday, when a contractor publicly announced that he had abandoned the job.

The contractor, Mr Les Jackson, of Kurri, averted an angry confrontation when he handed residents of the island and picketing Newcastle trade-unionists a statutory declaration promising he would not go ahead with the work.

Six police, including the officer-in-charge of the north-eastern police district, Superintendent F. Bradstreet, and three inspectors, watched the proceedings.

The Lands Department plans to clear the island of all dwellings and to reserve the area as a public recreation zone.

A departmental spokesman said later that the job was not going to die.

"We will probably make some further attempt to carry out the order," he said.

Failing this, the department would approach the Minister for Lands, Mr Lewis, to reconsider the issue.

The cottages on Coon Island, mostly weekenders, were held by permissive occupancy leases until 1970 when they were cancelled and the occupants given eviction notices.

Only 10 old-age pensioners will be allowed to remain.

Last week the Lands Department let the demolition contract, but a large group of residents and trade-union officials, carrying placards, barred access to the island.

The project was declared "black."

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## Picket lines save nine homes

**NEWCASTLE, Tues.—A man today repudiated his contract to demolish nine houses at Coon Island, near Sansea.**

His decision followed the opposition of residents and unionists.

People living in the houses — on a permissive occupancy basis — were given notice two years ago by the Lands Department.

Some of the houses are used as weekenders.

The department plans to convert the area into parkland.

### Resisted

The only residents at Coon Island who will be allowed to remain are pensioners with no other accommodation.

Picket lines last week resisted a move to demolish the houses.

Yesterday, the contractor for the demolition moved furniture from some of the houses into one building.

Today, local residents and volunteers carried back the furniture to the other houses.

Police Superintendent F. Bradstreet, and other police stood by today while opponents of the demolition discussed their complaints with the contractor.

Union representatives will attempt to arrange a conference with the Lands Department.

# Lake tourists driven out by 'squatters'

By DONNA GERSBACH, Lake Macquarie Reporter

ILLEGAL 'squatters' at Coon Island have been accused of turning an access road for a Swansea picnic spot into a speedway which is driving tourists out of the area.

And Lake Macquarie City Council has been blamed for helping the squatters by regularly maintaining the 'speed track'.

The gravel road, which connects Wallarah St with a picnic area on the point and with Swansea Gardens Tourist Park, was last upgraded the week before the May school holidays, creating fears for the safety of holidaying families.

The manager of the tourist park, Mr Max Gallard, has complained that the council's work has hindered the operation of his park, while assisting the Coon Island residents who contribute nothing to council's revenue.

The council confirmed that only five of the 20 residents had Land Board approval, while the remainder were squatters who paid no rates to council, but had water, power and telephone laid on.

At the request of Mr Gallard, ward aldermen visited the area on Wednesday to assess the problem, which he believed could affect the long-term development of tourism in that part of Swansea.

## Area ruined by a 'few locals'

The issue is expected to come up for discussion at next week's council meeting.

Mr Gallard said it was unfortunate that a 'few locals' were ruining a beautiful area.

'Tourism is big money for Swansea, and it is the ratepayers who will lose out in the long run,' he said.

Mr Gallard said some of the Coon Island residents were causing a major problem in the way they drove past the park.

Unless action was taken to combat the problem, he believed it would be impossible to maintain the current trend of increased park patronage.

During the busy summer period the council had done work on the access road and the Coon Island road, while the caravan park was full. Mr Gallard had tried unsuccessfully to have the work stopped, only to be confronted with a similar problem this month.

With the school holidays then due to start, Mr Gallard said he could only wonder at the timing of the work.

On the other hand, the council had assisted the squatters by reconstructing a bridge to the island which used to be a slow-down point for them.

Mr Gallard said it was the younger residents of the area who were using the road as a speedway and driving at high speed around the parking area at the point.

## Unruly drinkers disruptive

The problem occurred at all hours of the day, but was particularly prevalent at night, and the noise disturbed people who used the park.

People using the park camping area near the road were confronted with the added unpleasant problem of dust clouds, which worsened each time work was done on the unsealed road.

Further headaches were caused during summer by Friday and Saturday night drinking parties, which resulted in piles of rubbish, broken glass around the swimming area, and foul language which carried clearly to the caravan park.

The only saviour during the May holidays was the wet weather, which at least eliminated the dust problem.

Mr Gallard said he did not know what the final answer could be, but he believed the problem might be relieved by sealing the road, installing speed humps and declaring a speed limit of 40km/h.

25-5-85



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# STUDENTS' PLANS TO PROTEST ARE HAUNTED BY EVICTION

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# Lake takes cautious approach to eviction

By DONNA GERSBACH, Lake Macquarie Reporter

**PROPOSALS to evict squatters and close the access road on an isolated stretch of land at Swansea point known as Coon Island remain in limbo, with Lake Macquarie City Council adopting a cautious approach to what has become a touchy issue with residents of the area.**

The council has called for a further report on ways to control or remove the island's inhabitants and will take no immediate action to close the access road.

It was believed that a public outcry could result from the closure of the road, which is used not only by the island residents but by visitors as an access to the foreshore.

Suggestions for the closure brought a strong reaction from Swansea Advisory Committee which told the council it was quite adamant that the vehicular access should remain.

The council adopted this week a motion by Ald Shields for the council to prepare a plan for the access road which would be put into effect when Coon Island was dedicated as a reserve.

Ald Shields said he believed the council would get a considerable amount of flack if the road was closed now.

Although a number of residents have legal occupancy of the island until their death, plans to turn the area into a reserve date to 1968.

The homes occupied by the legal residents will be demolished as they become vacant, in preparation for its use as a reserve.

The remaining residents who have no legal rights fear they will be turned out with nowhere else to go.

The council originally believed the island was occupied by 20 resi-

dents, of which five had legal occupancy rights.

In an up-dated report this week the council was advised that of 22 dwellings on the island eight had permissive occupancy with the Land Board.

The area was inspected last week by ward aldermen, council staff and representatives of Swansea Advisory Committee after complaints from Mr Rex Gallard, the manager of the council's Swansea Gardens Tourist Park.

## Humps, speed limit approved

Mr Gallard told the council that the un-named gravel road which served the tourist park and joined the Coon Island access road was being used as a speedway, which was damaging to tourism in the area.

The council has agreed install speed humps on the section of road near the tourist park and limit the speed to 10k/mh in an attempt to overcome the speeding problem.

A report on last week's inspection of the area said the tourist park had the potential to be one of the best drawcards to the City of Lake Macquarie.

The report continued that closing the access road to vehicles would not deny public use. It would be only a short walk from the parking area to the water.



**STRUCTURES ON PUBLIC  
LANDS WITHOUT LAWFUL  
AUTHORITY  
CROWN LANDS CONSOLI-  
DATION ACT, 1913, SEC-  
TION 254A.**

Any person who claims to have authority to erect, maintain or use, or claims any interest in the structures referred to in Schedule (1), hereunder, or any part of the said structures erected on Crown land being those parts of Reserve 89230 for Public Recreation, notified 5th July, 1974, Village Swansea, Parish, Wailarah, County Northumberland, Land District Newcastle, City Lake Macquarie, known as Little Coonle, Swansea, is hereby required, pursuant to Section 254A (3) of the Crown Lands Consolidation Act, 1913, to deliver to the Minister for Lands a statement in writing signed by such person stating by what authority that person erected or is entitled to maintain or use the structures referred to in Schedule (1) or any part of the said structures or by what authority that person claims any interest in the structures referred to in Schedule (1) or any part of the said structures. NOTE: (1) The effect of Section 254A (3) is that any person who, within one month after publication of the above notice, fails to deliver the statement referred to therein to the Minister, shall have no claim against the Minister, or any other person, removing the structures referred to in Schedule (1) or any part of the said structures, or the contents thereof under the section. The address for the statement is: The Minister for Lands, 23-33 Bridge Street, Sydney, 2000. (2) Under Section 254A (4) the Minister may recover in any court of competent jurisdiction, expenses incurred in the removal, destruction, sale or storage of the structures referred to in Schedule (1) or any part of the said structures or the contents thereof. SCHEDULE (1) (a) On the land described as Block 29 Little Coonle on the Lands Department plan MD53 signposted as Gray's Place and known as No 16 Little Coonle adjacent to the Council Car Park: A weatherboard cottage on concrete piers with galvanised iron roof; low storage shed 4.2m x 2m adjacent to rear; fibro toilet 1.2m x 1.1m; concrete slab 5m x 2.7m and concrete path 7.4m x 0.9m. (b) On the land described as Block 31, Little Coonle on the Lands Department plan MD53, known as No 20 Little Coonle beginning 12 metres north of that cottage signposted as Gray's Place: A weatherboard and asbestos cottage on concrete piers with galvanised iron roof; galvanised iron toilet 1.1m x 1.4m; 15m long clothes line unenclosed by fencing; 51m paling fencing and 16m assorted fencing. W. P. KELLY, Director of Crown Lands.

Newcastle Herald

7-1-87

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# THE LAKE MACQUARIE *Gazette*

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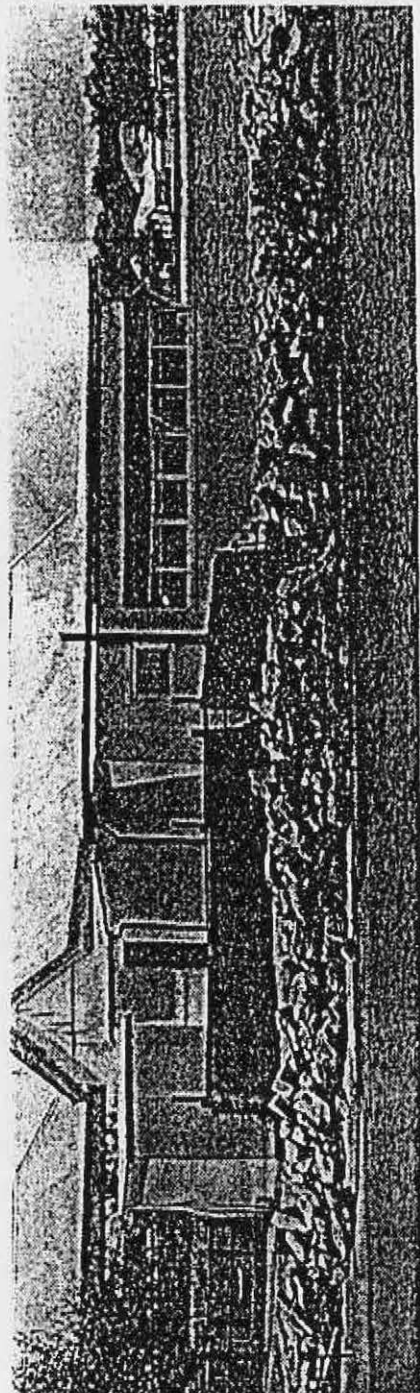
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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 1989 Vol. 42 No. 5

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□ ONE of the old houses on Coon Island which is to be demolished.

# ISLAND HOMES TO GO

By Anne Lee

**THE** last few remaining unauthorised residents of Coon Island are being asked to relocate by the Department of Lands - and the dwellings demolished.

Department of Lands regional manager John Osborne told the *Gazette* that of the eight dwellings remaining on the island, only four contained authorised residents.

"These authorised people will not be moved, but as they pass on or leave of their own accord, the dwellings will be demolished," said Mr Osborne.

He said the authorised residents had "permissive occupancy" and were paying rents and council rates, while the unauthorised residents were paying nothing.

## Unauthorised

"At one stage there were 65-70 dwellings occupied by unauthorised people," said Mr Osborne.

"As one group of people moved out, others moved in," he said.

Mr Osborne said the land was Crown Land earmarked for public recreation.

When all dwellings are



# Coon Island campaign to continue

**Coon Island and Little Coonie Reprive Committee will continue to press for a deputation to the Minister for Lands (Mr. Lewis) to discuss termination of permissive occupancies.**

A meeting of 75 people on the waterfront of Coon Island on Sunday adopted an 18-point circular and resolved that it be sent with a covering letter to the Premier (Mr. Askin), Mr. Lewis, all northern Federal and State parliamentarians and interested organisations.

The Acting Secretary (Mr. C. Lamb) said the meeting considered a meeting with Mr. Lewis would solve many problems.

"We feel that Mr. Lewis should at least talk the matter over with us, so we can come to some arrangement that is satisfactory to his department and to the occupiers," he said.

"In July, the committee appointed three delegates, the President (Mr. W. Standing), Mr. W. Russell and myself, as a deputation. We are still prepared to meet Mr. Lewis at any time and place to try to resolve the situation.

### Meeting happy

"We feel that Mr. Lewis has made an admission in a letter that was read to the meeting, by saying that development by the department cannot proceed till all pensioners are removed from the area.

"The meeting was happy with the tone of the letter in that fresh permissive occupancies would be offered to all pensioners in bona fide permanent occupation," Mr. Lamb said.

### Coon Island matter for Lewis - Askin

It would be more appropriate for the Coon Island Reprive Committee to direct its representations to the Minister for Lands (Mr. Lewis), the Premier (Mr. Askin) said.

Mr. Stewart, M.L.A., asked Mr. Askin to receive a deputation of occupiers to discuss the termination of their occupancies.

Mr. Askin said he appreciated the wish of the committee and residents to see him on the matter of permissive occupancies at Coon Island and Little Coonie.

It was not practicable for him to make an appointment because of pressure of duties, particularly with the forthcoming session of Parliament and preparation of the Budget.

The administration of Mr. Lewis was primarily involved in the matter, and it would be more appropriate to direct representations to him.

Mr. Askin said he told Mr. Lewis that Mr. Stewart had been in touch with him and the

In his letter, through Mr. Stewart, M.L.A., Mr. Lewis said it had been the policy of the department for a number of years to terminate all permissive occupancies at Coon Island and Little Coonie to develop the areas for full use and enjoyment of the public generally.

Permissive occupancies were terminable at will, terminable at any time. In arriving at a decision to terminate them from April 17, consideration had been given to circumstances of the occupants.

The decision provided that fresh permissive occupancies be offered to all pensioners in permanent bona fide occupation on Coon Island and Little Coonie, except in cases where the department was prevented by obstacles of transfer of titles to structures occupied.

Provision was also made for other occupants, to be given the opportunity of applying for residential blocks of land for disposal among themselves, all such applications to be dealt with on merits.

### 64 occupants

Final departmental plans for the area could not be completed till all occupants, including pensioners, were removed from the area. While problems associated with the termination of occupancies were appreciated, consideration would not be given to alteration of the decision reached, Mr. Lewis said.

Points raised in the circular adopted by the committee include—

There were 64 occupants, some of whom have been occupying blocks under lease for more than 25 years.

But for the personal interest of most in protecting banks against erosion, it was doubtful if the island would exist.

Most occupiers were mine and age pensioners, with an average age of about 70.

The department should inspect work done by residents to prevent erosion.

About 12 years ago, houses were removed from nearby lake foreshores. The land was then used as a rubbish dump.

Many acres of vacant Crown land that could be developed adjoined the area.

At all times the public had access to foreshores of Coon Island and Little Coonie.

Age pensioners in permanent occupation would stay for their lifetime. Other occupants should stay for this period because the department could make no development while pensioners were there.

The committee decided to continue its meeting at the same site at 10 a.m. on August 16.

*Mr. Stewart*

*in connection with Reprive 20/30/70 to you 5/8/70*

*[Signature]*  
15/8/70

*East M.D. Askin*

## WAITING FOR BULLDOZER DRIVER'S KNOCK



Mr Hallet and Mrs Jenkins on Coon Island.

By a Staff Reporter

Depression hangs heavily over Coon Island. It's not the fact that the 34 shabby, clapboard cottages on the four-acre tidal island 18 miles south of Newcastle are survivals of the depression years.

It's the fact that the cottages, which line the fore-shore of Swansea Channel, are doomed to make way for a recreation area.

The residents cast the Lands Department, which has resumed the land, as the villain of the piece, as one resident, Mrs Ella Jenkins, explained: "There could be a knock on the door this minute from a driver with a bulldozer waiting out front.

"The department is just playing a waiting game. It's 18 months since the people here got scared and started to leave. They felt they were breaking the law

"Once a house looks abandoned, the vandals come along and break everything. There's nothing we can do about it, because the police say a complaint must be lodged by the department, not the residents."

The residents claim that the department also knows that, with the houses in a derelict condition, they would not be able to rally support for their cause from unionists, politicians or the public. It was only this support, especially that of the Newcastle Trades Hall, which stopped the department from demolishing the houses 18 months ago.

The department, on the other hand, argues the land is needed for recreation. Lake Macquarie Shire Council will be given the trusteeship of the land to develop it as a caravan park lakeside park and

## Coon Island's outlook one of unrelieved gloom



"Vandals go up and down on motor cycles and in cars all the time," she said.

"One woman came down from Charlestown on a Sunday and spent the day cleaning up her cottage. When she returned next afternoon every window had been broken."

Mrs Jenkins, 56, and her husband, Trevor, a Water Board meter mechanic and president of the Coon Island Reprieve Committee, spend seven months of the year on the island. They return to their outer Newcastle suburban home at West Wallsend when the cold creeps in between the cracks in the old weatherboard cottage.

Now, as Mr Graeme Hallet, the reprieve committee's 20-year-old secretary, said: "It's only a matter of time."

homes or passing them on to friends or relatives. Mr Hallet says they have been determined to stay because, "let's face it, where else can you build right on to a deep channel and in these conditions?"

There was no need for him to explain the conditions he had in mind. Having driven down from sweltering Newcastle with sweat pouring from me, I understood.

The nor-easterly breeze coming from the water was instant relief. The tiny, swaying boats moored along the bank and the pelicans swimming along the channel relaxed the tension built up in the Pacific Highway traffic. A fisherman proudly displayed his 12lb catch.

It was the atmosphere of not knowing when they were going to be moved that made Mr Hallet and his parents, move their 13-

year-old fibro cottage half a mile to Swansea flats. The new block of land cost them \$6,000 and the moving \$1,800.

Mr Hallet is a trainee teacher but almost all the residents worked at Cessnock mine. They frequented the island not only because of its attractions, but because it was accessible for their three-week annual holiday.

The residents include Mr Thomas Turnock, 87, a retired, underground-mine manager, who began visiting the island 50 years ago with his wife Ella, 85. One of the island's oldest residents, he said: "I retired here because I liked catching fish. I thought it would be a nice way to spend the rest of my life."

His wife interrupted: "But now, I guess, we'll spend the rest of our lives in a nursing home."

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The department, on the other hand, argues the land is needed for recreation. Lake Macquarie Shire Council will be given the trusteeship of the land to develop it as a caravan park, lakeside park and bathing and boat-launching areas.

The residents pay the department \$6 a year rent. When their battle with the department reached its climax in July, 1972, the residents barricaded the island's one road, which is potholed and unsealed. When the demolition contractor arrived to begin work he found the rattling wooden bridge, which links the swampy island to the mainland, blocked by a car.

Eventually the Minister for Lands, Mr Lewis, agreed that the 10 permanent pensioner residents would be issued with new leases so they could stay on the island until they died. He had revoked the other residents' permissive-occupancy leases in 1970 and had given them six months to leave.

Now the residents think even the pensioners will be forced to leave, because it would be impossible for them to continue living on the island alone.

Mrs Jenkins described the island as frightening at

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Now, as Mr Graeme Hallet, the reprieve committee's 20-year-old secretary, said: "It's only a matter of time."

It's hard to believe these are the words of the same young man who once led the residents into battle, who took a stand against the State Government, even though he was thinking of seeking Liberal Party endorsement as a candidate in the last State election. (He won pre-selection but was defeated by 2,000 votes).

"I simply didn't agree with Mr Lewis," Mr Hallet said. "I couldn't see any point of moving the residents until all the permanent pensioners had died."

Mr Lewis's argument was that the residents would find another excuse to stay on after the pensioners died.

People flocked to the island in the depression years because of its natural attributes, including an abundance of fish, prawns and crabs. To help them through the hard times, the Lands Department granted them permissive-occupancy tenancies.

The people stayed, many using the cottages

homes or passing them on to friends of relatives. Mr Hallet says they have been determined to stay because, "let's face it, where else can you build right on to a deep channel and in these conditions?"

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## PLACARDS WAVE AS CAR BLOCKS WAY



As demonstrators wave placards on Coon Island yesterday, the car at left blocks access to cottages marked for demolition.

# COON ISLAND STOPS DEMOLISHER

Coon Island residents barricaded their one street yesterday and with placards, angry words and the help of trade unionists won another round in the fight against a demolition order on their homes.

The Lands Department contracted to

ing to stay vary. Some claim that if they can be assured of the island being properly kept for public use they will happily leave. They point to adjacent

and transfers had been granted without hint of eviction in the past five years, he said. Since they were given notice the residents have

demolished.

It says the land is needed for open space. Despite numerous protests, work was to have begun yesterday.

Early yesterday morning residents parked a car across the track that winds past the 34 small cottages and waited for the demolition contractor and Lands Department representative to arrive.

With them waited the Secretary of Newcastle Trades Hall Council (Mr Wilson) and several other union representatives.

### Barricade

Soon afterwards, the contractor, Mr Johnson, and Mr Redman, a Lands Department inspector, drove up to the barricade. The residents waved their placards, while several spokesmen conferred with the contractor and Mr Redman.

They explained the attitude of occupants of the first nine houses scheduled for demolition and told them the job was "black."

After about half an hour, the contractor and Mr Redman left for a conference.

In his absence Mr O'Beirne, Northern Organiser for the Builders' Laborers' Union, said his union would strike if one nail were pulled from the houses.

"If they come back to start and won't listen to reason, we will call men in to act as vigilantes and turn over any equipment the contractor tries to bring in."

Mr Johnson returned an hour later and said he was not going on with the job. He tore up a document he claimed was the contract.

The residents and helpers removed the barricades and dispersed.

Later a Lands Department spokesman said the work would start today.

"We have a contract with



MR JOHNSON

the demolisher and he will start in the morning. The resumption of the land is in accordance with department policy to provide open space areas. Places like the island were occupied when it did not appear it would be necessary to keep such areas. But the pressure of urban development and population growth have made such occupancy untenable. The land can be used later for park and recreational purposes with Lake Macquarie Shire Council as guardian.

### Accommodation

At present all on the island, except 10 pensioners with no alternative accommodation, have received eviction notices.

The present demolition contract is for the nine most northerly cottages. They were built about 40 years ago and were used for holiday and weekend purposes. The present occupants have been paying about \$55 a year in council and land rates.

Their reasons for want-

the Lands Department nine years ago for the same purpose and now overgrown and covered with litter.

"You could picnic by the water when the cottages were there. Now you cannot even get to it because of the undergrowth, rubbish and rats," one islander said.

Other residents claimed they had spent a lot of money improving the cottages under the impression that they would be allowed to stay until they died.

One claimed that only a year or so before his eviction notice was stuck to his door, in April, 1970, the department had renewed his lease.

Several other renewals

State Government and local bodies.

People ranging from Trades Hall officials and Northern parliamentarians to Swansea Liberal Party branch and a former president of Lake Macquarie Shire, Cr K. Smith, have expressed support for the islanders' stand.

A deputation of Coon Island residents saw the Minister for Lands (Mr Lewis) about a year ago.

"We got absolutely nowhere. Mr Lewis said if we made too much of a fuss the pensioners would go, too. But we will make a fuss and we will stay," Mr Graham Hallet, who led the deputation, said yesterday.