

## YOUR VIRTUAL DISCOVERY VISIT – 66 TO THE HERITAGE STORIES OF ROTTNEST ISLAND



*Virtual Visits were initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic when Rottnest Island was closed to the public due to lockdown and quarantine from March to June 2020. Virtual Visits have continued to enable a further enjoyment of stories introduced at the Wadjemup Museum, the Chapman Archives or sites around the Island.*

*Enjoy, reflect and share.*

### **Rottnest Nursing Post**

The 20 kilometre crossing between Rottnest and Fremantle has created a situation of dangerous isolation when a medical emergency arose. During the operation of the Native Prison, internment of enemy aliens or wartime military service, basic medical services were available but for serious illness transport to the mainland was required. How timely and hence how successful the intervention was depended on the availability of a boat and sea conditions. From the 1930s onward, the same limitations applied to air transport. In such circumstances, a critical need was for a qualified medical expert to administer emergency first aid and care until transport arrived.



Prior to 1960, basic first aid care on the Island was provided by visiting nurses or by the island manager at his residence or office. A self help project in 1960 saw the fitting out of a First Aid Post in a repurposed building placed in an open area next to the CEOs residence [now designated as Cottage 336] on Vincent Way in the main settlement area.

This First Aid Post was built by the Rottnest island Authority with financial support from the boating public, business firms and the Winnit Club. The Winnits not only furnished the three room structure but also subsidised the wages of a resident nurse. A year later in March 1961, the First Aid Post was gazetted a hospital enabling it to receive some government funding.

## **The Fay Smith Sullivan Story**

The history of the Rottnest Island Nursing Post really begins with Fay Smith. who went to Rottnest Island to the Nursing Post in November 1961. The first employment was for two weeks in the school holidays. This later became permanent employment. The post was poorly equipped at first – just adequate! It improved gradually. Later, extra rooms were added – a 2 bed ward and kitchen, shower and toilet. Hours were 7 days a week and 365 days a year. Official surgery hours were 10-12 and 2-4pm, but Fay was on call 24 hours a day and did work long hours as it was difficult to get relief staff.

Holidaying doctors – mainly general practitioners – helped enormously. They came to enjoy a holiday and relax with their families. Fay also relied heavily on communication with casualty registrars at the teaching hospitals – Royal Perth Hospital, Sir Charles Gairdner, Fremantle Hospital and Princess Margaret Hospital – who advised Fay according to her reported signs and symptoms and possible diagnosis.

As Nursing Sister, Fay was responsible for the health of the locals, including injuries to local tradesmen, prenatal care of resident mothers, epidemiology of local children – all booster injections – polio, triple antigen etc – working in conjunction with the Perth based department. Then there were various accidents, fractures, sutures and general health of tourists.

Use was made of the Flying Doctor Service. Patients were also carried on stretchers on ferries and when available, regular aircraft flights were used. On occasion a charter flight would be required with a return trip if Fay had accompanied the patient.

After a few years, a decision was reached by the Medical Department to upgrade the nursing post to the equivalent of a 5 bed hospital. The salary then became quite respectable – but still no payment for overtime! Prior to this supplement, the wage paid by the Winnit Club, Fay earned extra cash washing dishes at night at the Tea Rooms, and made curtains for the Rottnest Board accommodation.

In another chapter of Fay's story, she resigned after ten years to marry Des Sullivan and worked part-time for 4 years. Fay's story is one of the presentations shared as part of the "Who Lived Here?" walk during Holiday Guiding.

## **The Nursing Post Today**



In 1984 a new Rottnest Island Nursing Post was erected opposite the Police Station at 2 Abbott Street, within the Thomson Bay Settlement Area and is open to residents and visitors throughout the year. The Nursing Post is staffed by a nurse practitioner / clinical nurse manager, two clinical nurses and an administration assistant. The nursing team is supported by a doctor over the busy summer

period and during winter school holiday weekends. During other peak periods, the Rottnest Island Nursing Post receives additional medical support from Fiona Stanley Hospital Emergency Department Consultants and sees about 3500 patients a year.

## Recognition of Fay Sullivan

Pioneer nurse Fay Sullivan has been recognised by South Metropolitan Health Service (SMHS) and the Rottnest Island Authority for her work in establishing the Rottnest Island Nursing Post. In her years working on the island, Fay was known to go above and beyond her duties with the aid of telephone support from mainland clinicians, the local community and the Royal Flying Doctor Service, always striving to provide a high standard of care



*In March 2019, Rottnest Island Authority Acting Director Environment, Heritage and Parks, Shane Kearny, and SMHS Chief Executive Paul Forden unveiled a commemorative plaque at the Rottnest Island Nursing Post honouring pioneer nurse Fay Sullivan.  
[Fay's Bay is also named in her honour]*

<https://www.fsh.health.wa.gov.au/About-us/News/Nurse-recognised-for-service-on-Rottnest-Island>

## Beach Emergency Number Signs

Following the death of a surfer from a fatal shark attack on a remote beach, Beach Emergency Numbering (BEN) signs have been rolled out across WA as part of a State Government grant initiative. The first use on Rottnest occurred during the 2021 April School Holidays for two separate incidents near The Basin. This was the first call to St John Ambulance from the island where the '000' caller used the information detailed on the BEN sign at The Basin. Because of the accurate location details, both rescues were timely and successful.



*Rottnest Island Nursing Post Nurse Practitioner Claire Parsons and Rottnest Island Authority Fire and Emergency Services Coordinator Brendon McLaughlin with the BEN sign at The Basin.*

**The link below shows the Rottnest BENs plus defibrillator locations, sanctuary zones and moorings**

<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=5e18bab6cdbc4cd098b7712f2aad03ee>

Visit the Westpix site for many excellent photos of Des and Fay  
<https://www.westpix.com.au/preview.asp?image=WAN-0034296>