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The Jardine Family of Somerset

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Prior to 1861 there were no European settlements in north east Australia if we exclude the seven weeks the crew of Captain Cook's ship spent at the Endeavour River. From the 1860s settlements were established in several areas in response to issues including the rich grazing lands discovered by the Leichardt expedition in 1844, the discovery of gold on the Palmer River and the need for a refuge for shipwrecked sailors. The first permanent settlement was Bowen in 1861, followed by Cardwell and Somerset both in 1864 and Townsville in 1865. Cooktown was founded in 1873, Cairns in 1876 and Port Douglas in 1877. Port Moresby, on the New Guinea coast, was established in 1873.

Although a few ships including charting expeditions, such as those of HMS *Fly*, HMS *Bramble* and HMS *Rattlesnake*, had mapped the seaways and islands of Torres Strait, the Australian mainland north of Bowen was almost completely unknown. Ludwig Leichardt's 1844 expedition had penetrated the southern part of Cape York Peninsula and Edmund Kennedy's fateful expedition of 1848, beset by problems, had added little to the knowledge of the Peninsula. Torres Strait was becoming an important sea route between Australia and Asia, and there were a few notable shipwrecks in its dangerous waters.

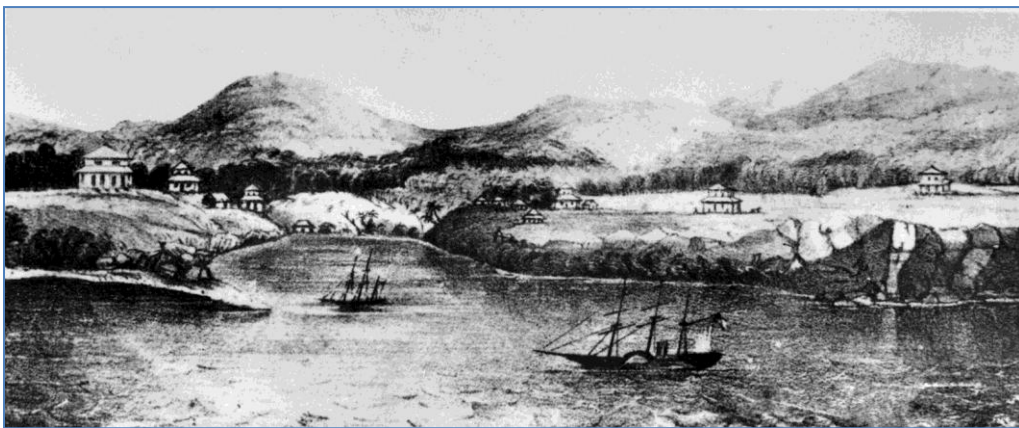
In the 1860s maritime traffic between Sydney and India and Europe was increasing through the dangerous waters of Torres Strait and the Government, at the suggestion of Governor Sir George Ferguson Bowen, decided to establish a settlement near the tip of Cape York Peninsula to act as a



John Jardine

safe haven for shipwrecked sailors and to act as a potential trading post. John Jardine previously Police Magistrate and Gold Commissioner at Rockhampton, was appointed to establish a government settlement named 'Somerset' on the tip of Cape York Peninsula. He and his third son, John, sailed on the steam ship HMS *Salamander* along with the hired barque *Golden Eagle* to establish the outpost on Cape York Peninsula. Prefabricated buildings were carried on board the *Golden Eagle*. They were accompanied by a squadron of 20 dragoons commanded by Lieutenant Pascoe whose work was to provide protection from the local Aborigines who were often troublesome in the early days and, when not required for other duties, to erect the buildings.

The residence was built on a hill overlooking the bay to take advantage of the ocean breezes. It was also to be a coaling station for steam ships passing through the strait. It was a good lookout and was in a prominent position to signal passing ships – almost a perfect position except for one thing: the bay was subject to strong currents and was dangerous to the large mail steam ships. This was later to lead to the major port being transferred, along with the administrative centre, to the better harbour at Thursday Island.



An early sketch of Somerset, drawn by Mr. J. Jardine in 1866 shows the Government Residence, Police Quarters, and Customs House on the eastern side of the inlet, and Barracks of Marines and Medical Superintendent's House on the western side. H.M.S. *Salamander* also appears in the sketch, which was reproduced in 'The Jubilee History of Queensland', edited by E. J. T. Barton, and published by H. J. Diddams and Co. in 1909.

A report on the establishment of the settlement at Somerset stated:

The site for the town of Somerset has been admirably chosen on an elevation of from sixty to seventy feet above the level of the sea, exposed to the sea breezes during either monsoon, bordered on the west by a constant running stream of excellent fresh water, and commanding on the north an extensive and most picturesque view of Torres Straits, with the adjoining islands; and all vessels passing through will be within signal distance. The situation appears to be remarkably healthy, judging from the manner in which the crew of the Salamander were necessarily exposed to the sun and water, from sunrise to sunset for thirty days, without any ill effects.

Between its inception in 1864 and its abandonment as an administrative centre in 1877, the Somerset settlement was the base for several Government activities. It was the administrative base for Torres Strait from 1864 to its eventual abandonment, largely due to strong currents in the harbour, in 1877.

John Jardine was appointed Commissioner of Lands and Police Magistrate at Somerset on 23 February 1864. He held office until the end of 1865 when he returned to his magisterial duties at Rockhampton. He was succeeded by Captain Henry G. Simpson, R.N., who was still in office at the end of 1866. His appointment was for three years, but before the end of his time he left on sick leave and did not return. The office was vacant at the end of 1867. The appointment was then held by Frank Jardine in 1868 and 1869. In the latter year Frank Jardine was granted leave of absence, and H. M. Chester was appointed to succeed him. Frank Jardine again held office from 1871 to 1873, when he was succeeded by Capt. C. E. Beddome and later George Elphinstone Dalrymple. The next Resident was C. D'Oyley Aplin. Frank Jardine again temporarily held office until the appointment in 1875 of H. M. Chester, who had held office previously. H. M. Chester was the last Police Magistrate at Somerset and the first Police Magistrate at Thursday Island, as in 1877 he was appointed to that office on Thursday Island.

In 1864 the Jardine family had instigated an expedition intended to provide cattle for a planned new settlement at Cape York. John Jardine's sons, Frank and Alexander, led an expedition from Rockhampton on 14th May 1864 and reached Somerset on 2nd March 1865, ten months later. They travelled along the central spine of the Peninsula or along the west coast, avoiding the dense wet jungles of the east coast which had frustrated the Kennedy expedition some seventeen years earlier. The Jardines' expedition, which consisted of the two brothers plus four European and four Aboriginal herdsmen, drove a herd of 250 cattle and 20 horses from Rockhampton to Somerset, travelling up the peninsula often in the face of hostile Aboriginal tribes.



They had several bloody encounters with local tribes, most of whom had never seen a white man or, even worse, encountered horses and cattle. At the Mitchell River on 13 December they withstood a major Aboriginal attack.

Frank and Alexander Jardine about the time of their successful overland expedition, probably 1865.

Although there were many casualties among the attacking tribesmen, there were no deaths or serious injuries among the Jardine party. The journey was marked by incessant rain, floods and conflict with Aboriginal groups and the party finally reached Somerset clad in tatters and with just 50 cattle and 12 horses remaining. The trip took ten months, during which time the party was constantly opposed by the area's indigenous inhabitants as they forced their way through scrub and swamps and crossed at least six large rivers, including the Jardine River which was subsequently named after the brothers.

They reached Somerset on 2 March 1865. Jardine's men survived in poor health, leaving a trail of dead Aborigines, dead horses and cattle and almost all their equipment. Frank Jardine claimed to have personally killed 47 people, with a total death toll for the trip of over 200 but, of course, we will never know the true toll of the expedition. Both Jardine brothers were elected Fellows of the Royal Geographical Society and received the Murchison Award.

An offer by the Government to promote funds to meet the cost of the expedition was not accepted as the Jardine family regarded the trip as a private business venture not sponsored by the Government. This epic expedition has been seen as unnecessarily bloody and violent by today's standards, but must rate as the greatest droving journey in Australian history.

After arrival at Somerset, Frank Jardine and his group operated a cattle station at Point Vallack about 2 km south of the main settlement. Frank was appointed Police Magistrate at Somerset giving him control of the Somerset area as he controlled the seven police troopers already at Somerset and four native troopers from the original overlanding party.

Frank and his father sailed for Brisbane in late 1865 and John resigned from his position as Police Magistrate at Somerset to return to Rockhampton. Frank, however, maintained ownership of the Point Vallack and Lockerbie cattle stations and returned to the area in early 1866.

It was a violent time and in May 1868 the local Aborigines attacked Jardine's Point Vallack station in large numbers resulting in the death of one native trooper and the looting of supplies and firearms. Jardine made a retaliatory attack and one account states that 32 local tribesmen were killed. After this Jardine was allocated an extra five native police.

After the resignation of John Jardine, Walter McClintock was in charge until Henry Simpson took over as Police Magistrate in May 1866 on a salary of £500. After having problems with the salary for his position, Henry Simpson resigned in 1868 and Frank Jardine was appointed as Inspector of Police at a salary of £300 in December 1867. John Jardine junior returned to look after Point Vallack Station. In June 1868 Frank was elevated to the position of Police Magistrate.

During his tenure Henry Simpson had soon discovered that the local resident Aboriginal population resented the loss of their lands to cattle stations and on a number of occasions in 1866 they attempted to burn down the structures and also speared dozens of livestock. The new police magistrate at Somerset (i.e. Simpson) noted that Frank Jardine's method of dealing with Aboriginal resistance was to go out and shoot them.

In early 1866 John Jardine senior returned to his post at Rockhampton where he died in 1874. In 1877 the centre of government was moved from Somerset to Thursday Island due to strong currents in the Somerset harbour. In February 1866 Frank had settled at *Lockerbie* but returned to *Somerset* after his appointment as Police Magistrate in 1868. In 1872 Frank Jardine commenced a business in mother of pearl shell which soon was successful but resulted in complaints that it should not be permitted while he was Police Magistrate. Confusion between his government and personal activities led to frequent complaints and in 1875 he was superseded as Police Magistrate by Henry Chester. The administration centre was moved to Thursday Island. About this time and Frank Jardine lived on Nagi (Mount Earnest) Island with his Samoan wife and continued his pearl shell

business. The Government then sold the old Somerset site to Frank who moved there with his family and rebuilt the original residency which was in a bad state due to white ant infestation. Frank and his wife and family lived there until Frank's death from Hansen's Disease (leprosy) in 1919.

The Jardine period at Somerset had two faces. In its early days it was an undoubtedly violent time and Frank Jardine was capable of the most violent actions in dealing with the local Aborigines. The local indigenous people, to be fair, were warlike and resisted the newcomers to their land, but Jardine showed little mercy to them in establishing his kingdom. There were several skirmishes with the local Aborigines in the early days. One, described by John Jardine while the residence was under construction, saw two of the soldiers wounded by spears and rescued by the Jardines, father and son. On another occasion Jardine visited Mount Adolphus Island in a small boat with some crew members of the visiting *Bluebelle* and, seeing natives on the island where they were not permitted to be, he returned to his base and requested Lieutenant Pascoe with an armed crew to return with him. This resulted in the Aborigines being shot and their canoe taken. In the following years there were several similar incidents in which the local tribesmen fared badly.

During this time Somerset became well known among scientists and naturalists as a useful base from which to explore northern Cape York Peninsula, southern New Guinea and Torres Strait. After the government station was moved to Thursday Island in 1877, Jardine's home at Somerset was the centre of civilization on Cape York. Elaborate dinners for visiting dignitaries were served on silver plate allegedly made from Spanish dollars found by Jardine on a reef in 1890.



F.M. Bailey, Queensland Colonial botanist a visitor to Somerset and Thursday Island in 1897 .

Over the years Frank Jardine stayed on at Somerset and played host to numerous visitors, including scientists and naturalists interested in the natural history of the area. These included the Queensland Colonial Botanist, F.M. Bailey in 1897, who reported: *'The beautiful orchids for which these islands used to be favoured are fast disappearing, at least from anywhere easy of approach from Thursday Island.'*



Far Left: Mrs. Ellis Rowan noted flower painter, a visitor to Somerset in 1891.
Left: A bunch of orchid flowers collected and painted at Somerset by Mrs. Rowan – the pink flowers are *Dendrobium bigibbum* and the other flowers are *Dendrobium bifalce*.



John Gould Veitch (see left) was a collector for Veitch's London nursery and travelled widely. In 1864/1865 he travelled to Sydney where he joined HMS *Salamander* which was supplying the new settlement at Somerset on the tip of Cape York Peninsula. He made some interesting collections in Northern Australia, staying there for three weeks in 1865. He is reported as being not particularly impressed with the local flora, but he made one significant exception - '*the first large importation of Dendrobium bigibbum ever received in this country*' (see page 4, Veitch 1906). He must have seen this species as



having commercial possibilities as the plants collected probably numbered in the thousands. They came from Mount Adolphus Island which is only a few kilometers from Somerset and was a known locality for the species at the time - the first record of this species was by Dr Thompson from HMS *Fly* in the 1840s.



Frank Jardine

On 10 October 1873 at Somerset Frank Jardine married the seventeen-year-old Sana Solia, niece of the King of Samoa.



THE OLD GRAINNAUT AT SOMERSET, CAPE YORK.
 One of the "men of government" of Torres Strait, his men through the house at the Jardine house.

Jardine residence about 1895: left- a guest, right- Frank and Sana

Frank purchased and rebuilt the Somerset residence partly from the salvageable timbers of the original Somerset which was in ruins due to white ant attack. From the 1870s Frank Jardine was heavily involved in the pearl shell industry and had several pearl shell boats and crews operating. This was seen in some quarters as not being compatible with the Government positions he held. Pearl shell diving was becoming an important industry in Torres Strait. In 1884-86 Frank was in charge of transport for the construction of the Cape York telegraph line and in 1890 was prominent in searching for survivors from the wreck of the steamer *Quetta*.



Frank Jardine's grave at Somerset.

Frank died of leprosy at Somerset on 18 March 1919 and was buried near the beach. Frank's grave is square in shape, not the usual rectangular shape, and local legend is that he requested to be buried standing so he could keep an eye on his kingdom. However, if legend is to be believed, he was so unpopular that he was buried head down.

Further Reading

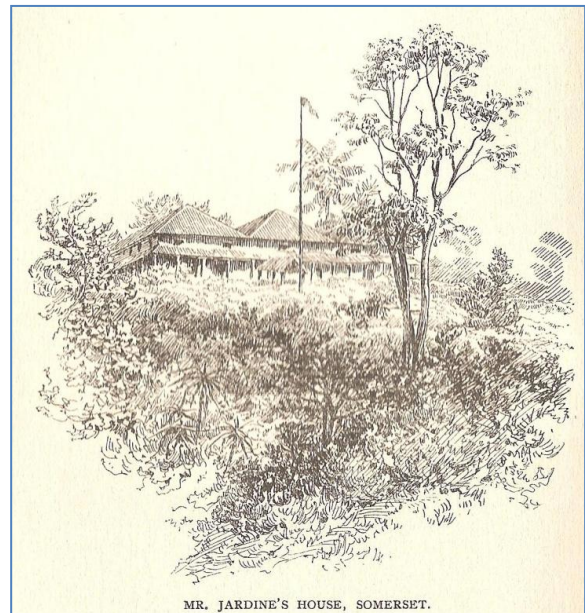
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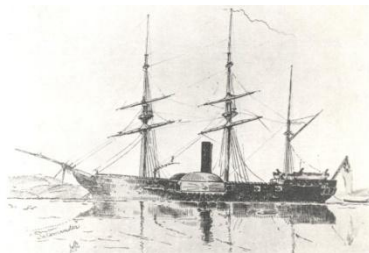
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View of Somerset Harbour 1872 by E.P. Bedwell. Postcard in author's possession.



HMS Salamander