****Rottnest Voluntary Guides Association Inc.****

**Information about Laurie Connell and Rottnest Island
– separating the facts from the fiction**

**Extract from Rottnest: Where to from here? Laurie O’Meara AM p 131, 116, self-published 2016**

**The Refurbishment of Cottages F & G
*(Cottages 341 & 340 – the Superintendent’s House)***

The concern of the Board about maintaining the historic buildings came to a head in the mid-eighties when the Board advertised in the Western Australian for persons willing to finance the upgrade the cottages on Vincent Way in exchange for certain concessional use.

Dallas Dempster [Chairman RIB], is recorded as advising:

“These cottages are in a dangerous state - they had to be restored or demolished.

The only person to take up the offer was the colourful merchant banker Laurie Connell, managing director of Rothwells Ltd. He spent $115,000 on Cottages F and G, for which he received the right to occupy them during the America's Cup and for a month at Christmas for four years. He also received adjacent mooring rights for the same period.

This decision gave rise to much adverse publicity during which the original plan of the Board was buried in controversy and all the public comment revolved around a perception that Connell had gained some sweetheart deal with the Board. As Dempster stated in the West Australian, 24th November 1986. I wish more people would follow his lead. Cottages E, J, H *(Cottages 339, 338 & 337 – Military Barracks)*, K1 and K2 *(Cottages 335 & 334 – Armstrong’s House)* are still available."

No doubt the public flogging Connell received in the media scared off any other takers as F and G were the only units refurbished under this arrangement. Unfortunately history had cemented in peoples' minds a sense of skulduggery when, on this occasion, it did not exist. Connell was a known mover and shaker who had developed quite a reputation in racing circles so he was always in the media's sights.

**Blasting of the reef at Catherine Bay**

In the sixties there was regular clearing of reefs to enable access to bays. Reports by Des Sullivan to his Board made frequent mention of having the Special Air Service visiting the Island to use explosives to remove "encroaching" reefs. Environmental considerations today would gain such activity a large headline.

The following extract from the Board minutes 20/2/56 makes this clear,

"Aqua Surveys Reef Demolition. The Manager read a letter from the above organisation regarding the demolition of the reefs in front of the Hotel, Government House Reef. The Chairman expressed views that the Board would have no objection to the Yacht Clubs doing the job at their own cost."

It is interesting to ponder what the mooring numbers would be in the bays around the Island today if this reef "adjustment" had not occurred.

Many years later, long after such blasting was seen as a usual occurrence there was blasting of a reef in Catherine Bay. It caused much media interest because it was carried out by the Authority to permit the entry of Laurie Connell's large boat.

Stories of such happenings tend to create a life of their own and with telling and retelling, they enter the realm of mythology. This action is one such case and it had Connell personally blowing up the reef at one stage. Some say there was a major overuse of explosives with others saying they thought it was an earthquake. Others at the hotel reported that their middies lifted off the bar. It is certain that none of these accounts are accurate but why spoil a good story?

The following extract from the Managers Report to the Board 20/4/83 says simply:

"The SAS carried out some blasting in Catherine Bay to enable access. More blasting is required and this will be done by the engineer and the ranger”

There is a view expressed that Des [Sullivan] played this down somewhat but it was interesting that it occurred on a Sunday morning so the story about the jumping middies loses some validity! [At the time bar sales on Sunday mornings were not permitted]

**Extract from Rottnest Island, A Documentary History, Prue Joske, Chris Jeffery, Louise Hoffman, Published by Centre for Migration & Development Studies, University of Western Australia1997 p 313 - 314**

The continuing accusations and perceptions of favouritism in the allocation of holiday accommodation reached its apogee in the 1980's during the halcyon days of government and ministerial patronage.

**"Connell Finishes Restoring Rotto Home" The Western Mail, Weekend 15-16 November 1986.**

Millionaire Laurie Connell' s $115,000 restoration of Rottnest' s oldest residence is complete. In a deal with the Rottnest Island Board, the merchant banker agreed to renovate the building known as F and G cottages.

In converting the convict-built cottage to a comfortable, modern holiday home, the simple exterior of the building was not changed. The main bedroom now has a walk-in wardrobe and ensuite and new furniture, carpets, fittings and kitchen appliances have been installed. Mr Connell will have exclusive use of the cottage until after the America's Cup and for a month over Christmas for the next four years.

The cottage overlooking the main jetty and Thomson Bay, is listed by the National Trust. The island board deal also gave Mr Connell moorings outside the cottage in Thomson bay and in Marjorie Bay on the island's west end. Mr Connell and his family will travel to Rottnest this weekend on the 17m luxury cabin cruiser, Joro. The cottage will open on Wednesday.

When Mr Connell’s part of the deal is finished, the island board will convert the cottage to two holiday chalets and rent each for about $400 a week.

**"Bunch of Bigots Upset Connell", West Australian 24 November 1986.**

Delighted with the way his $115,000 has been spent on restoring two cottages at Rottnest, millionaire merchant banker Laurie Connell says he is unhappy about adverse publicity he has received. "If I'd known my restoration of these cottages was going to cause controversy, I would have thought twice about it," said Mr Connell as he inspected the strikingly refurbished cottages.

"There are a bunch of bigots around who think that anyone trying to help upgrade Rottnest needs to be shot down. "I give $2 million away every year, and if it's going to cause controversy, I won't do it. I'm disappointed also that nobody else followed my lead. My prime motivation for doing this is not to benefit by having a holiday here, but to support the board in what they're doing. I get no favours from the board."

Rottnest Island Board chairman Dallas Dempster pointed out that the board had advertised for West Australians willing to refurbish cottages and in return get exclusive use of the accommodation for reasonable periods.

"Mr Connell has given more support to this island than any other individual." Mr Dempster said.

"These cottages were at a dangerous stage - they had to be restored or demolished.

"I wish more people would follow his lead. Cottages B, J, H and K and K2 are still available.

"Mr Connell gets nothing from the island he doesn't pay for."

Mr Connell made no secret of his love for the island.

"I've spent hundreds of thousands of dollars travelling the world" he said. "but I have seen nothing to equal Rottnest's Parker Point." "It's better than anything I've seen in the Mediterranean or the Greek Islands. You couldn't reproduce it anywhere."

Architect Peter Tennant had done a remarkable job in remodelling cottages F and G.

The cottages were the original residences of Henry Vincent the island's superintendent, and the colony's Governor before Government House now the hotel – was built in the 1860s.

The original jarrah floorboards have been sanded and polished and decorated with handsome rugs and mats. "

The Governor's ballroom in Cottage F has been beautifully restored and the old kitchen in this unit has been turned into a master bedroom.