



SKETCHES by BEACH HISTORIANS
RUPERT'S REFUGE

By Ken Gray

The records of early settler Rupert Fenby of Mission Beach create a mental picture of a reclusive man who valued the flora and fauna. He did what he could to protect it in his life and largely lived off the land. Fenby's Gap, located on the winding road from Mission Beach to El Arish, is a well-known landmark. This is the man the gap was named after.



Rupert Fenby, image courtesy Marie Carman, El Arish Diggers Museum, from the Bracewell Family Collection.

Rupert Cyril Fenby¹ was born in Yardley, Worcestershire, England March 1876 and died on the 28 December 1960. His father, Joseph Beverly Fenby, 1841-1903, died before Rupert emigrated to Australia in 1910. His mother, Emma Louise Richmond 1845-1927 died in Wales.

He had seven siblings; three brothers and four sisters. They were Alaric (brother) 1869-1938; Ronald 1871-1951; Edgar 1872-1960; Ethel 1874-1938; Edith 1878-1954; Hilda 1879-1962 and Winifred 1883-1972. Only Hilda and Winifred survived Rupert's death. Two of his siblings, Alaric and Edith, died in Auckland NZ; they had emigrated while the others did not. It is intriguing that Alaric and Edith emigrated to New Zealand, possibly with Rupert, yet he sailed on to Cairns alone. Rupert has no known children listed on *Ancestry* and he did not marry.

The first published stories of Fenby were written by his Dunk Island friend, *The Beachcomber*, Ted Banfield, in 1916:²

He it was who ventured onto the land with no more than a tin of oatmeal ... a box of matches, an axe and some other urgent things. He has now a fine little estate, due to his own intelligent industry, sheer pluck, prudence and thrift.

¹ Ancestry.com.au accessed 03 October 2021 at: https://www.ancestry.com.au/family-tree/person/tree/21592341/person/20020159810/facts?_phsrc=Fqa4&_phstart=successSource

² *Rural Homilies by the Beachcomber, Single Handed*, The Northern Miner (Charters Towers), 29 April 1916, accessed on Trove, April 2022 at: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/search/advanced/category/newspapers?keyword=Rural%20Homilies%20Single%20Handed>

The *Cardwell Shire Story*, by Dorothy Jones, has some excerpts about Rupert's life. Jones interviewed Rupert briefly while writing her history. Her first reference speaks of his start in Australia:

*Rupert Fenby, a former English motor engineer from the large automobile factories in Rugby, landed in Cairns in 1910 and came in Cutten's boat to Mission Beach. The Porters were already established. Fenby took up as freehold land 750 acres at Clump Mountain where he still lives as a naturalist recluse.*³

In a later book⁴, Jones said that Fenby arrived aboard the *Lass O'Gowrie* from New Zealand (where some of his siblings stayed.) Further investigations show the land area was 161 acres rather than 750. Ted Garner thought Rupert settled here in 1909 rather than 1910.⁵



Title Deed Lot 6v, Rupert Fenby, 1911, courtesy of Phil Porter.

Rupert planted bananas and pineapples. He helped Edmund Banfield get his new boat, *Nee Mourna* working after the engine was dismantled en route by curious sailors. The engine failed to fire up for three months, but Rupert was able to repair it.

Jones described Rupert as a 'naturalist recluse' who had preserved his land as a sanctuary for wildlife and that he would not allow anyone to molest the critters who were all tolerant of humans and did not fear them. Later in this book,⁶ Dorothy Jones tells the story of the devastating 1918 cyclone. Few settlers remained in the district after 1917 with the loss of shipping to the war; farmers could not sustain their income as they were unable to transport the fruit to markets. She found the Alexanders at Bingil Bay, Frizelle, a French naturalist at Garners Beach (*Scribe: he was an Irishman and an Oxford graduate*), Rupert at Mission Beach and Webb near South Mission Beach plus the 'Mission blacks' and staff.

Fenby survived the cyclone and continued to battle on. Jones told of the soldiers returning from WWI and of a digger named Sydney Woodfield Harris⁷ who had land on the beachfront near the old school

³ Jones, Dorothy, *Cardwell Shire Story*, 1961. The Jacaranda Press, page 295.

⁴ Jones, Dorothy, *Hurricane Lamps and Blue Umbrellas: the story of Innisfail and the Shire of Johnstone North Queensland*, 1973. G.K. Bolton, Cairns, page 318.

⁵ E. Garner, *Harsh Treatment*, *Cairns Post*, 14 July 1934, accessed on Trove, April 2022 at: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/41508624?searchTerm=Harsh%20Treatment%20E.%20Garner>

⁶ Jones, Dorothy, *Cardwell Shire Story*, 1961. The Jacaranda Press, page 307.

⁷ Jones, Dorothy, *Cardwell Shire Story*, 1961. The Jacaranda Press, page 312.

site on the corner of Boyett Road and Porter Promenade. Syd was burning the block to clear it in 1921 and died either through smoke asphyxiation or of a heart attack. Banfield, Moreton, Webb and Fenby built a memorial for him, after he was found by an Aboriginal tracker three weeks later. By the time Dorothy Jones visited this history, she heard it from Rupert as he alone, of the four men who built the cairn on the grave, was still living in 1960. Webb and Fenby erected four wooden posts and Banfield supplied the hawser looped between them.

The grave was located near where a camping ground is today then relocated by Council near the Community Hall, then relocated again to where it is now (2022) in the *Norm Byrnes Arboretum* beside a profuse clump of *Arenga* palms.

In *Hurricane Lamps and Blue Umbrellas*⁸, there was an anecdote about finding Fenby after the cyclone.

Fenby, a man whose insistence on the integrity of his privacy in later life led him to live almost as a recluse, even then preferred his own company. Some days after the cyclone when a party from Bicton went to check on his safety they were thoroughly alarmed at no sign of life until his feet were seen sticking out of a hollow log. Fenby reluctantly emerged to protest, 'Can't a man have any privacy at all without someone interfering?'

Constance Mackness wrote of Fenby too, describing him as a nature-loving recluse:⁹

When the cyclone struck in 1918, there was nobody on the Clump Point-North Mission section of our district save Mr. R. Fenby. Others had gone with the coastal ships, but no thought of leaving his land came to him: who would feed the birds he had tamed if he deserted them? Born a nature lover, he had fallen in love with his land because of its wealth of unusual and interesting trees, plants, birds, butterflies and insects; and he was already an authority on local flora and fauna. Right up to the forties, his part of Clump Point was almost deserted. His orchard almost went back to jungle, for there was no use growing fruit to see it rot.

Cut off from contact with the outside world, he settled down, happily enough, to live off his land and enjoy the companionship of Nature.

She added that he had hens and cattle, grew vegetables and made his own butter from milk and coconut. He purchased minimal food and goods ... *tea, sugar, matches, and little besides.*

An important piece of this puzzle is the owner of Rupert's land after he died. In a 2016 edition of *Message Stick*, published by the North Queensland Land Council, there is a reference to Rupert's will:¹⁰

NQ Clump Mountain Project Society Pty Ltd was established in the late 1970s by a strong Aboriginal and Islander community group, who began a journey to fulfil the last will and testament of one Rupert Fenby. Rupert Fenby dedicated the Clump Mountain property to Aboriginal people for education and tourism opportunities for all aspects of Aboriginal culture and traditional knowledge.

⁸ Jones, Dorothy, *Hurricane Lamps and Blue Umbrellas: the story of Innisfail and the Shire of Johnstone North Queensland*, 1973. G.K. Bolton, Cairns, page 321.

⁹ Miss Constance Mackness, 1959, 3rd edition 1983, *Clump Point and District an historical record of Tam O'Shanter, South Mission beach, Mission Beach, Bingil Bay, Garner's Beach and Kurrimine'* G.K. Bolton, Cairns, page 57.

¹⁰ Djiru Warrangburra Aboriginal Corporation, *Message Stick*, North Queensland Land Council December 2016, page 27. Accessed 03 October 2021 at: <https://nqlc.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2016-dec.pdf>

This was confirmed by Djiru Traditional Owner, Leonard Andy, who lives on that land today and has a copy of the will. Rupert had declared earlier that he would bequeath his land to the Victorian Gould League of Bird Lovers¹¹ to make it a sanctuary as Banfield had done at Dunk Island, but that did not eventuate. Local Don Wheatley said that his mother, Mrs Florence Wheatley, wrote Rupert's wills for him, and there were four different versions written over the years with different benefactors.

Several people living in Mission Beach today knew Rupert Fenby and say he was not really reclusive; he roamed around often and met many families in the district and was quite friendly and engaging.

Rupert Fenby died while living on his land in 1960 and was buried there.¹²

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Cover image: Lacey's Creek – not far from Fenby's lot.

Further reading: Diedre Holmes, *Mission Beach Street & Place Names: Volume 2: Mission Beach*, MBHS, H009.2, 2023, see Fenby's Gap.

¹¹ *Bird Sanctuary, Offer of Land, Cairns Post*, 27 May 1936, accessed on *Trove*, April 2022 at:

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/41737412?searchTerm=Bird%20Sanctuary.%20Offer%20of%20Land>

¹² Ken Gray, *Living Links: The Berry-Porter Family of Mission Beach*, Mission Beach Historical Society, H023, 2022, P. 34.