

Dilli Village — from mining camp to environmental education & research

Prior to construction of Dilli Village in 1975, nearby Govi Creek was a favourite campsite for FIDO safaris. When the Dilli Village dining room was turned into a temporary courthouse FIDO argued against mining there. FIDO gave it the name of Dilli Village playing inferring that the mining company (Dillingham) was a *dill* for making such a premature and stupid investment. When mining ceased after 18 months FIDO used Dilli Village for the next decade as a base for its safari groups. FIDO an historical interest in tracking the history of Dilli Village as we have seen it transformed from a recreation camp to an educational centre.

History as a Mining Camp 1975-1977

Toby's Break: When mining on ML102 was first foreshadowed in January 1971 the only access to the site was by following a rough track that helped form a firebreak. The firebreak squeezed between two parallel Creeks, then known as First and Second Creeks by now known by the Butchulla name, Gerrawea and Govi. Because Toby Fletcher was the bulldozer driver who created this firebreak, the route became known as Toby's Break. This was corrupted by pilots who named the adjacent airstrip as Toby's Gap. Forestry had a practice of establishing two parallel tracks up to 100 metres apart and burning the land between to reduce fuel loads in attempts to stop fires crossing. The photo below shows that there was also another firebreak track on the western side Gerrawea Creek.

Preparing for mining: To enable FIDO to expose the area to be impacted by proposed sandmining this previously little used route to reach Lake Boomanjin was used regularly. Safari groups camped right beside Govi Creek. Toby's Break soon became a major road. However, the long run beside the creek near the foredunes was truncated by about a kilometre in early 1975 when Dillingham placed a weir across Govi Creek to raise the water level and then built a bridge across that still remains. That was also when construction of Dilli Village and associated infrastructure began.

A mining camp: Dillingham planned their sand mine and primary plant to separate out the heavy mineral sand not far south of Dilli Village to be operated by a workforce that was to fly in and fly out each shift. However they needed a camp to house the workforce should there be an interruption to flight schedules stopping workers getting back to the mainland. An area on either side of the main Toby's Break track was cleared and construction began on the camp. The second strand of Toby's former firebreak to the west of Dilli Village became the main track to Lake Boomanjin. Twenty single rooms were established for the mine workers and the cabins were used by managers as needed. While it never had to be used in such an emergency it was used by consultants and specialist supporting staff from time to time.

The Airstrip: To service the mine and to bring in the miners each shift Dillinghams established an airstrip on an area of woodland (Dune System 6) to the west of Dilli Village adjacent to Toby's firebreak. They also built a haul road to carry the heavy mineral across Fraser Island from the mine to a loading facility at Buff Creek. Both the airstrip and the road were provided with a gravel surface. After forty years the nutrients that have washed off the airstrip have enriched the depauperate soils and changed the ecology. Once stunted mallee Scribbly gums adjacent to the gravel strip have more than quadrupled in size. This is just another of the environmental impacts that hadn't been foreseen when miners sought to extract the mineral sands.

Court House: In 1975 the Federated Furnishing Trades Union placed a Green Ban on a building Melbourne and refused to install windows in this building because it was opposed to Dillingham's mining operations on Fraser Island. To settle this industrial dispute the Federal Arbitration Commission brought the disputing parties to Fraser Island and after a comprehensive inspection of the whole island and the mining operations, the dining room at Dilli Village became a court room hearing formal submissions from the disputing parties. Court reporters were flown in especially for the occasion.

The Machinery Shed: Because the mine was a continually shifting site Dillingham needed a more permanent base to generate electricity, service and store equipment and establish its large plant nursery. This very large shed still services Dilli Village to generate electricity although there is a lot of space that remains now surplus to requirements. However in its day at the height of mining in 1976 thousands of trees were being produced at the Nursery.



Dilli Village early 1975 cleared before any building construction



The DM Mineral mine site south of Dilli Village 24 April 1976

FIDO and other conservation groups throughout Australia fiercely opposed Dillingham's (DM Minerals) mining operations. This led to the Commonwealth Government establishing the Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry. That Inquiry recommended banning the export of mineral extracted by the controversial sandmining on Fraser Island from the end of 1976. This effectively ended mining and the need to retain Dilli Village as a mining camp.

Dilli Village — Recreation Camp to University Campus

Dillingham's weren't such dills as FIDO had supposed. Although Dilli Village was effectively worthless to them once mining ceased they successfully persuaded the Queensland Government to buy this worthless asset from them and then requested that the name Dilli Village was retained so that they may be remembered. The then Bjelke-Petersen Government acquiesced. It was the time of the Life Be In It Campaign throughout Australia to get people to become more physically active. So Dilli Village was run as a National Fitness Centre by a Queensland Government agency that also ran a large National Fitness Camp at Tallebudgera. To commemorate hand-over of the camp to National Fitness the then National Fitness organizer Betty Patterson planted an alien Norfolk Island pine that still survives adjacent to the dining hall.

ALP trips based on Dilli Village: At the height of the anti-sandmining campaign FIDO had won a lot of fans for Fraser Island amongst unionists and Labor Party supporters who had no love for the Bjelke-Petersen Government of the 1970s and 80s. When mining ceased these fans decided that they wanted to go to Fraser Island regularly and initiated their own safaris, independent of, but supported by FIDO. The weekends were chosen when there was a midnight low tide to be able to travel the beach in the dark. These safaris of around forty people each would start from the Trades Hall on a Friday night and travel to Rainbow Beach where while luggage was being transferred from the bus to ex-army trucks at about 10.00 pm the travellers would gather some fast food before heading down to Gordon Elmer's ferry that would make a special late night run to the island. Gordon was very helpful to these political opponents. The run up the beach was always exciting. Once the group was able to clearly pick up Haley's comet in the dark new moon sky. On another occasion on a full moon Les Greensill, the driver, only used his headlights to depart the barge and while a lone small cloud in the sky passed over the face of the moon. There were many adventures in those trips. Once when the truck broke down passengers had to walk the last six kilometres to the camp and then cross the wobbly pontoon bridge carrying their luggage in the dark. That was also the night when a snake sleeping on the windowsill inside the screen and quite close to a pillow caused a big upset for some of the group not withstanding the late hour.

The concerts and parties: One of the features of these weekend trips were the wonderful parties on Saturday nights. Before people could leave the dining room after dinner the song sheets would come and these inspired some most memorable concerts. There were frequently other guests staying at Dilli Village and they sometimes joined in and displayed remarkable talent. One memorable English visitor rivaled the best of the old-time music hall presenters.

Some Other Guests: When Chris Wilcox's film, "*Sands of Time*" was shown in Japan, photographer Eichi Tanaka was so impressed that he made a mission to come to Australia just to photograph sandblows. He hired a 4WD and based himself at Dilli Village. However he quickly appreciated the vastness of Fraser Island and realized he could not afford to complete his mission if he had to continue hiring a 4WD. So the very experienced blackjack player went down to Jupiters Casino and played blackjack, gambling until he had won enough to buy anew 4WD outright. He then returned to the island and completed his mission. One of his photos was blown up to cover a 30 metre wall in a Japanese gallery.

Forestry Takes Over: The small Maryborough based committee of Queensland National Fitness found that Dilli Village was beyond their resources to run. After a decade they surrendered their tenure. That posed a dilemma for the Queensland Government because the Dilli Village site had been excised from State Forest 3 that surrounded it on all sides. It was decided that tenders should be called inviting private enterprise to bid for the rights to manage this site that is the most accessible gateway to some of Fraser Island's best attractions, its southern lakes, Jabiru Swamp, Yankee Jack Creek and Great Sandy Strait. However when one of the tenderers was FIDO's John Sinclair, a hostile Queensland Government decided not to accept any tender and authorized the Forestry Department to operate the camp along similar lines to National Fitness based on providing budget accommodation and camping. One of the best moves made under Forestry was to replace the former very rickety pedestrian pontoon crossing between Dilli Village and the beach with some solid logs.

Forestry bows out and QPWS takes over: The Forestry Department managed Dilli Village well until the Fitzgerald Inquiry in 1991 recommending World Heritage listing for Fraser Island meant the end of logging on Fraser Island and the reason for Forestry tenure on the island. Forestry quickly also relinquished its responsibilities for Dilli Village passing them to the QPWS. The QPWS made one very early decision to dramatically reduce the appeal of Dilli Village. A decision was made to remove the logs that the Forestry had placed across Govi Creek that allowed pedestrian access to the beach less than 200 metres away. However they had no plans to replace the bridge. That has meant that for the last two decades people staying at Dilli Village could only walk to the beach by taking the long and risky walk along the road. This has reduced the appeal of staying at Dilli Village. It still serves well though for vehicle based groups and in 1996 FIDO hosted a group of international scientists who had attended the 6th Ramsar Convention by accommodating them at Dilli Village. During almost another decade Dilli Village continued to be used by school groups and others involved in environmental education as well as recreational parties

University Outpost: The QPWS didn't like the operational responsibilities of running Dilli Village. It wasn't part of their core business. Once again the Queensland Government was looking to outsource the management of Dilli Village and as a result of this process in at the start of the new Millennium, the University of the Sunshine Coast took over Dilli Village and immediately began upgrading the amenities and extending the dining room. Dilli Village has become the Fraser Island Research and Learning Centre. As well as Dilli Village providing budget accommodation Dilli Village also provides access to field study sites for primary, secondary and tertiary student groups. Researchers and groups with genuine environmental interests in the region are encouraged to use the site.

Dilli Village is available to the public for budget accommodation. Bookings and inquiries direct with Dilli Village managers Phone: (07) 4127 9130 or Email: dillivillage@usc.edu.au

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