



## Nonsuch Island



*Google Earth aerial of Nonsuch Island.*

### **BUILT HERITAGE | SEPTEMBER 2022**

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*This is part of a series of architectural articles by the Bermuda National Trust that will highlight some of Bermuda's endangered historic buildings.*

The mention of Nonsuch Island spontaneously brings to mind images of the Bermuda cahow, or petrel, especially their oh-so-cute fluffy chicks. The island however has played other important roles in Bermuda's history.

The 15½ acre island of Nonsuch is marked on the 1636 map drawn by Willem Blaeu using Richard Norwood's 1616/1617 survey. With its high cliffs and difficult approach it is not the most accessible of islands and remained part of the 'common lands' of St George's, which generally meant for the use and maintenance of the governor, until 1759 when its lease was sold to Jonathan Burch for £25 plus an annual 'quit rent'. By 1811 the lease had been acquired by Henry Todd who forbade persons from landing or bringing dogs as he was planning to raise deer. It doesn't look as if this venture was successful and Nonsuch may have gone through a few more lease owners before being purchased for £15 in 1856 by barrister Duncan Stewart who lived at Ardsheal in Paget.



The yellow fever epidemic that began in the 1850s hit St George's the hardest. Crewmen and passengers from arriving ships had to be isolated and treated. By 1862 there was a need for a Quarantine Hospital at the East End, and Nonsuch Island, with its elevated situation open to the sea breezes and remoteness from the mainland, was chosen. Duncan Stewart had died in 1861 and it wasn't until 1865 that his widow sold the island to the Colonial Government for £300.

By 1866 trunks of contaminated clothing were being taken to Nonsuch to be burned and buried. It was not until 1869 that the Colonial Surveyor was asked to prepare a plan and estimate for a building to accommodate sick seamen to be "50 feet long, 20 feet wide, 14 feet high, well ventilated and divided into two wards with open balcony at each side of 8 feet including an eight feet road to the proposed site from the eastern landing". There appears to have already been some sort of building which in addition to being made habitable needed its kitchen enlarged. A new water tank able to hold 5,000 gallons was also to be built.



*The Octagon was photographed in 1992. This is thought to be the building that needed a kitchen and water tank in 1866. The building was used as the dining room during the time that Nonsuch was a quarantine hospital.*



*The Octagon and its large domed water tank in 2022.*





On 31 May 1872 Governor John Henry Lefroy and the Legislative Council were informed that the new hospital at the Quarantine Station on Nonsuch Island had not yet been handed over by the contractor. Completion of the building was delayed due to the rough and severe weather and “the very great inconvenience experienced in conveying stores etc to the Island and the scarcity of skilled workmen in that neighbourhood”. By May of the following year the buildings had been completed although since some minor items had not been done in a satisfactory manner the transfer to the government had still not taken place. It was noted that they needed to hire a competent nurse.



*Now called Nonsuch House, this is the front view of the West Hospital Ward. A portion of the verandah was enclosed many years ago. The eastern wing of the building in particular is now in very poor condition.*



*Side view of the West Hospital Ward taken some time between 1928 and 1930 when it was used by Dr William Beebe as his marine research station. The section on the left is now called Nonsuch House. The small wooden addition has since been demolished and the connecting walkway between the two buildings has been closed in (see below).*



*The West Hospital Ward was made up of two buildings that were connected by a covered walkway which has since been closed in. At some point dripstones (stone mouldings over the windows that deflect rain) were added to Nonsuch House. The building on the right has been until recently used as a workshop and laboratory.*



*The East Hospital Ward was a mirror image of the surviving West Ward. The larger section was demolished sometime before 1992 when this photo was taken. The back of the East Ward was originally the kitchen and by 1992 had been turned into a storeroom and garage for a golf-cart used to transport heavy items around the island.*



*The back building of the East Hospital Ward is still used for storage but is in a rundown state. The above-ground water tank seen in the 1992 photograph has since caved in.*





In 1881 the sum of £500 was allocated to erect a building to accommodate pilots and others detained in quarantine for observation. In 1881 the now “old” buildings were thoroughly repaired and limewashed and the new building begun in 1880 had been completed. It is not known which of the two wards – West or East – was built first. A small mortuary was built halfway down the island. This was demolished in the 1980s. The consecrated cemetery remains, with two old monuments still standing.

In addition to the two hospital wards and The Octagon, a Caretaker’s Cottage was built in the late 1880s.

*An undated photo of the Caretaker’s Cottage. It has had several additions since it was built in the late 1800s. It too is now in poor condition although less so than Nonsuch House*



*The Caretaker’s Cottage in 2022 is not yet derelict and can be repaired and made useful.*



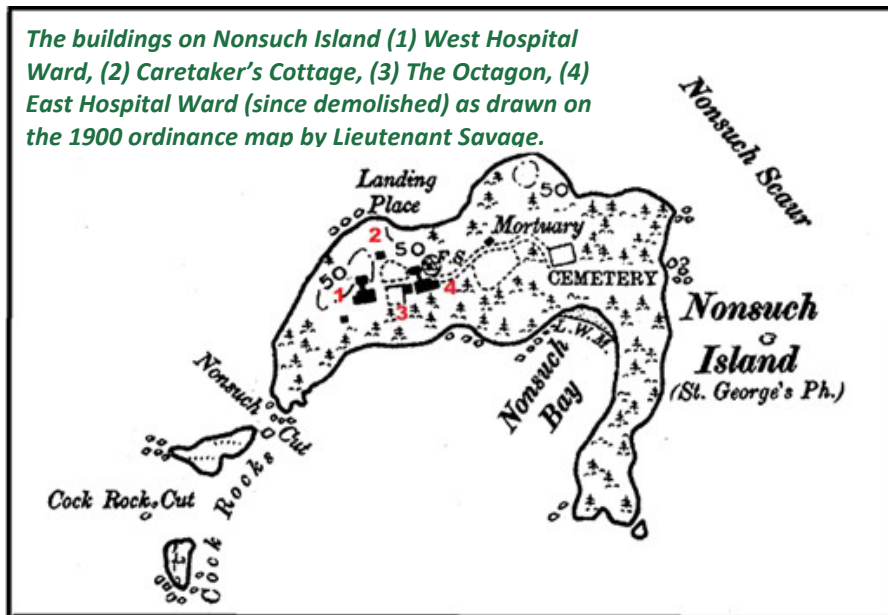
In 1925 parliamentarians argued over whether Nonsuch Island was still needed as a quarantine station when the government was about to purchase Abbotsford. Most were opposed to giving up Nonsuch which accommodated cases of yellow-fever, smallpox and beri-beri while Coney Island was to be used for less infectious diseases. In 1926 the positions of



caretaker and matron were advertised for the Nonsuch Quarantine Station. By December 1928, the Board of Health had recommended that the use of Nonsuch as a quarantine station be discontinued. This led to the decision to grant permission for Dr William Beebe, Director of the Department of Tropical Research of the New York Zoological Society, to occupy the island for several seasons for his scientific laboratory and base for his marine research. The position of caretaker was again advertised in 1932 and Hamilton Fox and his wife were hired.

From 1934 to 1948 the island was used as a boys' junior training school run by Arthur St George Tucker. Tucker was well acquainted with the island as he and his wife Elsie had been caretakers of the island after he returned home from the First World War. The East Hospital Ward was used for the boys' dormitory, the West Ward for the superintendent's quarters while his assistant lived in the former caretaker's cottage.

*The buildings on Nonsuch Island (1) West Hospital Ward, (2) Caretaker's Cottage, (3) The Octagon, (4) East Hospital Ward (since demolished) as drawn on the 1900 ordinance map by Lieutenant Savage.*



*Aerial view of the Nonsuch buildings taken about 1960. The now demolished East Hospital Ward is in the forefront with its remaining kitchen building now used for storage. Behind is the West Hospital Ward, the left building of which is now Nonsuch House.*



By the late 1950s Nonsuch Island was inhabited by Wilfred Smith, a barber with a shop on Reid Street in Hamilton, who with his wife were employed as caretakers. Mrs Smith baked bread in the large oven still to be found in the kitchen building of the East Hospital Ward. An article in the 2 June 1957 issue of *The Royal Gazette* stated that by then the only habitable building was the East Ward where the Smiths resided. The Department of Works claimed that thieves stripped the buildings soon after the training school was relocated to Paget Island.

In 1961 Nonsuch Island and other islands in Castle Harbour and around Cooper's Point were declared a Nature Reserve to encourage the cahow population to increase. In May 1966 Nonsuch was officially launched as a "Living Museum" to be developed as an example of what Bermuda's environment might have been like before man's arrival. The island was the summer home of Dr David Wingate and his family from 1962 until his retirement as Government Conservation Officer in 2000. It was initially primitive living as the island had no electricity or telephone service, but the buildings were restored to a sound state apart from the East Ward, which was demolished. An underwater telephone cable was laid from the NASA base at Cooper's Island, and a generator provided electricity until a bank of solar panels was installed in the late 1990s. A major renovation of the buildings took place in 2000 just prior to Dr. Wingate's retirement. Nonsuch House is no longer inhabited, but the Cottage is occasionally used by visiting researchers despite its poor state.

Nonsuch Island is part of the Castle Harbour Islands Nature Reserve and for the last 60 years has been the most important site in Bermuda for rare and threatened species and habitats. However, the island's role as a quarantine hospital and training school should not be forgotten. There is no reason why the buildings cannot be rehabilitated before they totally deteriorate and be used to provide proper accommodation for visiting scientists and research groups who would respect the sensitivity of the cahow sites.





*There are presently no working toilets on the island for tour groups. The visitor's restroom is unusable as the ceiling has caved in, the water tank that serves it has been cracked by tree roots and the pump is broken.*



*An invasive Ficus tree has rooted in the corner of the Octagon, threatening its integrity.*





**Sources:** *Life in Old St David's*, E A McCallan; *The Islands of Bermuda*, Terry Tucker; various issues of *The Royal Gazette* from 1811 to 1968 including 7 September 1869, 24 March 1927, 17 & 18 May 1966, 5 July 1968. See earlier at-risk article on Coney Island. After a short stint as an isolation hospital Abbotsford was demolished in 1957 and was replaced by the Nurses Residence, also now demolished (see *Bermuda's Architectural Heritage* Paget volume).