

## GRAINS OF SAND FOR A TRAVEL BUDDY

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In 2005 when Sylvia Clarke died aged 105, her doctor said that the cause of her death was old age - a condition she had been enduring for about two weeks. But that's not the half of it.

A few years before, the Grade 6 class at the Magnetic Island State School began searching an Internet list for a school group somewhere else in the world to engage in the Travel Buddies program – a kind of email penpals project. While the Magnetic Island students were pondering their options they were chosen by a class at the Headley Park Primary School in Bristol, England. Knowing that William Bright, one of Magnetic Island's earliest European settlers, had originally come from Bristol in the 1880s, it was suggested that this might be an interesting starting point for developing the relationship between the two schools.

It was also known that a Bright relative was still living in Bristol because she occasionally wrote letters to the Townsville Bulletin expressing concern about the destructive Nelly Bay harbour project which was having such an impact on the landmark of Bright Point. The waterfront development, which had collapsed in financial ruin in the early 1990s, had also disturbed the remains of 'Presto', an historic shipwreck beached as a breakwater against the prominent headland. Sylvia Clarke was out there and she had Magnetic Island on her mind.

Imagine the excitement when it was discovered that Sylvia Clarke, born 1900, was William Bright's niece and that she lived in the same street as the Headley Park Primary School. In addition, Sylvia's great granddaughter was a current pupil at the school and would be joining in the Travel Buddies connection.

At about this time it had been discovered that two old black and white photos of Bright Point featuring local notables John Shaw, William Bright and Otto Bottiger beside Bottiger's famous thatched beach hut with the 'Presto' in the background, had originally been snapped as a panoramic pair. With some specialist digital repair, the previously separately mounted originals were joined perfectly together for the first time to create a unique panorama of the historic landscape. With Sylvia's 100th birthday rapidly approaching it was decided to make this picture the talking point for the celebration of the two schools' electronic and community connection.

The 100th birthday party in February 2000 was visited by a group of students from Headley Park School who presented Sylvia with a framed copy of the Bright Point picture sent from Magnetic Island. Sylvia posed for photos and showed the children the birthday card she had just received that day from Queen Elizabeth.

In February 2005, Queen Elizabeth had to call upon the Royal Mail to deliver a new birthday card to Mabel Sylvia Clarke on the occasion of her 105th birthday. Relatives and friends from around the world, including Magnetic Island, made the pilgrimage to Sylvia's home in Headley Park to celebrate the life and times of this great personality who was still occupied looking out for family and community in her home town.

What gift would be appropriate for this centenarian who had seen two world wars, a couple of kings and queens, had raised children, grandchildren and great grandchildren but had never ventured to the end of the earth where her uncles had gone so many years before? Of course, a handful of sand from Nelly Bay beach. It contained colourful granite grains, coral rubble, bones, shells, seeds and leaves that held all the textured stories of Magnetic Island down to the salty scent of the shining sea. Sylvia turned the sample over in her hand and recounted a story from the time when she left school in 1913 aged 13. The Head Teacher had reported to Sylvia's father, Tom Bright, that, "You can lead her but you can't drive her." Sylvia had remained a leader for her whole life.

In the Headley Park School just down the street from Sylvia's home the 300 students (compared with Magnetic Island's 200) are well aware of the long history of engineering excellence and maritime discovery attributed to their home town. Now they would also be fascinated by the curious Bright family connection with distant, exotic, tropical, Magnetic Island through their near neighbour Sylvia Clarke. On the occasion of the 2005 birthday a new class of pupils at Headley Park renewed their connection with the Magnetic Island school with an exchange of email letters. Within a few days one of the Magnetic Island schoolboys, who by then had connected with a seven year old pen pal at Headley Park School, told his mother, "We're going to meet up when we are men". The flukey link between the two school communities was alive and well.