

Report by H.E. Maude (excerpt).

This excerpt from a report by British Colonial Service officer Henry E. "Harry" Maude is dated November 19, 1937 and describes his visit to Gardner Island in October of that year.



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GILBERT AND ELLICE ISLANDS COLONY.



REPORT

BY

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ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER AND NATIVE LANDS COMMISSIONER,

ON

COLONIZATION OF THE PHŒNIX ISLANDS BY THE SURPLUS
POPULATION OF THE GILBERT AND ELLICE ISLANDS.

CONFIDENTIAL

2. My orders were to call first at those islands in the Gilbert and Ellice Groups where the existence of land hunger had been reported, inquire into the extent and causes of any over-population found to exist, and embark delegates who would investigate the suitability of the various islands visited for permanent colonization. My report on the question of over-population has already been submitted and the present letter deals only with the actual work of the expedition in the Phoenix Group. A further report, on the various problems connected with the scheme for voluntary migration, is to follow.

3. Leaving Ocean Island on the 18th September, we visited the islands of Tabiteuea, Beru, Onotoa, and Arorae in the Gilberts, and Nanumea, Nanumanga, Niutao, Vaitupu, and Funafuti in the Ellice. Tabiteuea, Vaitupu, and Funafuti were visited for reasons unconnected with the main object of the expedition and no investigations were held on them, although it is probable that several families exist on Tabiteuea who are sufficiently impoverished to desire to emigrate. There was no evidence of any land hunger on Nanumanga and none of the inhabitants were willing to consider migrating to the Phoenix Group. On each of the other islands a varying degree of land hunger was found to exist, and from two to five delegates were taken on board H.M.C.S. "Nimanoa," the actual number depending on the population of the island and the estimated extent of the local land shortage. Seventeen delegates in all were taken, distributed between the islands as follows:—

Beru	..	..	5	Nanumea	..	..	2
Onotoa	..	..	3	Niutao	..	..	4
Arorae	..	..	3				

The delegates were all chosen by the people of the islands concerned, with the exception of Koata, the well-known Magistrate of Onotoa Island, who was selected by myself and whose skilled assistance was invaluable.

Apart from the native delegates, I was accompanied by Mr. E. R. Bevington, Cadet Officer, as assistant, Mautake, the Permanent Head of Delegates to the Lands Commission, as native adviser, and Tutu, Native Medical Practitioner, who investigated conditions in the Phoenix Group from a medical standpoint.

4. The enthusiasm evinced at every island in the Gilbert Group for the scheme was amazing in view of the chronic land hunger on many of the Gilbert Islands it would probably be impossible for the Government to advance a more popular scheme than one by which the Gilbertese are allowed to settle the uninhabited atolls of the Pacific. At my suggestion, however, the island delegates were chosen from among the more cautious element in the population and at the outset none of them were particularly prepossessed in favour of the project. They were the pick of the agriculturists and cultivators on each island and I was very impressed by the business like manner in which they conducted their investigations in the Phoenix Group and by their concise and accurate summing up of the merits and disadvantages of each island.

5. At Niutao, the last island visited in the Ellice Group, two sturdily built canoes were taken on board for surf work. Four delegates instead of two were taken from Niutao in order to manage them. These canoes were undoubtedly a great success and handled, as they were, by experts no difficulty was experienced in landing the delegates at any of the Phoenix Islands.

6. The expedition left Niutao Island early on the 9th October, and sailed due east for McKean Island, which it was proposed to visit *en route* to Canton. The following day the International Date Line was crossed, which gave us two Sundays, much to the astonishment of the native delegates. Owing to the easterly wind and a strong adverse current our progress was very slow and on the 12th October, it was decided to change course and make for Gardner Island, which was reached at 8 a.m. the following morning.

GARDNER ISLAND.

7. The profuse vegetation on Gardner Island gave it the appearance, from the sea, of possessing several low hills. Approaching from the north-west, after an unsuccessful attempt to find an anchorage the "Nimanoa" was tied to the wreck of the "Norwich City," about 200 yards to the north of the main entrance into the lagoon. The delegates were immediately landed in the two canoes and the majority, in charge of Mr. E. R. Bevington, commenced to walk round the island. Camp was pitched under the shade of a clump of "buka" trees to the north of the lagoon passage. It was nightfall before the delegates returned, the chart having proved to be quite inaccurate and the island far larger than had been anticipated.

The canoes were brought through the passage and the following day I examined the lagoon and the various points of interest on the island, while the delegates dug a series of wells along the western side of the atoll. The inspections and well-digging were completed on the third day, the 15th October, and the expedition left for Canton Island at 4.45 p.m.

8. The results of the expedition's work on Gardner are summarised under the following heads:—

Topographical.—The map of the island contained in Admiralty Chart No. 184 was found to be quite unreliable. The island is of atoll formation, approximately 4 miles long by 1-1½ miles wide, enclosing a lagoon approximately 3½ miles long by ¾ mile wide. The width of land varies from under 100 yards on part of the east and north-east coast to ¾ mile on the west. The land was generally flat but on parts of the north coast there was a gradual rise amounting to several feet, culminating in a ridge along the centre.

Lagoon.—From the point of view of possible settlers the lagoon, which trends E. and W., is an excellent one. There are two passages into it from the sea, on the middle of the west and south coast respectively. The western passage is at present just navigable for canoes at high tide and, by means of blasting, it should be possible to make a passage which could be used at half tide or over. Owing to there being only the two comparatively narrow passages there is no daily tidal rise and fall in the lagoon, the only change in the water level being between the spring and neap tides. As a result it is possible in many places to step straight from canoe to shore. There is a remarkable absence of coral patches or "horses heads" in the lagoon, making it easily navigable.

Fertility and Flora.—Without hesitation I should judge Gardner to be the most fertile island in the Colony, with the possible exception of Washington Island. The typical soil was a rich dark brown mould, resembling peat, and quite unlike the coral sand of the Gilbert Group. Most of the island was covered with groves of enormous "buka" trees (*Pisonia grandis*), an excellent wood for house building and box making. These, with their large grey trunks several feet in diameter and anything up to 60 feet in height, and their soft green foliage, are more reminiscent of European than tropical trees. To the south of the main passage there were also some fine groves of "kanawa" trees (*Cordia subcordata*), which are invaluable for canoe and boat building. In the Gilbert Group both the "buka" and "kanawa" trees are very rare indeed and can only be grown on the most fertile islands and then with the greatest difficulty.

A striking illustration of the fertility of the soil was seen in the growth of the "kaura" plant (*Sida fallax*, Walp.), for whereas in the remainder of the Colony it forms a small shrub, often procumbent and never more than a foot or two high, on Gardner, it had grown into small trees seven or more feet in height. Unlike, I believe, all other low islands in the Central Pacific, there is very little undergrowth on Gardner Island, and particularly on the western and northern sides there were few of the plants and grasses typical of the Gilberts. This, however, is almost certainly due to the dense groves of trees, for on the south-east of the island where there was extensive open country, the flora, while growing more luxuriantly, was identical with that of any other coral atoll.

Soil profiles obtained when well digging showed the dark brown mould, which contained a large admixture of guano, extending down to four feet, gradually becoming lighter and being finally replaced by white coral fragments. On the south-east corner of the island the soil was of a light brown sandy nature, more like that of the Gilbert Islands.

There were five small groves of coconut trees on the west side of the island, two to the north of the lagoon passage and three to the south. Unfortunately many of the trees had grown up in hopeless positions subject to inundation during spring tides, but the two groves planted in tolerably good localities were doing extraordinarily well, the trees bearing heavily with the ground round piled high with nuts. A feature that struck the delegates forcibly was the fact that the trunks of the coconut trees were in no instance "waisted," demonstrating that during the last fifteen or twenty years at any rate the island has been free from drought. There were altogether 111 coconut trees on the island in full bearing and no indication could be found of others having been planted and subsequently dying.

Water supply.—Eight wells were dug during our three days on the island—four to the north of the main lagoon passage and two to the south. The water in five of the wells was of indifferent quality, particularly those to the south of the channel. Two of the wells in the north, however, contained water of fair quality, while one well contained drinking water nearly equal, in the opinion of the natives, to that on Sydney Islands and fresher than many wells in the Gilbert Islands. The expedition was fortunate in visiting the Phoenix Group just before the commencement of the wet season and I think that it can be taken as an axiom that if an atoll well contains drinkable water in October or November, there is no likelihood of the water proving undrinkable at any time. Low island wells are, of course, partly tidal and contain a mixture of rain water seepage and sea water filtered by the coral sand. As a consequence most Gilbertese wells run very saltish towards the end of the dry season. The water in freshly dug wells is, furthermore, usually exceptionally brackish for the first week or so and the expedition was unfortunately unable to stay long enough to see whether the water in the southern wells improved. The delegates appeared to be satisfied with the water on the island and were of the opinion that even better water could be found if further wells were dug. Samples of the water were bottled and taken to Beru, where the people stated that it was better than they obtained from some of their own wells.

Fishing.—Fish were everywhere plentiful, both off the reef and in the lagoon, and most of the varieties common to the Gilbert and Ellice Groups were recognised by the delegates. If settlers lived on Gardner Island permanently the fish naturally would gradually become scarcer, as in the Gilbert Group. There were large numbers of sharks, but those seen in the lagoon were quite small.

On the south-west corner of the lagoon a natural lake had formed which teemed with "baneawa" fish, a species of pond mullet much esteemed by the natives. This natural supply would prove of value during the early stages of any settlement.

Anchorage and landing facilities.—For convenience in landing passengers and gear, the "Nimanoa" was tied to the wreck of the "Norwich City" during the whole of our visit to Gardner Island. A fairly good 9 fathoms anchorage was, however, discovered by the officers of the vessel about $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile south of the wreck.

There is quite good landing during easterly weather, to the south of the wreck by the lagoon entrance, and a small amount of blasting could make the landing better than at some of the reef islands in the Ellice Group.

Suitability for immigration.—The delegates were quite certain that Gardner Island is suitable for settlement by Gilbertese or Ellice Islanders. They were overcome with astonishment at the fertility of the island and the Onotoa and Arorae natives, in particular, have made earnest representations that they should be permitted to colonise it jointly.

The delegates considered that practically the whole of Gardner Island was good coconut and pandanus land, with the exception of about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile on the east and north-east coasts. This would largely depend, however, on whether soil well suited for the growth of "buka" trees is also suitable for coconut and pandanus cultivation. It is doubtful if the native "babai" would grow in such rich soil but limes, tomatoes, yams, kumaras, taro, and other plants that will not readily grow elsewhere in the Colony, should do quite well.

It is estimated that, when fully planted, Gardner Island should support a population of approximately 1,100 Gilbertese in comparative affluence.

Miscellaneous.—The island was found to contain thousands of enormous coconut crabs, which formed a welcome addition to the diet of the delegates. As the crabs were often met with several miles from the nearest coconut tree, it is obvious that they must feed on leaves and grasses as well as on coconuts. Rats and innumerable birds formed the other occupants of the island.

A large cairn was built in a conspicuous position midway between the wreck and the lagoon passage, surrounding a flagstaff and notice board. As similar notice boards were erected at the other islands, a copy of the inscription is enclosed.

Owing to the difficulty the Gilbertese have in pronouncing European names, the island was unanimously re-christened "Nikumaroro" and it is by this name that it is known throughout the Gilberts at the present time. The name happens to be exceptionally suitable as it was from the island of Nikumaroro, lying to the south of the Gilbert Group, that the famous Gilbertese ancestress Nei Manganibuka came, bringing with her the traditional lore of deep-sea navigation and the first "buka" tree.

CANTON ISLAND.

8. Owing to a due easterly wind and set it was decided to make straight to Canton, the northernmost of the Phoenix Group, from Gardner. Canton Island was reached at 9 a.m. on the 17th October, the ship anchoring in 7 fathoms, to the south of the main lagoon passage. On proceeding ashore I was met by Mr. F. H. Rostler, Administrative Officer, Phoenix Islands District. The first morning was spent examining the land in the vicinity of Mr. Rostler's station, two wells being dug. At 3 p.m. I left with Mr. Bevington and a number of delegates in the launch to inspect the remainder of the island. During the afternoon and evening the southern coast was explored, the party sleeping on the beach at the south-east corner of the lagoon, where Mr. G. V. Langdale, Assistant Administrative Officer, Phoenix Islands District, with his Niutao Island servant, had pitched their camp.

During the second day the eastern and the northern sides of the island were examined, several
On the north-east corner On the third