

# John Busst Story

Ninney Rise , the birthplace of two World Heritage areas the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics.



John Busst self portrait  
courtesy Margaret Thorsborne AO

# John BÜsst Story

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Nestled in the rainforest at the northern end of Bingil Bay, North Queensland, Ninney Rise was built by artist and conservationist John Büssst in 1957

Ninney Rise has a unique building style and is set in park-like grounds where the rainforest meets the reef. The very environment, at that time, was threatened with clearing, runoff from agriculture, logging, limestone mining and oil drilling.

In the days when conservationists were seen as cranks, this inspiring location overlooking the Coral Sea, became the meeting place for artists, scientists and activists seeking to protect the reef and rainforest. The work of these visionary people culminated in the Great Barrier Reef and later the Wet Tropics being listed as World Heritage Areas.

Born into a wealthy Melbourne family, John Büssst chose the life of an artist becoming a key figure in the Montsalvat artists' colony in Eltham, Victoria. Led by Justus Jorgensen, Montsalvat was built by students including John Büssst. Jorgensen instilled in his students a philosophy to live simply, to be self-supporting and to try to keep themselves free of commercial entanglements. Büssst was seen as one of Jorgensen's most successful students and became an important character in the life of the Montsalvat colony. During his time at Montsalvat, Büssst became a passionate conservationist.



Portrait of John Büssst while at Montsalvat



One of the buildings at Montsalvat Art colony

In 1938, 29 year old Büssst visited the Family Island group offshore from Mission Beach to paint the 'brilliant hues of the tropics' He immediately declared "This is the place for me to live, henceforth Melbourne is out - finished with!"

He leased, then bought land on Bedarra for three thousand pounds. Using the skills he learnt at Montsalvat, Büssst spent three years building a mud brick home in a secluded bay furnishing it with bamboo from nearby Clump Point on the mainland.

For the next 12 years Büssst lived an idyllic lifestyle pursuing his art on the island retreat. During this time, Büssst published a paper on the rare Australian swiflets on Bedarra Island.



In 1950, John married Alison Fichett also from Victoria.



John and Ali Büssst wedding day Photo courtesy Virginia Edlington

As tourism increased on the Family Islands, John and Alison sought seclusion on the mainland at Ninney Point, Bingil Bay, described as a place of "extreme quiet and of great beauty".

Adapting the Montsalvat philosophy to the tropical environment they designed and built their new home (now known as 'Ninney Rise') with Büssst's trademark bamboo furnishing.

Patricia Clare, author of Struggle for the Great Barrier Reef, wrote . . . "It was surrounded by wide verandahs, with a roof like a shade hat pulled down over the lot" "The white house stood on its own cliff, the rainforest behind it" "Like the grounds, it was the creation of its owner" "Büssst had built it" "In front the satin shine of blue water stretched away to where the reefs of lime lay hidden"



Ninney Rise during Büssst era

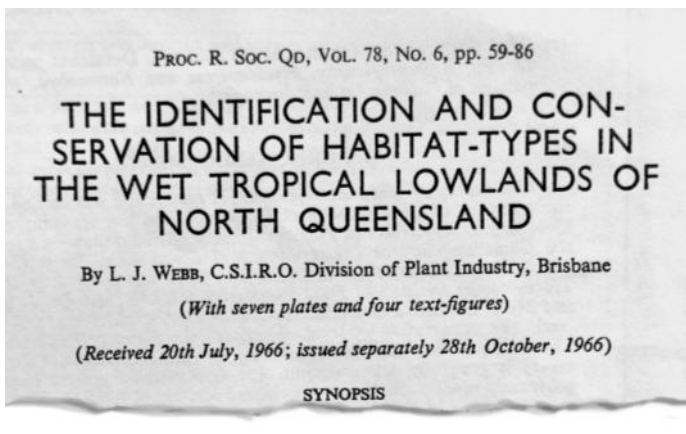
Built from local Silkwood bricks, Büssst explained, *"I am not interested in making anything that won't last for a thousand years"*.



John and Ali Büssst at Ninney

Just as they were settling in John and Alison became aware of proposals for extensive clearing of local rainforest. John immediately used his contacts to fund a scientific study of the conservation value of the lowland forests. In his rainforest conservation campaign, John Büssst worked with Queensland's handful of flora and fauna scientists, botanists Len

Webb, and Geoff Tracey and ornithologists Jiro Kikkawa and Billie Gill. The research established that the Wet Tropics rainforests were of global significance. This partnership between scientists and conservationists resulted in protection of many of the lowland rainforest National Parks that we treasure today.



Critical to this success was Büssst's connections with government leaders. Harold Holt, then Prime Minister, was a friend from Büssst's school and university days. Inspired by Büssst and their love of diving, Harold and Zara Holt bought land at Garners Beach visiting the Büsssts often and to enjoy the reef environment.



Photo, Courtesy Virginia Edlington From left: Zara Holt, Len Webb, Harold Holt, Ali Büssst at Bingil Bay

But then a new threat emerged. The reef was in danger!

Billie Gill, secretary of the Innisfail Branch of the Wildlife Preservation Society remembered... *"In August 1967, John Büssst's wife Alison was reading the Innisfail newspaper, the Evening Advocate. She saw a small notice advertising an application to the Mining Warden's Court for a license to mine limestone for agricultural purposes from the 'dead' Ellison Reef. Ali was at once appalled and showed it to John. The rest is history."*

Using his brilliant communication skills and connections, John Büssst immediately set about proving that Ellison Reef was not dead. He was able to get Queensland University marine science students from Brisbane to dive Ellison Reef. The subsequent data proved Ellison Reef was not dead.



John Büssst at Ninney Rise



Eddie Hegerl

Marine Scientist Eddie Hegerl, recounted his story...

*"We were taken out in two little tiny home made boats that were unsafe at any speed and we stayed on these boats on the reef for five days and surveyed the reef. We had over two hundred species of fish and 90 something species of coral. We found it was a perfectly normal coral reef."*

They won the court case and established the legal precedent that the reef should not be mined.



The reef was safe! . . . or so they thought. The Qld government had leased almost the whole Great Barrier Reef for oil drilling exploration.

Conservationists argued the reef was a natural wonder of the world, that it belonged to everybody. State and national conservation groups joined the 'David and Goliath' battle.

The federal Government challenged the Queensland government about exploitation and ownership of the reef. With international and local oil spills, the future of the reef became an international issue.



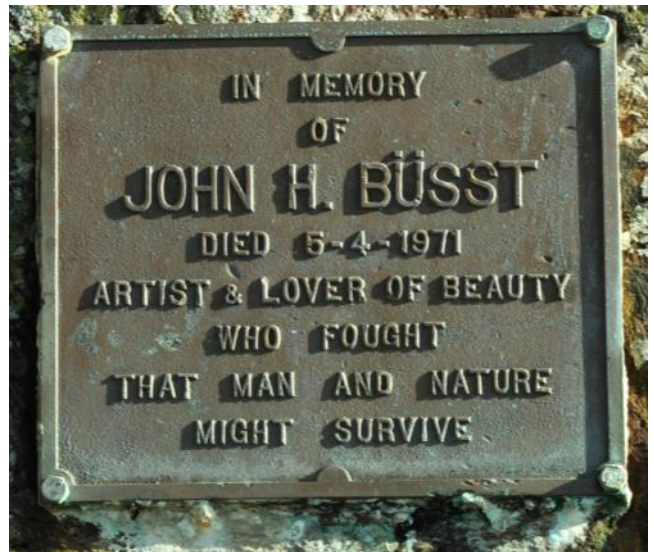
*"It was the wildest bad luck as those who wished to exploit the Great Barrier Reef met with the graduate of Montsalvat who was not simply a romantic artist but at once a man of emotion and a wickedly cool organiser"* (History of the Australian Conservation Movement by Drew Hutton and Libby Connors)

Known affectionately as 'the Bingil Bay Bastard' John Bússt didn't live to see the end result of this massively successful campaign - the declaration of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and World Heritage Area.

At John Bússt's untimely death in 1971, Len Webb wrote a eulogy titled 'To drop quietly from a twig'



*"I do not think that anybody will fill the ecological niche which John Bússt occupied in our life over the past 24 years ... So much for John Bússt, who stirred a lot of mates to optimism and action and ruffled a lot of forests and reefs before the tree shed a leaf"*



A commemorative plaque was placed near Ninney Rise with words by Australian poet Judith Wright, fellow conservation leader who was pivotal in the reef conservation success.



**"IN MEMORY OF JOHN H. BÚSST ARTIST AND LOVER OF BEAUTY WHO FOUGHT THAT MAN AND NATURE MIGHT SURVIVE"**.

(Judith Wright Photo courtesy Meredith McKinney)



0418 508 349  
friendsofninneyrise@gmail.com  
www.ninneyrise.com



Friends of Ninney Rise