

Basic Detail Report

00051327

Title

Port Arthur The British Penal Settlement in Tasmania - Glimpses of its Stirring History

Date

1920-1930

Primary Maker

The Old Curiosity Shop, Port Arthur

Medium

Ink on paper

Dimensions

Overall: 203 x 140 mm

Name

Book

History

The Port Arthur penal settlement was first established as a small timber-cutting station on the south-eastern coast of what was then Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) in 1830. There was vocal opposition by free settlers to convict transportation who objected to seeing chain gangs in the streets of Hobart and Launceston; recently arrived free migrants also had to compete with free convict labour in the market place; and there were perceptions of increased crime in Hobart and its surrounds. This resulted in Governor George Arthur in 1832 making the isolated convict settlement the primary secondary punishment settlement for male convicts in Van Diemen's Land. Secondary punishment settlements were specifically located in areas that were isolated and removed from districts inhabited by free settlers. This isolation not only gave the settlers some protection from escaped convicts but also deterred the convicts from bolting, acting as a psychological wall or barrier. The Tasman Peninsula, on which Port Arthur and a number of other penal settlements were situated, was the perfect location. It was surrounded by water on three sides and the only land access was via Eaglehawk Neck - a narrow neck of land only 80 metres across - which was guarded night and day by armed guards and a line of chained dogs. A perfect example of the changing government attitude towards crime, punishment and prison reform, Port Arthur became the largest convict manufactory in Van Diemen's Land with its captive workforce producing ironwork, bronze castings, leather work, ceramics, bricks, small boats and even ships for the colonial government. Prior to 1842 all convicts in Van Diemen's Land, except those serving secondary punishment sentences or working on government projects, were employed under the Assignment System. Under this system convicts were assigned to work for private individuals, who provided shelter, food and clothing in exchange for the convicts' labour. The Select Committee on Transportation, also known as the Molesworth

Committee after its chair, William Molesworth, was specifically formed in April 1837 to investigate Transportation and Secondary Punishment in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. When the Molesworth Committee reported that the Assignment System was too lenient on the one hand and open to abuse and corruption on the other, the British and Colonial Governments introduced the Probation System into Van Diemen's Land. This new system was based on the convicts first having served part of their sentence in England prior to being transported out to Van Diemen's Land. In the colony they were classified into classes depending upon their crime and previous behaviour and then sent out to Probation Stations, or secondary punishment settlements such as Port Arthur, for at least two years. During this time the convict would have points credited or debited from an account - a certain number of points would entitle the convict to a remission on the remaining part of their sentence. After two years probation the convicts could receive a probation pass allowing them to work for wages while reporting to police. If they were well behaved they gained a Ticket of Leave and later a Conditional Pardon. In 1842, the four-story flourmill and granary (later the penitentiary) that still dominates the site today was begun, along with the settlement's hospital. The penitentiary was the largest brick building in the colony and contained 136 separate cells on the two lower floors for prisoners under heavy sentences; the third floor contained a dining room, library, school room and Catholic prayer room whilst the fourth floor was a general dormitory area which accommodated 348 separate sleeping places in two tiers. At its height in 1844 there were some 1200 adult and 800 boy convicts located on site. Taken into account the administration, military guard and related families the population of the site was close to 3000 making it the second largest settlement of Europeans in Van Diemen's Land. In 1848 construction began on the Separate or New Model Prison, the completion of which marked a philosophical shift away from physical punishment to mental control and domination. The Cessation of Transportation in 1853 saw the Port Arthur penal settlement decline in population and importance and Port Arthur was abandoned by the government in September 1877. The final occupants, under the supervision of the last Surgeon - Commandant of Port Arthur, Dr John Coverdale, were Norfolk Island returnees, convict pensioners and transported felons whose sentences had not been completed. When the last invalids and paupers left Port Arthur in 1877 the complex of buildings, boat yards, foundries and accommodation blocks were sold off to private individuals and the site became known as Carnarvon in a government effort to wipe clean the former penal settlement's fearsome reputation. However many of the locals, realising the tourist potential of the site only a day trip from Hobart by steamer, quickly established shops, tea rooms, hotels and guided tours and the former Separate Prison and Penitentiary became popular tourist destinations. By 1892 Port Arthur had become an established port of call for tourists with several thousand visiting the settlements during the summer months. Several small museums, including William Radcliffe's Old Curiosity Shop, were established at Port Arthur whilst the well known Tasmanian photographer J W Beattie established the much larger Port Arthur Museum at his photographic studio at 60 Elizabeth Street in Hobart. Both Radcliffe and Beattie acquired and regularly sold off relics and artefacts from Port Arthur, Point Puer and the coalmines, employed former convicts such as Bill Thompson as guides, printed numerous publications on Port Arthur and the convict days, many of which used Beattie's haunting black and white photographs of the romantic gothic ruins in their picturesque landscape, and generally encouraged visitation to the site. By the time this guide was produced by Radcliffe and Beattie in the 1930s the penal settlement had reverted back to its former name of Port Arthur and the state government had become more proactive in the management of the site,

funding restoration work, re-establishing gardens and buying back the buildings and land it had sold into private hands in the 1870s. The buyback continued until the early 1970s when the entire site was handed over to the Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service to manage as a historic site. Now under the management of the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority, the Port Arthur and Coal Mines Historic Sites attract more than 300,000 visitors per year and in 2010 were given World Heritage status.