Extract Becoming a Penal Colony

(1) Convicts: Punishment & Transportation
(2) Convicts: Working for Freedom
(3) Convict Systems: Assignment, Probation and Exile
(4) Hulks and Macquarie Harbour
(5) Convict resistance
(6) Port Arthur
(7) Point Puer: boy convicts

These extracts are from an earlier version of Becoming Tasmania. They were edited out so that the published book was a manageable size and did not become a 'general history.' However, by making these 'general' elements available online it should assist readers to further interpret the published material.

Please note: a 'lace doily view' of convict history is not intended, because one cannot ignore the 'drama of justice' nor the pain and punishment that operated on VDL while it was predominantly a prison island.

Background: General

Background: Penal Plan
Van Diemen’s Land becoming a penal colony was a matter of British political and legal policy. As a result of these repressive socio-political and legal policies John West and R. W. Giblin both suggest that by sending its criminals to the island the UK government had used VDL merely as the ‘dust-hole of the Empire’ and a ‘dust heap’. Contradicting these widely held views, Geoffrey Blainey considered that Australia was too far away from the UK to have been used just for this purpose. Yet governmental expectations of convict reform meant that the bureaucracy hoped that the convicts would become ‘peasants’ after their penal sentence had expired. They were not expected, nor were many even eligible, to return to the UK.

Alternative views of convict history have stressed that trade and sea power were the vital selection factors involved not simply ridding Britain itself of convicts. Dallas encapsulated this fundamental feature of British colonial policy

Transportation was a mercantilist device for providing any likely colonial venture with a sufficiency of unfetted labour. Some form of slavery was essential in a civilisation which had not yet learned to respond to wage incentives.

‘Slavery’ and ‘Civilization’ are subjective terms, although Dallas has remarked, when discussing so-called convict slavery, that many colonial masters treated their convicts like horses to be broken in, fed and watered. Conversely, Australian masters could not legally flog their convicts: only magistrates could order the lash, although many masters were close friends of local magistrates. On balance Dallas noted that the same work practices often applied in England.
Pentonville: an example of a British prison cell from which convicts were transported.  
Note its similarity to those at Port Arthur

---

**Becoming Tasmania Extract (6) Port Arthur**

Port Arthur, established in the 1830s, was named after the incumbent Lieutenant Governor George Arthur who departed VDL in 1836. Nevertheless, Arthur’s name has become synonymous with convicts, although he probably asked for it. By presenting London only selective information, Arthur, by somewhat ‘devious’ means, created a settlement on Tasman Peninsula because shipping access there was better than for the infamous Macquarie Harbour. At least he admitted Port Arthur was to be for the ‘severe punishment of the vicious’. By 1847 — a decade after Arthur’s departure — it was still planned to ‘make Port Arthur a place of severe and dreaded secondary punishment’.

While VDL was a prison without walls, two isolated secondary punishment stations operated at Macquarie and Maria islands to contain convicts sentenced by local Magistrates for transportation within the colony. However, concerned about the cost of Macquarie and Maria islands, Arthur asked for a report on which could be closed and yet still retain an effective punishment regime. Maria Island convicts were not considered as ‘delinquent as those sent to Macquarie Harbour’ and as a result Maria Island, a secondary penal site since 1825, was closed in 1832. Although it did serve as such again from 1842-1852. After this closure the focus for the administration of felons shifted to Port Arthur.

As a place of secondary punishment Port Arthur meant hard work and pain, physical or psychological. Therefore, its reputation is infamous. Deserved or not, we cannot either ignore this reputation or encompass a great deal of it here. The penal station's scenic setting was soon described as the ‘final cage for incorrigibles’, and as a place of ‘unvarying and unmitigated misery and desolation’, or of ‘all-consuming misery’. Even James Calder, a contemporary surveyor, who found convict punishment repulsive, dubbed Port Arthur an ‘abode of evil-doers.’ He was even reluctant to endlessly ponder it and so refused to ‘wear out his brains over the place’.
Port Arthur and Punishment

Descriptions of convicts often focus on the tripod and the whip. Yet solitary confinement and or the dreaded treadmill eventually replaced the whip. John Frost, a convict clerk employed at Port Arthur, for one, told his international audiences that the ‘flogger was the most powerful man at Port Arthur’, by which he meant his physique not his authority. Contradictory to this and most assessments of flogging, one-time Port Arthur Commandant James Boyd noted that ‘the more unflinchingly a prisoner endured flogging the more he was looked up to and applauded by the mass of his associates.’

One convict flagellator, an ex-soldier transported to VDL for desertion, apparently used his position to gain sexual favours [associating indecently] from other inmates of Port Arthur.

This case alone illustrates that so-called ‘unnatural’ practices were not merely taking place between women-starved men, but were also perpetrated by overseers who abused their positions.

Before being sent to isolation cells, other punishments were used at Port Arthur and throughout VDL. Humiliating, and doubtless sometimes painful, wooden stocks were used. However, for example, Henry Button recalled that the public stocks used in Launceston were rather tame and that ‘this petty ridicule was often endured in silence.’ He also recorded that the originally horrendous torture of the local Launceston treadmill was eventually converted into a stable for the mounted police.

Concerning isolation practices, Port Arthur’s now famous ruins include the Separate or Model Prison constructed between 1848 and 1854. Modelled on Britain’s Pentonville Prison, here were the cells, 9 feet by 6 feet, where strict silence reigned and within which the probationer-exiles began their island-based tenure, unless they were sent to the smaller ‘dark’ or ‘dumb cells’. Such true solitary cells aside, the implementation of punishment -versus- incentive regime fluctuated at Port Arthur depending on its Commandant and level of government directives to institute economies. Flogging, for example, witnessed an overall decline from 38 percent of convicts in 1840, to a mere 4 per cent following the implementation the probation system of convictism. Punishment moved from the back to the brain.

As background; usage of silent cell isolation methodology was widespread internationally. Overall its aim was to help contain society because those in power felt that ‘crime was sustained in society by the spread of irreligion and immorality’, which they perceived was rampant amongst the lower classes. Therefore, using absolute silence ‘separated the convict for long hours in his own cell to commune with his conscience’ and this separation ‘prepared the mind to receive better impressions and the soul to hear the message offered by the chaplain.’

Confirming this, when solitary or ‘dark’ cells, with absolute silence regimes, were introduced in VDL they were designed to provide ample time for personal reflection on a convicts’ ‘sins and reform’, and minimal rations were also used to help make the point. An 1849 interpretation of VDL’s prison regulations considered that solitary confinement ‘produces a powerful effect in changing the evil tendencies of the convicts minds’. The eerily silent Chapel at Port Arthur was part of this system; albeit often seen as quirky rather than targeted at ‘improving’ the convicts before their release.

Returning to the decline in blood-producing flogging and beatings, an 1846 report shows that only 516 of 24148 convicts were flogged that year. Historian Lloyd Robson, however, suggests that a bare 10 per cent of convicts were never victims of the harsh corporal punishment system. Regardless of this decline the previous ‘horrors’ of Port Arthur perpetuated VDL’s bad image internationally. Was there no chance of a ‘cure’ for this exaggeration? After cessation of transportation, horrendous tales of cannibalism especially during escapes from Macquarie Harbour became prevalent, as did tales of agreements to murder a fellow convict after drawing lots. Was this limited but cruel lottery a form of sequential suicide? Did one convict supposedly agreed to kill another in order that they might be hanged? We cannot settle this matter here, but many such sad stories come to rest on Port Arthur, although they may be inaccurate.
Port Arthur Data

Stories aside, the number of convicts at penal settlements within a penal colony rose quickly. The adults at Port Arthur were in fact supplemented by the juveniles at Port Puer so relevant data is presented here. In addition, as illustrated in this Table Point Puer numbers climbed because boys began to arrive directly from the UK. Thus an additional barracks was built to accommodate them in 1837. 

(Becoming Tasmania) Penal Data on Port Arthur & Point Puer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Port Arthur 1830-1878 [Male and Female]</th>
<th>Point Puer 1834-1849 [Boys 9-18 years]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1831</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>412*</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1832</td>
<td>836</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1834</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1835</td>
<td>884</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1836</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1837</td>
<td>1024</td>
<td>315 [accommodation wing added]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1838</td>
<td>1044</td>
<td>473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1839</td>
<td>1495</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1843</td>
<td>1100*</td>
<td>706 NB: henceforth under 15 years only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1845</td>
<td>1209</td>
<td>730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1846</td>
<td>1218</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1847</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>162 [NB: Point Puer Closed]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td>Year of Cessation</td>
<td>Transportation ends…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td>690</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>517</td>
<td>NB: only 50% able-bodied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td>888 [only 100 were convicts, i.e. lifers]</td>
<td>NB: inc. time served invalids; Lunatic Asylum was built for them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1867-68</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>Adult convicts removed to Hobart Gaol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>283 [192 were paupers]</td>
<td>NB: Tasmanian Govt. assumes full control of Port Arthur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1873</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>NB: removed to Hobart Gaol etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1876-78</td>
<td>64 [and 126 paupers, 79 lunatics]</td>
<td>Final annual report adds 5 felons Pauper facility temporarily reopened:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Adapted from VDL Statistics 1838 Table 38 & PP 48/1878
I. Brand Penal Peninsula, and Hooper Prison Boys of Port Arthur, and
* Journal O’Hara Booth p.163, where 1120 is given as peak year in 1843
I. Brand Convict probation System p.86

Port Arthur industrial site

A cruel life or not, apart from punishment what were the males, whether juvenile or adult likely to endure during their sentences? Convict duties in and around Port Arthur centred on timber getting, making shingles, firewood and coal mining. There were also six foundry forges for metalworking by 1848, from which appeared not only convict leg-irons but also inkpots and saucepans, et cetera. There was manufacture of bricks, barrels, coach wheel spokes, shoes and extensive shipbuilding, to name just a few. In fact, shoemaking, with leather from a tannery on site, was to become an ‘export’ industry from Port Arthur, where work was partly seen as retraining of the felons, say from rural worker to shoemaker. In 1835 ‘2903 pairs of men’s boots, 4 pairs of Wellington boots, 200 pairs of boys’ boots, 2130 pairs of womens’ and girls’ shoes and 5485 pairs of mens’ shoes’ were produced. In 1846 3000 pairs of boots of ’superior description’ appeared, and in 1848 58 shoemakers laboured there producing boots ‘worth nearly two pairs of those sent out from England’. 

Extract from Becoming Tasmania by Terry Newman
The coal-mining alone provided a harsh, even savage, working environment for the convicts, who were lowered down the shafts to grub away in often waterlogged tunnels within which they could not even stand up. In addition, they had to push the coal-laden carts out themselves. Many of these miners might, however, have been semi-skilled having undertaken similar work before their transportation. On the other hand, along with accusations of lax administration of these mines, convicts undertaking clerical duties for them gained ‘private’ sleeping quarters and the ability to cook their own meals in ‘comparative leisure.’ However, of note, the presence of boy convicts at the mines was, in a report dated 1847, considered ‘objectionable’. This followed a similar requirement in 1842 for a Hiring Depot at New Town Farm to separate them from the adults while they awaited employment after training at Point Puer [see extract No.7]. So, VDL’s social evolution extended to concern for boy convicts?  

Terry Newman

2 Robson, L. History of Tasmania Vol. 1 p.118.
4 K. M. Dallas ‘First settlement of Australia; considered in relation to sea-power in world politics’ THRA P&P 1952 No. 3 p.12.
8 See for example, J. R. Morris, ‘Early convict history of Maria Island’ THRA P&P Vol. 11 No.4 July 1964 pp.157-177 and J. Tattersall ‘Lobor on Maria Island; punishment by exile’ Napier: Hawke’s Bay Art Gallery and Museum, 1973
11 J. Frost The Horrors of convict life; two lectures London: Holyoake, 1856 p.11.
16 VDL Statistics 1838 Table 40 records the solitary rations were the same for men and boys at 12% daily flour made into 1 lb bread. ½ oz soap and ½ oz salt. ’Dark cells’ defined by A. Laugesen Convict words: language in early colonial Australia Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002 p.63.
21 See I. Brand Port Arthur coal mines, 1833-1877 Launceston: Regal, 1993. VDL Statistics 1828 Table 43 records, for example, 435,732 feet of timber was cut at Port Arthur and 11,896 feet exported.