



TASMANIA

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PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA

PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

REPORT ON PORT ARTHUR RESTORATION

Laid upon the Tables of both Houses of Parliament

The Committee was appointed under the provisions of section 2 of the Public Accounts Committee Act 1970 (No. 54).

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE

Legislative Council

Mr Batt
Mr Gregory
Mr McKay

House of Assembly

Mr Barnard (Chairman)
Mr Davies
Mr Lyons

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REPORT

PORT ARTHUR RESTORATION

Because of the significance and high cost of the Port Arthur restoration programme, the Committee recently investigated the progress which has been made and the economics involved. The Minister was kind enough to furnish us with copies of the draft management plan for the area, dated December 1982. Under the heading 'Introduction to Direction of Management' the basic thrust of the plan is indicated, and this is quoted in full:—

The Port Arthur Historic Site is the major convict settlement of an Australian penal system that is the foundation of European social, economic and physical development of the nation in general, and Tasmania in particular. As such, the existing fabric of the settlement is of monumental importance to the nation's heritage as an historic document capable of accurate interpretation.

The economic importance of tourism to the State of Tasmania is well known, and it is in this context that the presentation of a quality historic attraction will maximise the tourist potential of the Site.

Accordingly, the direction of management will be towards conservation of the fabric of the site to keep from harm, decay or loss the structures, spaces and elements that accurately reveal the significance of the site. In guiding this conservation, the principles of maintenance and preservation will be given the highest priorities, with restoration limited to those structures where it is the only means of arresting decay or loss. Adaption of structures will also be selectively limited for interpretive or essential purposes.

In visiting Port Arthur, people come to see the reality of the site. The presentation of a site comprised to accommodate unrelated contemporary functions will not occur. The basic needs and comfort of visitors is recognised and will be provided for in appropriate facilities. Arrangements for providing visitor information and interpretive experiences will also be provided in a meaningful but low impact manner. It is also recognised that ancillary commercial development outside of the Site will greatly assist in the tourist development of the Port Arthur Region.

In summary, the principal direction of management for the Port Arthur Historic Site will be towards conservation of the fabric of the settlement to enable the historic realities of the Site to be accurately and continuously understood at many levels, while providing visitor and management requirements with minimal impact.

At Port Arthur, the Australian community has the opportunity to conserve and understand the vital contribution of a system that was basic to European settlement of the country. Intervention that reduces the integrity and significance of the Site is not appropriate.

The Committee heard evidence from the Director of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Mr Murrell, the Port Arthur Liaison Officer, Mr Tiffin, and the Acting Accountant, Mr Davidson, and some months later visited the Site. Following this thorough inspection, further evidence was heard from Messrs Murrell and Tiffin. We were told that the programme which began in 1979-80 was for a seven-year period and a total cost of nine million dollars. Six million dollars is being provided by the Commonwealth and three million by Tasmania. Many of the decisions on policies and procedures were decided in the earlier stages of the project by the Tasmanian Restoration Advisory Committee, made up of Commonwealth and State officers and others from the private sector, the Heritage Commission, and so on. The Tasmanian Professor of History, Professor Roe, was Chairman, and the committee included a Melbourne architect much involved with the restoration of historic buildings and materials and soils experts. The advisory committee is no longer in existence, having been replaced by a steering committee of Commonwealth and State officers, chaired by the Director of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, to supervise expenditure on the work.

The Director said in evidence that while the cost of the project was very high — the nine million dollar estimate having been worked out in 1975 or 1976 without allowing for inflation — this is the price that must be paid for neglecting our heritage for a hundred years. He said that the cheapest way to handle the problem now would be to draw plans of the buildings and then to demolish and rebuild them. But Australia adheres to the ICOMOS Charter, the International Charter on the Restoration of Monuments and Sites, which calls for restoration and conservation rather than replacement.

The Committee was told that had funds for the restoration of Port Arthur not been made available, we would in ten to fifteen years have been left with piles of red dust. Instead a number of buildings will be fully restored and others, such as the penitentiary, will be stabilised. Tenders are called for each project. The Director said that complete restoration of the penitentiary would cost some three million dollars and he did not think this would ever be done. His reasoning was not confined to the cost. He felt that the penitentiary, like the church, had a value in their ruined state as 'part of the aesthetics of Port Arthur', and the Committee would not disagree with this view. The Director said that the historic integrity of Port Arthur is one of its greatest assets from the point of view of tourism. Complete rebuilding would thus lose something. Although work on interpretation and presentation of Port Arthur will not be completed for some years, exploitation of this integrity by allowing the buildings and physical features to serve as a natural attraction seems likely to continue. This leaves the various commercial undertakings to provide the type of tourist entertainment service which compliments the historic site.

The Committee was told that roughly 250 000 people visit Port Arthur each year, of whom some 130 000 pay to go into the model prison. The Service has given consideration to the question of whether there should be a fee for entry to the whole Port Arthur area. Given the various ways and directions from which entry can now be gained, it would be necessary to construct a bypass road for through traffic. All visitors to Port Arthur itself would then enter at one point where a fee could be collected. This would be a matter of Government policy and any decision would have to take account of factors such as costs of collection, roadworks, fencing, effect on numbers of visitors, and whether the total amount spend in the area would actually increase. The attractiveness of having the area freely accessible would have to be weighed as well as alternative ways of raising revenue, such as more realistic arrangements with entrepreneurs.

The Committee saw examples of buildings being restored and others being preserved from further deterioration. The extent of restoration decided upon in each case depends generally upon the state of the building. There is no doubt that the value of Port Arthur will be very substantially increased by the project.

The Committee at the same time inspected the new caravan park which would be among the best in Australia. We were told that the park took quite a significant proportion of the money available for the whole project. The land cost \$80 000, kiosk and reception \$177 000, shelters \$180 000, en suite toilets \$38 000 and the toilet block and amenities around \$70 000. Again the decision to build a caravan park of this standard was a policy one, taken no doubt with the area's remoteness from Hobart and its position as one of the great tourist attractions in Australia. It is operated by a manager and his family who receive thirty per cent of the takings. In its first year it showed an operating profit to the Government of \$40 000. As the whole Port Arthur site is enhanced by restoration it could be expected that demand for the caravan park will grow.

There is a likelihood that regardless of whether or not an entrance fee is imposed, there will be a bypass road so that motor vehicles will be kept out of the Port Arthur area. Horse drawn vehicles may possibly be used for sightseers who do not wish to walk. In view of this likely banning of cars, the decision to restore the house 'Lithend' and other structures in its vicinity was questioned by the Committee. The Lithend area is somewhat isolated since it cannot be seen from the main site. It can be approached by an unsealed road which continues past the souvenir shop. However, vehicles are not permitted to use this road.

The Director of National Parks and Wildlife Service expressed some annoyance at the public criticism there has been of the fact that the house has been used as accommodation for a ranger. He justified its restoration largely by telling the Committee about the need for housing for staff. The work cost about \$147 000 and so could not be warranted just for the purpose of accommodation. The Director said that he was considering leaving Lithend empty in future because of this criticism. However, the Committee felt that this should not happen under any circumstances. As he was told after the hearing,

the Committee believes that for the sake of protection against vandals a staff member must live there. On the other hand, the money having been spent to restore the house it seems reasonable to encourage people to view it. The Committee can see no reason why for the time being cars cannot be allowed to use the access road and the feature promoted, for example, by signposts.

As stated above, the Committee was interested in why this building was restored at such an early stage of the project, it being so far out of the way. The Director explained it as follows:—

At the same time as the architect was given the contracts for 'Quality Row' a Hobart architect was given approval to prepare documentation for Lithend farm cottage and dairy. His plans and specifications were ready first. They were the first plans and specifications to come off the board. As I mentioned earlier, we were getting terrible pressure from the Commonwealth to get results and as the plans and specifications were ready, the decision was made to go ahead with it. In those days we had TRAC. It fully supported the decision. It was recommended to the Minister and we went ahead. That was good because we were able to tell the Commonwealth that restoration at Lithend had started . . .

It was a matter of convenience. Preparatory works were ready.

The Committee does not wish to comment on the appropriateness or otherwise of the work. However, it does put forward the above observations as recommendations, i.e. that Lithend continue to be used for staff housing, that visitors be encouraged to look at it and that vehicular access be permitted during the day.

Committee Room No. 3,
Parliament House Hobart
8 September 1983

M. T. C. BARNARD, Chairman