



Eaglehawk Neck

HISTORIC SITE

The Eaglehawk Neck Historic Site offers visitors a unique perspective of the security system which operated throughout the Tasman and Forestier Peninsulas during the convict period. The infamous dogline which ran across the Neck was devised to prevent the escape of prisoners from Port Arthur, while a semaphore station provided communication with the rest of the peninsula.

The system proved quite effective in achieving its purpose; however, it was not enough to prevent the escape of the infamous Martin Cash, who was to become one of Tasmania's best-known bushrangers

How to get there

From Hobart take the A3 to Sorell, turn right onto the Arthur Highway (A9), towards Port Arthur. Continue along this road until you reach Eagle Hawk Neck.

Facilities

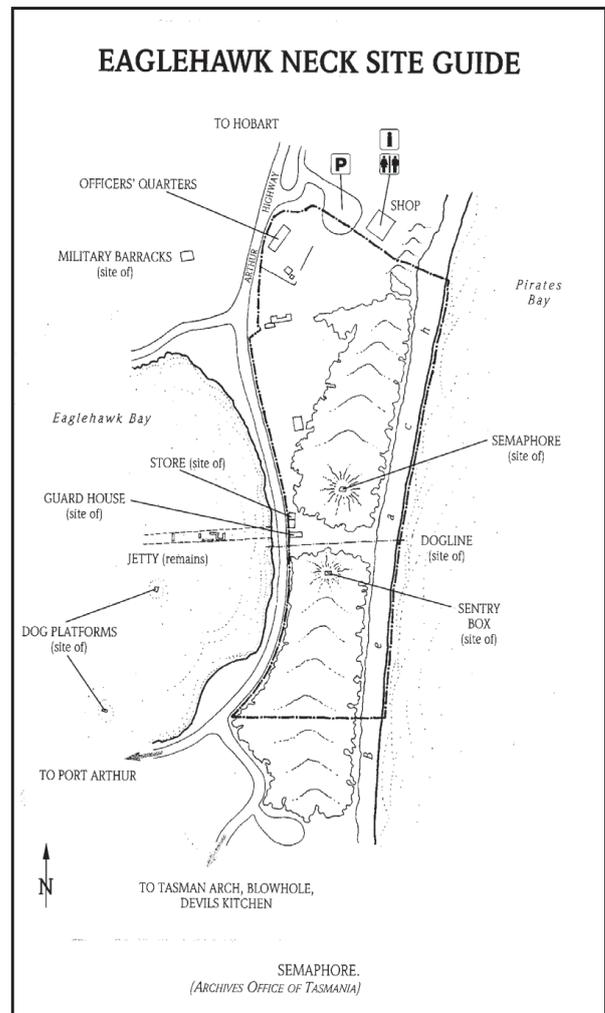
At the Eaglehawk Neck Historic Site there is an open lawn area suitable for picnics. The closest toilets are located at the Tasman Blowhole

Today, the only building which survives is the Officers' Quarters, erected in 1832. It is thought to be the oldest timber military building in Australia. The building has been restored and now acts as a museum and interpretation centre. Opening hours are from 9.00 am to 4.30 pm each day and entry is free of charge.

The famous dogline

A line of ferocious dogs and a detachment of military guards once kept a constant watch along the narrow isthmus at Eaglehawk Neck. They were on the lookout for escaped convicts from Port Arthur. The military station was established at the Neck in 1832, under the command of Ensign Darling. It was a vital link in the strict security system which operated throughout the Tasman and Forestier Peninsulas during the convict period. Appropriately, it was referred to as 'the key to the peninsula'.

The dogline which ran across the Neck was devised by John Peyton Jones:



It occurred to me that the only way to prevent the escape of Prisoners from Port Arthur in consequence of the noise occasioned by the continual roar of the sea breaking on the beach and the peculiar formation of the land which rendered sentries comparatively useless, was to establish a line of lamps and dogs. I therefore at once covered a way with cockle shells so as to show a brilliant light on the ground at night and proposed that a certain number of Lamps be supplied and rations for a certain number of dogs (9) to be so placed that they could not fight although eat out of the same trough, and render it impossible for any one to pass through.
(Peyton Jones, 1852)

Any break of the scrub, movement or slightest noise would set the hounds barking and alert the sentries. Dogs were also placed on stages out in the water to detect absconders attempting a sea crossing. They made an impassable barrier. When one of the sergeants foolishly decided to test the effectiveness of the line he was attacked, receiving a severe wound from one of the dogs.

Today, a cutting through the sand dunes marks the location of the dogline. As an additional security measure constables' huts were positioned along both sides of Eaglehawk Bay. A similar, but smaller, detachment of men also guarded East Bay Neck (Dunalley).

Military settlement

By 1836 the settlement at the Neck was quite substantial. Officers' quarters, a military barracks, school room, store and jetty had been erected. Communication with the rest of the peninsula was by way of a semaphore station.

Today, the only building which has survived is the Officers' Quarters.

It was a lonely outpost, especially for the soldiers' wives. In one instance, Harriet, the wife of Ensign Isdell, complained that she had not spoken to another female except her maid for three months.

Others relished the solitude. Henry Bunbury, the commanding officer in 1835, apparently 'liked the place extremely'. He kept himself amused by hunting kangaroo and gardening.

Semaphore station

A chain of semaphore stations once relayed important messages between Port Arthur and Hobart Town. Smaller stations, such as the one at Eaglehawk Neck, were part of a system which operated throughout the peninsula.

Moveable arms attached to a mast-like structure were positioned to send numerically coded messages. These were deciphered with the use of a code book which listed up to 3,000 phrases.

At Eaglehawk Neck the semaphore was principally used to convey information about absconders from Port Arthur.

Attempted escapes

Desperation drove many convicts to attempt escape from Port Arthur, but only a few ever made it successfully via Eaglehawk and East Bay Necks.

Some 'bolters' perished in the dense bush or drowned whilst attempting a sea crossing in makeshift canoes and rafts. Others were caught in the act and subjected to severe punishments for their efforts. A belief that the bays were shark-infested acted as a deterrent to sea-based getaways.

Some of the escape plans were quite bizarre. In one case, the convict Billy Hunt disguised himself as a kangaroo and attempted to hop across the Neck. His plan was brought to a sudden halt when one of the soldiers decided to shoot the 'large roo'.

Martin Cash and fellow convicts, Lawrence Kavanagh and George Jones, made a carefully planned and executed escape in 1842. On reaching the Neck they tied their clothes in a bundle on their heads and followed each other silently into the water. Cash lost sight of his friends and feared that they had been eaten by sharks. On reaching the opposite bank, however, they were re-united, though all had lost their clothes during the crossing. The men stole provisions and clothes from a nearby road-gang's hut. After spending several months at large, living as bushrangers in the Derwent Valley and Midlands, all were re-captured. Cash and Kavanagh were transported to Norfolk Island 'for life' whilst Jones was hanged in May 1844.

The escape of Martin Cash and gang prompted the authorities to tighten up security arrangements at the Neck. Additional guards were placed at strategic points along Eaglehawk Bay.

Closure

With the closure of Port Arthur penal settlement in 1877, the station at Eaglehawk Neck was abandoned. The land and buildings were then acquired by private settlers. A farm was run on the property until it was acquired by the State Government. Martin Cash was one of the few convicts to outflank the formidable security arrangements at the Neck. He was successful on two occasions. According to Cash, to successfully pass this barrier gave an escapee considerable prestige amongst his peers.

Further information

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