

Daily life at Macquarie Harbour penal settlement

The population of the Macquarie harbour penal settlement, although fluctuating, comprised some 100 military and a dozen or so civil officers, some of whom were accompanied by their wives and children. The remainder were convicts, most of whom were re-offenders. Between 1827 and 1830 the average number of people residing on the island was about 420, although after this date the numbers steadily declined. The largest number of residents was noted in 1828 as 531.

Accommodation

In the main penitentiary on Sarah Island convicts slept in hammocks, with 12-30 to a dormitory. Prisoners of good character who had gained

positions as overseers, tradesmen or gardeners lived in smaller huts, with 2-8 men to a room. Labourers at the farm on nearby Philip Island were accommodated in huts under the supervision of a convict constable. Convicts engaged in pining along the lower reaches of the Gordon River often stayed overnight in work camps.

The most incorrigible of the convicts were housed on the tiny, spray-swept Grummet Island. On this 'island of despair' up to 60 prisoners were housed in a dormitory. They were frequently obliged to sleep in clothes that had become soaked after wading ashore from the work-party boat.

Work

The convicts worked in a variety of occupations, including administrative duties,

carpentry, tanning, shoemaking, tailoring, masonry, sawing and ship-building. Lumbering gangs and charcoal burners operated up the Gordon River, while the pilot's station at the entrance to the harbour employed eight convicts as boat's crew. The most severe labour, often reserved for newly-arrived men and those working in chains, was hauling and piling the logs which had been rafted up from the Gordon River.

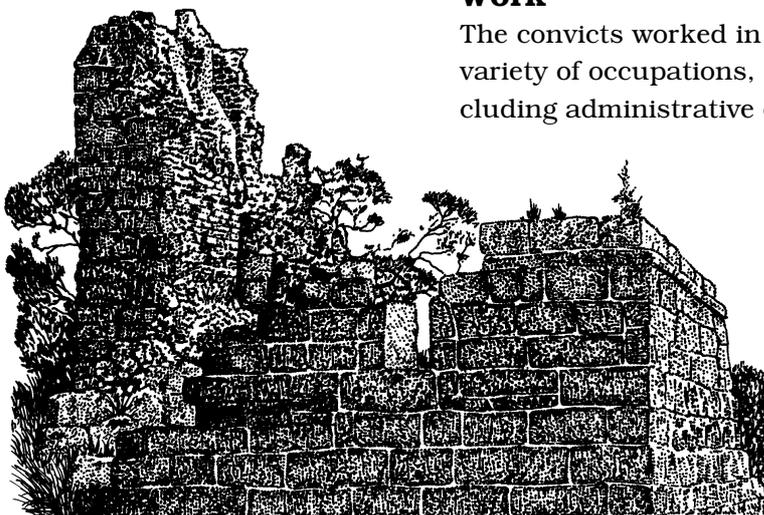
Working hours were:

- 6.30 am – 9 am
- 10 am – 1 pm
- 2 pm – 6 pm

These times varied throughout the eleven years that the island operated as a penal settlement. Under Commandant Butler, the hours were reduced to a 7 am start and 5 pm finish during the six months of shorter daylight. Sundays were a rest day, and work ended at midday on Saturdays to allow prisoners to engage in domestic duties such as washing.

Food and supplies

Despite attempts to gain some degree of self-sufficiency, the



Sarah Island Penitentiary

colony was frequently short of food supplies. On occasions, the convicts' rations were considerably reduced due to delays and spoilage of supplies from Hobart. A report of 1828 describes '2 040 pounds of colonial salt beef...very bad and putrid...unfit for use...to be destroyed.'

The rations of the convicts varied throughout the history of the settlement. An 1827 report reveals the daily rations for each convict as:

- 1 lb 4 oz wheatmeal
- 1 lb fresh meat or salt beef or
- 10 oz salt pork
- 11 1/2 oz salt

These were issued in bulk to work gangs once a week. It was the prisoner's responsibility to prepare his own food and ensure that the rations lasted the week.

This diet was supplemented with vegetables when these were available; however an overall deficiency of vegetables resulted in scurvy becoming one of the more prevalent diseases of the settlement. The pilot, based at the entrance to the Harbour, grew potatoes which he sold to the penal settlement. Soldiers often trapped wallabies and other native animals to supplement their own rations.

The regulations

The following is an extract of the regulations issued on 6 July 1824:

'At daylight every morning (Sundays excepted) a Boat proceeds to the small Island

to bring off the bad Characters who are kept there.

The Bell then rings for Muster 1/2 an hour before Sunrise, when every Prisoner attends in the presence of the Superintendent.

They are then divided into Gangs and marched to the Pier, where they are rigidly searched to prevent Provisions, Knives, Fish Hooks, etc., etc., from being taken away.

A quarter of an hour before Sunrise, they are embarked in Boats and proceed to the Main, where they labour at the Farm, felling, rolling, and brickmaking, and do not return till Sunset.

At One P.M. on Saturday, Prisoners are exempted from Labour in order that they may mend their Clothes.

At 8 P.M. every Evening, Prisoners are mustered in the Penitentiary in the presence of the Superintendent, who locks them up in their several Rooms, leaving 1 or 2 Constables in each.

On Sundays, the Church Service is read by the Assistant Colonial Surgeon, in the presence of the Commandant and all the Prisoners.'

Not all the regulations were enacted to the letter. As Reverend Scholfield, chaplain of the penal settlement describes in a letter of 1829:

'the Commandant has absented himself (from church) ever since I preached the missionary sermon. "Not many win, not many noble are called." '

Tobacco and alcohol

Despite a total ban on tobacco, there was a thriving

black market trade largely organised by the military. A letter intercepted from one of the prisoners to his father thanking him for the two pounds of tobacco he sent, implicated the wife of the shipwright in the smuggling operation. In the latter years of the settlement, regulations became increasingly relaxed. Indeed, the convict James Porter (who later seized the *Frederick*) was once given 25 lashes for 'neglect of duty in not taking care of some tobacco offered into his charge'!

Alcohol was forbidden, although rum was occasionally issued to prisoners suffering from rheumatism. To mark the King's birthday, prisoners were issued an allowance of rum so that they may drink to the King's health. Such relaxing of the regulations led Commandant Butler to complain in 1826 that 'a system of partial intoxication...was prevalent among the prisoners'. In 1830 the Colonial Secretary wrote to Commandant Briggs:

'I have the honour to acquaint you that it has been reported to the Lt. Governor that certain convicts have expressed a desire to be sent to Macquarie Harbour, stating that when there they would receive sugar, tea and rum daily...!'

Further reading

Brand, Ian (1984) *Sarah Island*. Regal Publications, Launceston.

Lampriere, T. J. (1954). *The Penal Settlements of Early Van Diemen's Land*. Royal Society of Tasmania.