

Industry at Macquarie Harbour penal settlement

The Sarah Island penal settlement, like all penal establishments of its day, was expected to recover much of its cost through industry. To this end, convicts were engaged in a variety of occupations. Although the settlement never quite achieved this aim, it did produce an enormous number of saleable items for the newly-founded colony. Such productivity occurred despite Governor Arthur's directive that convicts be engaged in unremitting labour 'even if it only consists of opening Cavities and filling them up again.'

Pining

The discovery of Huon pine along the foreshores of Macquarie Harbour and the lower Gordon River played a large role in the decision to establish a penal settlement in the region. Huon pine, being particularly resistant to wood rot, proved to be an outstanding timber for shipbuilding. It was used at the Sarah Island shipyards and also formed the largest item for export. In 1827 alone some 2869 logs were collected. A number of other trees were used by the settle-

ment for shipbuilding, including blackwood, myrtle and celery-top pine, the latter being particularly useful for masts and spars.

Pining was considered the most disagreeable and dangerous of the jobs that convicts performed. Felled logs, often weighing up to 12 tonnes had to be levered and manipulated by handspikes and rolled into the river. Convicts, even those in chains, worked waist deep in the cold waters of the Gordon River arranging the logs into rafts which were then floated to the settlement.

Shipbuilding

Shipbuilding was a major industry on Sarah Island. Under the command of Captain Butler, considerable progress was made in establishing dockyards and recruiting convicts, as suggested in his letter to the Colonial Secretary:

'We are much in need of good sawyers and a few boat builders. If there are any idlers of either description about Hobart town or in the lumber yard, I could turn them to good account here for a few months.'

In one of the earliest examples of land reclamation in Australia, large logs were laid out from the shore and held in place with rocks to provide a platform upon which the dockyards were constructed. The extensive remains of the dockyards can still be seen today along the shores of the island.

The first of two official Master Shipwrights appointed to the settlement, Thomas Cole, received considerable criticism about the quality of the ships built under his charge:

'The curve of the vessel is very incorrect, the counter and stern considerably too low. Very unsafe when laden. Sails very indifferently and will not work but in smooth waters.'

The arrival of David Hoy as Master Shipwright in 1827 ushered in the greatest period of productivity. Indeed, in its day Sarah Island was the largest shipbuilding yard in Australia. During the life of the settlement a total of 113 vessels were constructed, 80 of them in the period 1828-1832. The largest of the vessels built at Macquarie Harbour was

bigger than some of the vessels used to transport convicts from the British Isles! They included a 250 tonne barque, six brigs, at least seven schooners and over 70 smaller boats and launches.

Newly arrived convicts were recruited and trained as shipwrights, boat builders, blacksmiths or sawyers or labourers depending on their inclinations and abilities, and the lengths of their sentences. Up to 35 convicts were employed as shipwrights, supported by other craftsmen and clerical workers. One such convict, Newton Gray, who was transported for life for highway robbery, displayed considerable 'exertion, intelligence and zeal' in his labours as shipwright, earning a conditional pardon in 1829. Another convict, James Reeves, apparently was so dedicated to his work that he declined an offer to return to Hobart Town in order to complete two new boats!

Farming

Farms were established at Macquarie Harbour in an attempt to gain a degree of self-sufficiency — an aim that was never quite achieved. Prisoners grew a variety of vegetables, including peas, cauliflowers, cabbages, beans, onions, carrots, turnips, celery and lettuces. Some crops were grown on Sarah Island, where most of the top soil was brought in from the mainland and

enriched with a mixture of compost, wood ashes and locally produced lime to overcome the poor quality and high acidity of the soil. Another farm was established on nearby Philip Island which produced nearly 40 tons of potatoes annually, while at Farm Cove growing potatoes and raising pigs were the main activities.

Other industries

Coalminers worked the deposits found along the shore of Macquarie Harbour at a point now known as Coal Head. However, due to a lack of expertise and the poor quality of the coal, the mine was later abandoned.

Brickmakers worked around the southern shores of the harbour, producing the thousands of bricks that were used in the construction of some of the buildings on Sarah Island. Four to six men were engaged in limeburning on the Gordon River near the Champ (Marble) Cliffs and charcoal burners operated at the mouth of the river.

Shoemakers produced large and profitable numbers of shoes which were used for prisoners throughout the colony. A tannery was established on Sarah Island which tanned wallaby skins using the bark of celery-top pine and wattle. However, the leather was reputed to have become 'a disagreeable colour, which stained the stockings'. This pink dye was often used by convicts to colour

their own clothes.

Carpenters engaged in the manufacture of a wide range of items, often in prodigious quantities, as revealed in a letter written by the storekeeper in 1831:

'There being...upwards of 500 water buckets and 850 wooden bowls instore, it would be advisable to discontinue the manufacture of these articles for the present.'

In some cases the finished product, when it arrived at Hobart Town, was found to be of 'very rough workmanship...most shameful articles and totally useless'!

Clearly, in an establishment whose purpose was reformation through 'unceasing labour, total deprivation of spirits, tobacco and comforts of every kind, the sameness of occupation and the dreariness of situation', not all convicts were inspired to adopt a dedicated approach to their work.

Further reading

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

Bannear, D. (1991). *King River to Kelly Basin Archaeological Survey*. Occasional Paper no. 29, Department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage and Forestry Commission, Tasmania.