



ALBANY HISTORICAL SOCIETY (INC)

SCHOOLS PACK GENERAL INFORMATION ON ALBANY CONVICT GAOL

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ALBANY HISTORICAL SOCIETY (INC)

Affiliated With The Royal Western Australian Historical Society Inc

Our mission:

"To Provide Leadership in Preserving and Promoting Albany's History & Heritage."

Dear Teacher,

This set of Information Sheets is designed to ensure that your knowledge of the Albany Convict Gaol is both instructional and factual.

The Albany Convict Gaol is unique in the history of convict labour in Western Australia. It was built by convicts for convicts. Its construction used local granite as well as bricks made on the site. Much of the original construction is intact and visible.

The original building was for Imperial Convicts who had committed minor crimes. There were only a few occasions when the gaol was full. There was only one man hanged.

The newer part of the Albany Convict Gaol held local miscreants including citizens of Albany and districts, drunks, seamen and Aborigines. A section of the Gaol, added in the early 1870s, was set aside for women.

If you should require any information not contained in the following pages, please feel free to contact us. We are only too pleased to help in any way possible.

Kind regards

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THE BUILDING:

The building of the Albany Convict Gaol dates from the time that convicts were brought into Western Australia from Britain to help develop West Australia. It was built in two stages - the first in the 1850s and the additions were made in 1870s. The oldest part of the building is to the right of the entry door.

The Albany Convict Gaol was part of the complex which was established as a hiring depot and included the Residency Museum, which was the Commissariat Store, and an assortment of buildings for the Military Miners and Sappers (Engineers) and their families, a twelve cell lock-up (The Albany Convict Gaol) and keeper's quarters. Other buildings at Point Frederick included workshops, hospital, kitchen, a garden and a parade ground. The Albany Convict Gaol was used as a place of punishment for ticket-of-leave men who committed offences while working at the depot or in the district. It was built by the convicts, mainly ticket-of-leave men, and stonemasons from the Royal Sappers stationed at the depot.

The end of the small exercise yard had a wall on which broken glass was placed to stop convicts climbing the wall and escaping. Most of the prisoners were held in the Albany Convict Gaol from three days to twelve months and the most common offences were drunkenness and fighting.

During the 1860s overcrowding of the town's Civil Gaol at Lawley Park was noted and a decision was made to make the hiring depot a public gaol. In 1872 work started to enlarge the site to provide facilities for women in the form of female cells and a matron's quarters. The refectory, or dining hall, was built with cell accommodation for Aboriginal prisoners added at the rear. Walled, glass-topped exercise yards for male and female prisoners were constructed and, in later years, the whole gaol was surrounded by a high brick wall which was topped with broken glass.

Apart from superficial changes and repairs, little was done to improve the facilities of the Gaol and the form of the Albany Convict Gaol today is as it was in 1880.

A decision was made in 1940 to close the gaol and demolish the buildings but because no tenders were received the building stayed intact. Later the Public Works Department used the buildings as a store and repair shop. Public Works Department vacated the buildings in 1959 and in 1968 were handed over to the Albany Historical Society (Inc) who have since repaired and renovated the buildings. In 1973 the buildings were classified as Heritage Buildings by the National Trust of Australia.

The period between the Public Works Department vacating and the Albany Historical Society (Inc) taking control of the buildings saw the complex fall into disrepair. It was used during this time by school-age children as a local haunt. The children did graffiti and damaged the complex extensively.

It is also believed that up to three local people committed suicide within the complex in this period .

A number of alterations to the cells were made over the years, including the division of sleeping arrangements which varied over the years. It is thought that the original convicts slept in hammocks, then wooden beds were used and later probably iron bedsteads. Toilet arrangements would have included a slop bucket in the cell.

Outside privies were built in the small exercise yard and were evidently appalling. The toughest prisoners were put in the cells closest to the foul smelling latrines as an added punishment. After the new gaol buildings were completed, new closets were built in the main exercise yard.



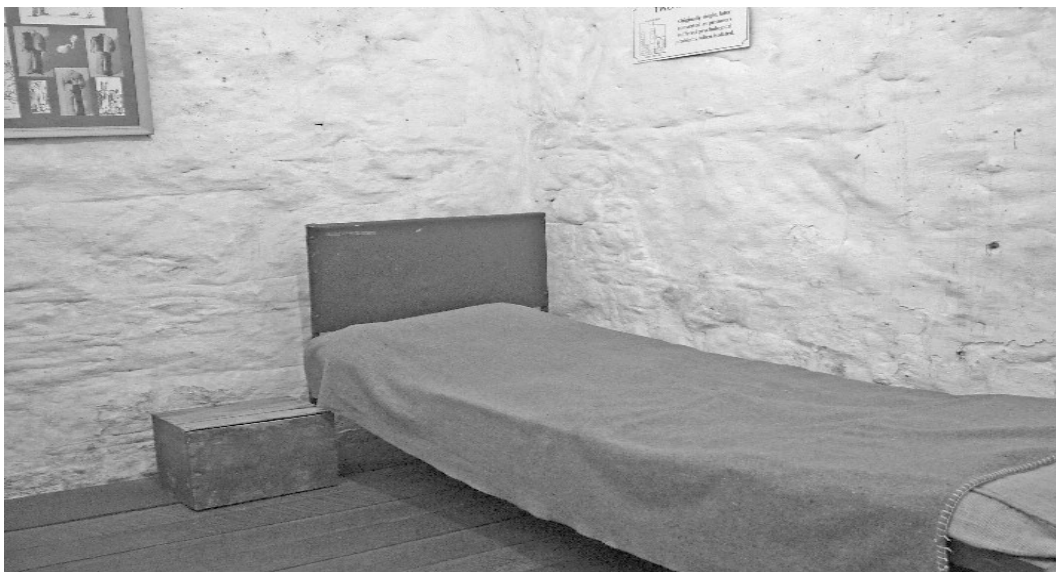
THE CELLS:

The twelve cell stone lock up was one of the first buildings constructed and was completed in 1854. Attached to the lock up was a three-roomed brick cottage used as the superintendent's quarters and depot store. Reports from later years describe the cells as damp, poorly ventilated with spring running water flowing under the building in winter.

The granite used was quarried from Mt Melville. The bricks were made from local clay which was taken from the town clay pit which is now a part of Parade Street.

The lock up was intended to be a place of punishment for ticket of leave men who committed offences while working at the depot or in the district. All the convicts were Imperial convicts being those who had committed offences in Britain and had been transported to Western Australia. However colonial convicts i.e. those who committed offences in the colony were soon also gaoled in the building.

A number of alterations to the cells were made over the years including the division of the lock up into two sections each of six cells, a combination of two cells to become a kitchen, the walls of which have been rebuilt and the changing of single cells to become two man cells.



THE BLACK HOLE:

The Black Hole cell was a common form of punishment for difficult prisoners, though a stay in the Black Hole cell was usually for short term isolation. The use of the Black Hole cell for punishment was officially abolished in 1898.

At the time of the first settlement a Black Hole cell was used for punishment for several drunken soldiers. They were packed into the Black Hole cell and, as a result, one soldier died from suffocation.

THE ABORIGINAL AND SEAMAN'S CELL:

This cell was built in 1874 for Aboriginal prisoners. Up to that time the Aborigines had been held in the town gaol at Lawley Park. Aboriginal prisoners frequently escaped from that prison by digging under the walls. When the cell was built it was lined with timber to prevent digging. The cell has a number of remarkable carvings on the timber. They include a snake, a goanna and a kangaroo. They are believed to be the oldest Aboriginal cell art in Australia.

Foreign seamen were also held in this cell and there are carvings of sailing ships on the walls. Grooves have also been carved into the timber to denote the number of days some prisoners had been gaoled.



THE GREAT HALL:

The Great Hall was planned for in 1871 as part of the new additions. Its exact purpose is unknown as an unusual sloping section was planned and built along the length of the north wall. A piece of this sloping shelf can be seen in the far corner.

Because of the number of warders, the Hall was later used as a dining room, thus the area is called 'The Refectory' but it was also used for other purposes including a day room and a church.

By the 1900s it was used as a ward for hard labour prisoners.

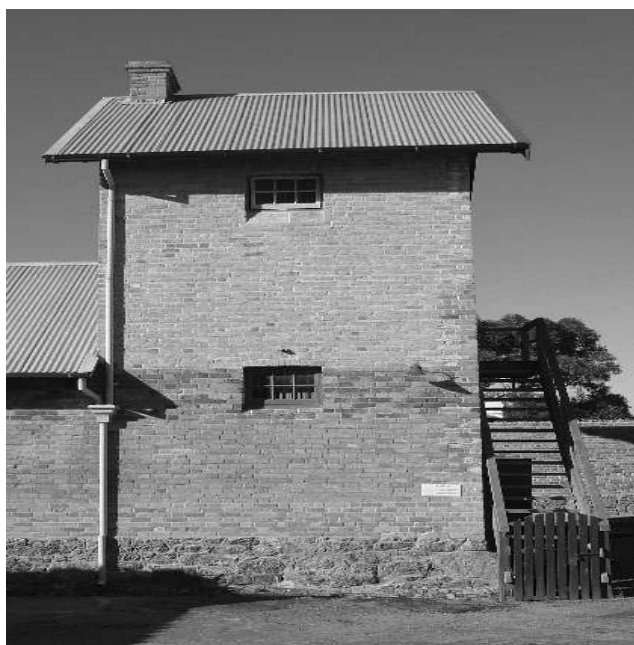
THE TOWER:

The upstairs room was built in 1879, after the Great Hall, although the design was included in the original plans but its exact purpose and subsequent use after construction is unknown.

It is constructed with a high window and has a fireplace on the east wall, with access to the room by external wooden stairs.

One theory is that it was built for a mentally ill person. The story is that a young man had periods of unmanageable behaviour which included hurting his sister. He was incarcerated in the Tower and was only visited by his priest. At times when he was lucid, he wrote poetry.

But this has not been proven. It may have been two cells one either side of the fireplace. Another theory is that it was a storeroom but this is fairly discredited because of the fireplace.



THE FEMALE CELLS:

These cells were added for female prisoners in 1874. All the female cells are doubles. Most of the prisoners were convicted of drunkenness, prostitution or other minor offences. There was at least one mental prisoner but she was transferred to Perth. The female prisoners had a day room where they were allowed during the daytime. The female prisoners worked in the adjoining wash house, doing the washing and ironing.

People who have worked in the Albany Convict Gaol and some visitors have related experiences of ghostly happenings in the area of the female cells. These include the sound of a baby crying. As a number of the McGovern children died while living at the Albany Convict Gaol, there are theories that the ghosts are theirs.



JOHN McGOVERN:

Of all the Wardens at the Albany Convict Gaol, the one we know the most about was John McGovern. He was a warden from 1879 to 1913. John was a police constable at York until 1871, when he transferred to Perth and Fremantle. In 1881 he was appointed gaoler at Albany. John had married Mary Ann Mannix who became the matron at the Albany Convict Gaol. The family lived in the rooms to the right and left of the entrance to the gaol. In these quarters he and his wife had nine children and at least eight of these lived in the gaol. There was no electric power and only one gas light in these quarters until 1913, when the next warden installed extra gas light at his own expense.

Times were hard for families at this time. Three of the McGovern children died between 1886 and 1892 and then, in 1899, twin daughters and Mrs McGovern died after childbirth. Mary Ann was just forty years old.

When Mary Ann McGovern died, the position of Matron passed to her daughter Minnie, then aged sixteen years, who retained the title until 1905. Minnie was followed by the second eldest daughter, Lilian, in 1905 who was just fifteen years old. Lilian remained Matron until 1913, when her father retired and a new warden was appointed.

John McGovern made several improvements to the gaol and organised most of the convicts, who had few skills, to carry out routine repairs and maintenance. However, because little money was forthcoming from the colonial government, the gaol became rundown and obsolete. Some changes were made including the conversion of solitary cells into larger cells by removing internal walls, so giving the prisoners more space. A kitchen was added. But the close proximity of the gaol keepers and their families to prisoners meant that they were subjected to the noise and abusive language of the drunken prisoners who made up the greater proportion of the inmates.

Although the living conditions for all were harsh it appears that conditions were fairly relaxed. At one time it was a prisoner who rushed into a gaoler's bedroom and extinguished a fire which threatened the whole gaol. Also the gaol bakehouse became a friendly place for the prisoners to gather.

John McGovern tried many times to improve the building, including the removal of the shingle roof to be replaced by iron sheeting. A doorway in the stone wall on the Parade Street side was bricked up and a window built in the wall over the old opening.

McGovern retired as warden of the Albany Convict Gaol in 1913 and died at "Neumylde" hospital on Grey Street, Albany, in 1926.

PETER McKEAN (ALIAS WILLIAM McDONALD)

In cell 12 there is a replica of Peter McKean, alias William McDonald, who was born in 1829. He was convicted at Ayr in 1855 for housebreaking and transported for 21 years. He arrived on the "*Runnymede*" on 11 September 1855 and was granted a Ticket of Leave on 28 July 1860.

McKean was a ticket-of-leave man who came to work for Henry (Yorcky) Marriot on his lease at Slab Hut Gully, which is near Kojonup, in return for his keep. It appears that a business agreement between the two men involving money for sandalwood came to an end when money McKean had owing did not materialise.

On Sunday 30th June 1872, Yorcky Marriot failed to pay his usual visit to neighbours. On 8th July Marriot's body was found lying behind a cart and the police near Kojonup were informed. McKean was not at the farmhouse but later returned and told neighbours that he had left to go to Albany, but had got lost. When questioned he blamed the death of Marriot on a vicious horse but because of other evidence McKean was brought to Albany for trial and was found guilty. He was sentenced to be hanged. As Albany did not have a scaffold, a portable scaffolding and a hangman were shipped from Fremantle for the execution. The scaffold was set up in the grounds of the Albany Convict Gaol in the corner facing the east. Peter McKean was hanged on 12th October 1872. The identity of the hangman was kept secret as he was a convict who was given twelve months remission from his sentence.

FREDERICK BAILEY DEEMING:

Cell 15 held the multi-murderer Frederick Bailey Deeming, alias Baron Swanston, alias Albert Williams. Deeming was an Englishman who came to Australia (Melbourne) with his wife Emily. He changed his name to Williams but once in Melbourne rented a house under the name of Druin. He changed his name several times.

On a visit to the house, the landlord of the premises found Druin had gone but detected a disagreeable smell. On investigation the police found the body of a young woman. Deeming - at the time F. Duncan - then advertised for a wife. However on a voyage from Adelaide to Melbourne Miss Katherine Rounsefell met Williams (now Baron Swanston) and after a period of time she consented to become engaged to him and to go to Western Australia with him. Deeming moved west and, after the discovery of the body of Emily Williams and the subsequent press coverage, Kate, who realised whom she had met, then cancelled the journey west.

Swanston journeyed to Albany, then onto Perth and then by rail to Southern Cross where he worked as an engineer at Fraser's gold mine at Southern Cross.

In the meantime police in Melbourne contacted the English police who confirmed that Williams was an alias and the man's name was Deeming, and that he had a wife and four children. On investigation of their English house the police found the bodies of a woman and four children - Deeming's first wife and children.

Melbourne police travelled to Southern Cross and arrested Swanston (Deeming). From there he was taken to Perth and then Albany where he was held at the Albany Convict Gaol overnight and then put onto a ship to take him to Melbourne. During the night, even though regularly checked by warders, Deeming managed to remove his moustache with a piece of glass and by pulling out the hair, in an attempt to alter his appearance.

At the trial he professed his innocence and tried to contact Katherine Rounsefell. After a trial of four days the jury found Deeming guilty of murder and the judge pronounced the sentence to be hanged by the neck until dead. He was hanged in Melbourne on 23rd May 1892.

There was some scientific thought in the 19th century that criminals could be identified from the bumps on their skull. To further this study it was common for hanged criminals to have a plaster cast made of the head. This model was used by scientists to map the bumps in attempts to support their theory.



**Thank you for taking the time to visit us,
we hope to see you again in the very near future.**