

Cockatoo Island: Convict Labour and Secondary Punishment, 1839-1869

Katherine Roscoe

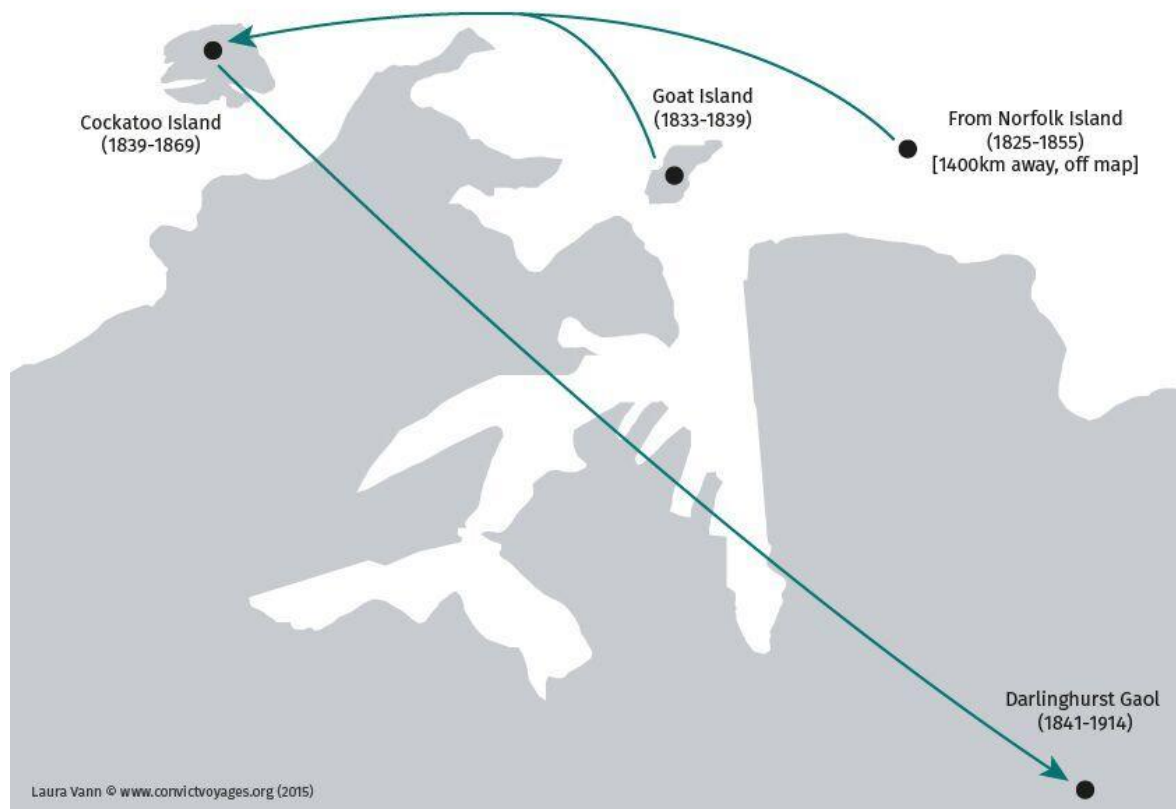
Cockatoo Island is the largest island in Sydney harbour, where the Parramatta River meets the Tasman Sea. It is surrounded on 3 sides by harbour frontage with only half a kilometre separating it from the shores of Balmain and Woolwich on either side. The island is called Waramah in the language of the local Indigenous people (the Eora). It takes its European name from the sulphur-crested cockatoos that lived in the red gum trees that covered its craggy surface. Cockatoo Island served as a convict establishment for the punishment of secondary offenders between 1839 and 1869. Convict labour transformed the island into an industrial dockyard, dominated by a sandstone plateau quarried by the strikes of a thousand convict pickaxes. Though no longer a functioning dockyard, the blend of convict and industrial landscapes form the backdrop to modern-day tourism on the island.

Cockatoo Island was established in 1839 as a result of the need to ease overcrowding of convicts on Norfolk Island and the closure of Goat Island. Norfolk Island was a penal establishment for secondary offenders located 1400 kilometres east of Sydney in the Pacific Ocean. In 1837, the Governor of NSW, Richard Bourke, found that convicts were not morally reformed during their incarceration on the island. He suggested that sentences of transportation to penal settlements be commuted to hard labour. In response to overcrowding and dissatisfaction with Norfolk Island, an act was passed in 1838 that gave the Governor the power to move prisoners from the penal settlements of Norfolk Island and Moreton Bay to local public works where labour was needed. To further reduce the costs of keeping these convicts accommodated and fed, their sentences would be reduced. In the past, groups of Norfolk Island's convicts had been sent to Cockatoo's neighbour, Goat Island. By 1838 the convicts had finished quarrying sandstone and building an arms magazine for a military outpost on Goat Island. The presence of a weapons cache made the colonial administration eager to find them a more permanent accommodation, in case they used the arms to mutiny. Governor George Gipps recommended Cockatoo become the convict stockade to relocate some of Norfolk Island's convicts in 1839. In his letter to Lord Glenelg, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Gipps was pleased to note that Cockatoo Island's convicts would be "under the eye of colonial authority" which would ensure proper discipline was maintained – a problem at the isolated Norfolk Island. With its excellent quality sandstone reserves, and its central harbour location, Cockatoo Island was a perfect site of public works. As these prisoners were secondary offenders, the hard labour was also intended to serve as punishment. The convicts were given strenuous tasks, placed in irons and were not allowed "indulgences" above the government ration. *The Sydney Gazette* further suggested that the location of punishment was psychologically punitive. On 23 May 1839 they wrote that:

The worst punishment of all...is that at Cockatoo Island they are constantly in view of civilized life and tantalized with the sight of the blessings of freedom, yet find themselves shut out from the one and denied the other.

A hundred and sixty of the best behaved offenders were offered three months' hard labour at the newly formed penal establishment, Cockatoo Island, rather than serving out their original sentence at Norfolk. In February 1839, a 60-strong contingent of men from Norfolk Island became the founding population of the convict stockade on Cockatoo Island. By May they had been joined by 107 more convicts from Norfolk and Goat Island. Over thirty years as a convict settlement, around

1,440 prisoners were transported from Norfolk Island to Cockatoo. Although transportation to New South Wales was suspended in 1840, convicts continued to be transported from Britain to Van Diemen's Land and Norfolk Island. The new superintendent of Norfolk Island, Alexander Maconochie, hoped to trial a new system of discipline on convicts that were newly arrived from Britain, rather than the hardened secondary offenders. The Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Russell, wrote to Governor Gipps asking where in New South Wales could be used to house the secondary offenders from Norfolk Island. Governor Gipps suggested Cockatoo Island in a move that proved unpopular for those who felt its proximity to Sydney posed a physical and moral danger to its inhabitants. In 1841, Van Diemen's Land also refused to accept 'doubly convicted' prisoners, forcing Cockatoo to change its status from a temporary convict stockade, primarily to extract convict labour, to a permanent place of reception for male offenders sentenced to transportation, intended to punish. In theory, those from Norfolk Island and the newly transported were kept separate, but overcrowding led this distinction to become less and less important over the course of the 1840s. The cessation of convicts being sent to Norfolk and Van Diemen's Land coincided with the transfer of Cockatoo's finances from the imperial government in Britain to the colonial Government in Sydney, adding additional pressure for the convicts to recoup their costs



Towards the mid-nineteenth century increasing numbers of convicts sent to Cockatoo were people experiencing incarceration for the first time, because they had arrived free or been born in the colony. They were usually sentenced to “work on the roads with hard labour”. Cockatoo Island also held a number of Indigenous convicts sentenced in New South Wales. Of the 22 Indigenous men transported to Cockatoo Island between 1835 and 1850, [14 are known to have died in custody](#). This prompted Gipps to order an official investigation in December 1850, with a board of medical officers concluding that particular attention should be paid to the state of health of Aborigines in confinement.

The first tasks of the convicts on the island was to bore a well, as there was no fresh water on the island, and to construct a wharf to receive supplies from the mainland. The convicts were under the charge of Denis Lyons and overseen by convicts on probation for a ticket of leave. Convicts quarried the sandstone to construct the buildings for the establishment; by March 1840 work was underway on barracks to accommodate the prisoners, who had been living in tents and prison boxes. The barracks consisted of two large wards of 90m² with large barred windows, designed to hold up to 200 prisoners. Their design was simple and functional, and not influenced by new penal ideas about the desirability of separating prisoners at night.

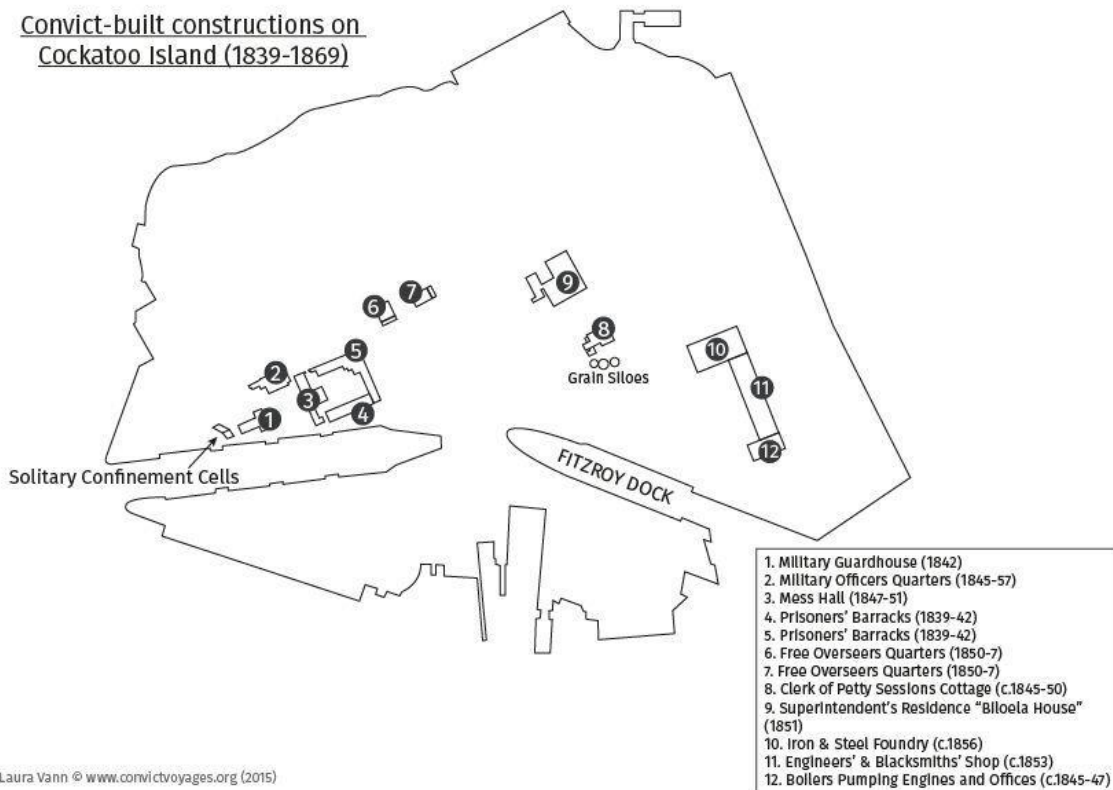
By September 1840, the cookhouse, mess shed, hospital wards and workshops had all been completed, and a road was being built to connect the wharf to the accommodation. In 1841, the influx of prisoners from Norfolk Island led to a second wave of construction, all completed by convict labour. This included the construction of a new barrack for convicts, designed to accommodate 500 prisoners and 20 overseers. In addition, a combined guardhouse barracks was built in the west corner of the island to hold 56 soldiers. In the escarpment along the side of the guardhouse, a set of 12 solitary cells were built, with a ladder which convicts descended down through a trap door as punishment if they misbehaved. Over the course of this construction, the convicts quarried an astounding 1.5 million cubic metres of sandstone, some of which was used for construction projects in Sydney, probably including Circular Quay.

The emphasis on Cockatoo Island was on hard labour, not rehabilitation, with no effort made to teach unskilled convicts associated skills like blacksmithing. This led to inefficiency of time and waste of materials. As Lawrence Cowan, a trained stone-cutter, complained, the lack of training of his convict overseer meant that: "There is never one building put up on this island that has not had the material for two buildings spoiled on it, and all this for want of a free man that understands the trade." This kind of mismanagement was endemic at all levels of the prison hierarchy. An 1847 committee was shocked to discover that large numbers of convicts were being worked for Charles Ormsby's personal use and in 1861 the same complaint was levelled at Civil Engineer Charles Gother Mann.

In 1839, the free settler and emancipists (ex-convicts) of New South Wales were struggling with huge fluctuations in the price of flour thanks to severe grain shortages. Under [mounting criticism](#) for government inaction, Gipps instructed the convicts on Cockatoo to build grain silos in 1839. Under the supervision of Royal Engineer [George Barney](#), Cockatoo's convicts spent the next 2 years constructing 20 silos that could hold up to "5,000 bushels of wheat" each. Digging out these silos was claustrophobic, at best, and, at worst, resulted in death by asphyxiation. Convicts were lowered down a manhole to dig into the sandstone with hand tools, and were not raised back up to daylight unless they had made their daily quota. The silos were bottle-shaped holes measuring roughly 6 metres deep and 7 metres wide. In 1842, Gipps received orders from Westminster to halt the practice, as the Colonial Secretary decreed that the free market should govern grain prices, in order to protect the interests of the East India Company.

As Port Jackson (as Sydney Harbour was then known) was frequented by increasing numbers of ships from all over the British Empire, Governor Gipps hoped it might become a naval station for the British fleet. In the mid-1840s, Cockatoo Island was put forward by Governor Gipps as the prime spot to build a dry dock, as it was sheltered, easily defensible, and had a convict labour force to construct it for no wages. The Admiralty supported the project, but were unwilling to finance it. Governor Gipps' successor, Sir Charles Fitzroy, approved a budget of £4000 and a schedule of 470 days' work for 100 men to go forward with the work funded by the colonial treasury.

In 1847 Cockatoo's inmates began constructing what became known as Fitzroy Dock (after [the superintendent](#) who oversaw its completion). Under the supervision of the Royal Engineer [Gother Kerr Mann](#), explosives blasted out the sides of the sandstone cliff in 1848 resulting in the distinctive "anvil" shape that is the dominant feature of its landscape today. After quarrying this stone and clearing the area, convicts had to dig down 15 metres to build the dry dock. Most of the work was done by convicts equipped only with hand tools; much of it completed in leg irons waist deep in water. In 1849, to motivate the convicts, Mann suggested the introduction of task work which meant convicts who exceeded their targets would reduce their sentence incrementally. This system was instituted in 1851, with indulgences such as tea, sugar and tobacco awarded for any work completed over 8 ¼ hours. In 1853, convicts were divided into three classes and 61 categories of trade to ensure that healthier, skilled workers did not benefit disproportionately. However, work progressed slowly, partly due to a delay in receiving equipment from Britain. The chief cause was the lack of skilled convicts during the construction phases and the unwillingness of skilled free labourers to work among convicts, even in exchange for high wages. With Mann under mounting pressure from the legislative council of New South Wales, a select committee was appointed in 1852 to recommend any means of hastening the work. Gother Mann attributed a number of logistical difficulties to the slow and uncertain progress of the dock, but the Committee chose instead to focus on 'defective' discipline of convicts which stopped the overseers extracting 'anything like the proper amount of labour' from them. There were tensions between the discipline of the prison, which was the responsibility of Superintendent Charles Ormsby and his staff, and the need to direct labour, which was the responsibility of Civil Engineer Gother Kerr Mann and his staff. The committee recommended the replacement of Superintendent Charles Ormsby with a 'strict disciplinarian' and the removal of convicts to a hulk, with their accommodation taken over by free labourers. Their recommendations were not acted upon, and Ormsby, Mann and the convicts stayed where they were.



By 30 September 1857 the dock was ready to use for the first time, to receive the colonial steam dredge, the “Hercules”. The following year the dock was extended, involving the excavation of more of the cliff face. Between 1861 the convicts built twelve workshops and an engine house to house machinery for the dry dock, which involved the removal of more of the sand stone cliffs. However, the continued use of convict labour whilst the island functioned as a dockyard presented a number of disciplinary and security risks.

In September 1857, a letter appeared [in *The Empire*](#) signed N.B. (but really penned by [Henry Parkes](#), the paper’s own editor) complaining that “frightful yelling and hallooing” from Cockatoo Island could be heard from his home on the mainland, even on a Sunday. The noise complaint resulted in a [stream of letters](#) to the newspapers about the poor discipline on Cockatoo. Though a number of these were penned by Henry Parkes, the (perceived) public calls for an inquiry forced the Legislative Council to act. In 1858, a Board of Inquiry, chaired by [Edward Merewether](#), uncovered a host of abuses at the prison. The same year new regulations which made it mandatory for convicts to work the entirety of their probation before they could receive tickets of leave. This generated unease as convicts were placed together in work gangs, some of whom would be reducing their sentence by up to half a day per every day worked, alongside those who were not. This resulted in “an inordinate amount of insubordination” and by the end of 1860 a third of the prisoners were refusing to work in protest.

In 1861, Parkes headed up a Select Committee into the conditions on Cockatoo. It was found that labour concerns preceded penal ones, with the committee concluding that discipline was ‘very imperfect, and in no way determined by any of the moral axioms of the present age’. Overcrowding was an additional problem; a police inspector described convicts squeezed up against the bars of the prison in an attempt to breathe. With “double tiers of double sleeping berths,” prisoners were crammed in “coffin-like Apertures” and locked up for 12 hours at night with the stench of the “night tubs” (buckets for excrement). As well as the physical discomfort, the closeness of the convicts in the confined sleeping quarters pointed towards a lack of separation between different “classes” of prisoners in general. Henry Parkes wrote in a private letter in October 1856:

“The Prisoners are all huddled together like so many wild beasts – the youth of eighteen, young and inexperienced in the ways of the world, being linked with one where hairs are grey with vice and villainy.”

Alongside a fear of moral contamination, fears were raised about the possibility of homosexual acts taking place in the poorly lit and poorly surveyed convict barracks. This resulted in the remodelling of the convict barracks, as well as improvements to general disciplinary practices. Furthermore, a renewed focus on rehabilitation led to the establishment of a prison school. By 1869 there was only one convict left on the island who had been sentenced in Britain. As a result of poor discipline and mismanagement nearby Darlinghurst Gaol. The island – and its infrastructure – was handed over to the Royal Navy, who went on to construct a second, larger dry dock adjacent to Fitzroy’s.

However, the island’s incarceratory role was not complete. In 1871 the paddle-steamer *Vernon* was moored off Cockatoo to house the 113 young boys “found floating about the streets and lanes like fish in a pond” who were to be “reformed” at the Naval Shipping School. In the same year, the Newcastle Industrial School for Girls was established. Though not convicted of any crimes, the girls were housed in the old (and inadequate) prison quarters and subject to similarly brutal punishments as the convicts had been. Three new dark solitary cells were constructed under the convict barracks to replace the cliff-side dark cells of the convict era. In 1908 the same convict buildings, rebranded as Biloela Gaol, were used to incarcerate petty criminals and vagrants.

In 2010 Cockatoo Island was placed on the [UNESCO world heritage list](#), along with 9 other convict sites around Australia. As the only surviving imperial convict works in New South Wales, the remains of the silos, dry docks and other convict-built structures are testament to the importance of convict labour to the British Empire. Cockatoo's subsequent role as a Royal Navy Dockyard and commercial shipbuilder attests to the ways in which convict labour quite literally laid the foundations for the modernisation of Australia in the twentieth century and beyond.

Further Reading

William Derricourt (alias Day), *Old Convict Days*, ed. Louis Becke (London: T.F. Unwin, 1899).

Kristyn Harman, *Aboriginal Convicts: Australian, Khosian and Māori Exiles* (Sydney: UNSW, 2012).

Kristyn Harman and Hamish Maxwell Stewart, "Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in Colonial Australia, 1805-1860," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 13, 2 (2012).

James Semple Kerr, *Cockatoo Island: Penal and Institutional Remains* (Sydney: National Trust of Australia, 1984).

Ian Hoskins, *Sydney Harbour: A History* (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2009)

Online Resources

Australian Convict Sites – UNESCO World Heritage, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1306/documents>

Cockatoo Island History, <http://www.cockatooisland.gov.au/about/history>

Cockatoo Island Conservation Management Plans,

<http://www.cockatooisland.gov.au/about/publications>

'Convict Times' Worksheet, <http://www.cockatooisland.gov.au/learn/resource-materials>

National Heritage Places: Cockatoo

Island, <http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/places/national/cockatoo-island>