

Rottnest Island: A prison for the Indigenous Australian Convicts

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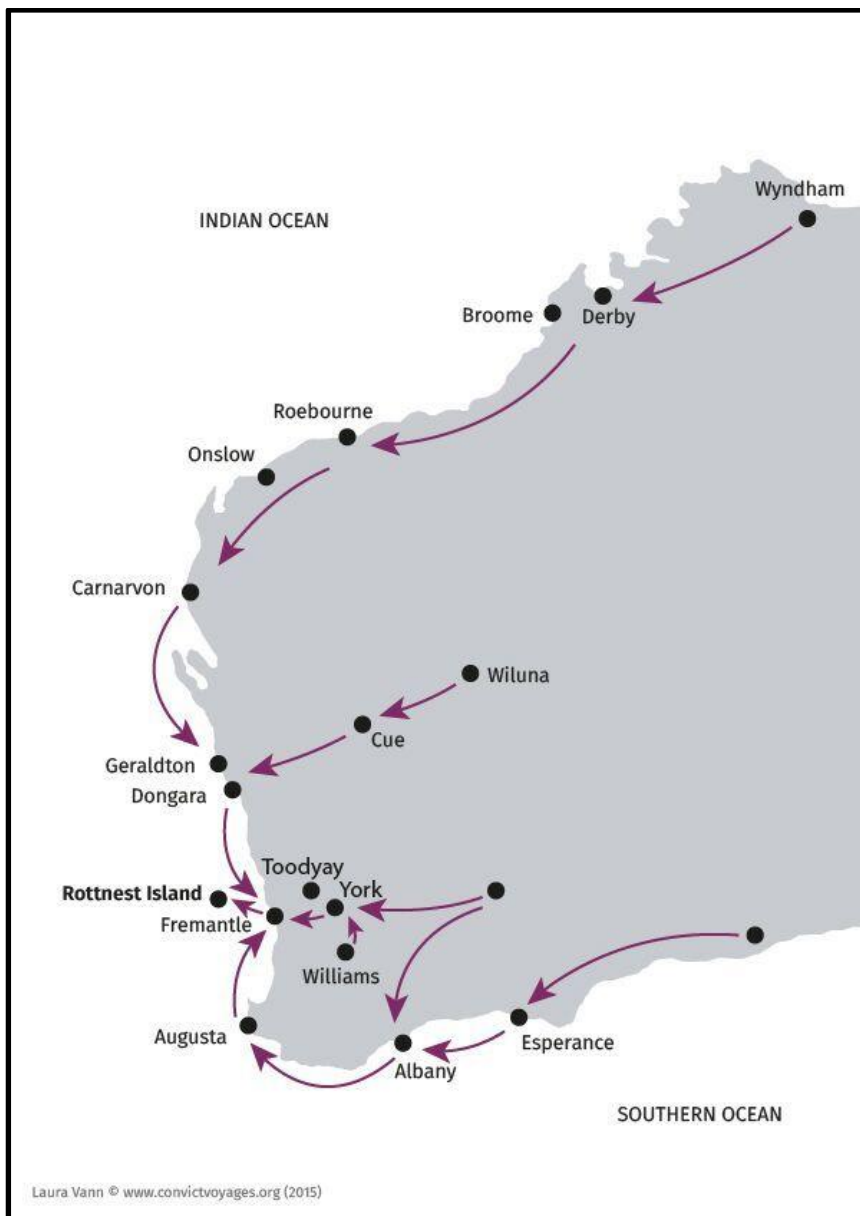
The Aboriginal name for Rottnest is Wadjemup which roughly translates as “place across the water”. This refers to the 18 kilometres of Indian Ocean that separate Rottnest from the West Australian mainland. This was an untraversable distance for the local Indigenous people (known as the [Nyungar](#)). Although Rottnest was not inhabited by the Nyungar before they were transported there as convicts, the island was central to their culture through its connection with the Dreaming. The first Europeans to record landing on the island were the Dutch crew of the *Waekende Boeij* (Watching Boy) under the command of Samuel Volkerson in 1658. It was another Dutch naval commander, [Willem de Vlamingh](#), who named the island Rottnest (Rat’s nest) in 1696 after mistaking the large numbers of quokkas there for rodents. The British who claimed the island as their territory when they established a settlement on the mainland at Swan River in 1829.



The island received its first shipment of prisoners in August 1838 when Constable Lawrence Welch brought 10 Aboriginal prisoners over by rowing boat. Without proper accommodation, the convicts spent their first months on the island sheltering in a cave tied to a tree, while their gaolers sought shelter in the outbuildings belonging to the sole occupants of the island, the Thomson family. In September [6 convicts escaped](#) by rowboat after setting fire to the tree they were manacled to at night. Henry Vincent was transferred from Fremantle Prison, where he worked as a warder, to become Superintendent of Rottnest in 1839. He came with instructions for the convicts to begin constructing prison buildings to ensure better security at night. In 1841 an Act was passed to institute Rottnest a legal prison primarily “for the confinement of Aboriginal offenders.” The Act stressed that the isolation of the island would prevent the Indigenous convicts from escaping (which

they were more successful at than their European counterparts). This would allow them to be work on the island unfettered to roam and hunt about the island in their free time. There were concerns at the high death rates among Indigenous prisoners across the colony at large, which they hoped increased freedoms at Rottneest would remedy.

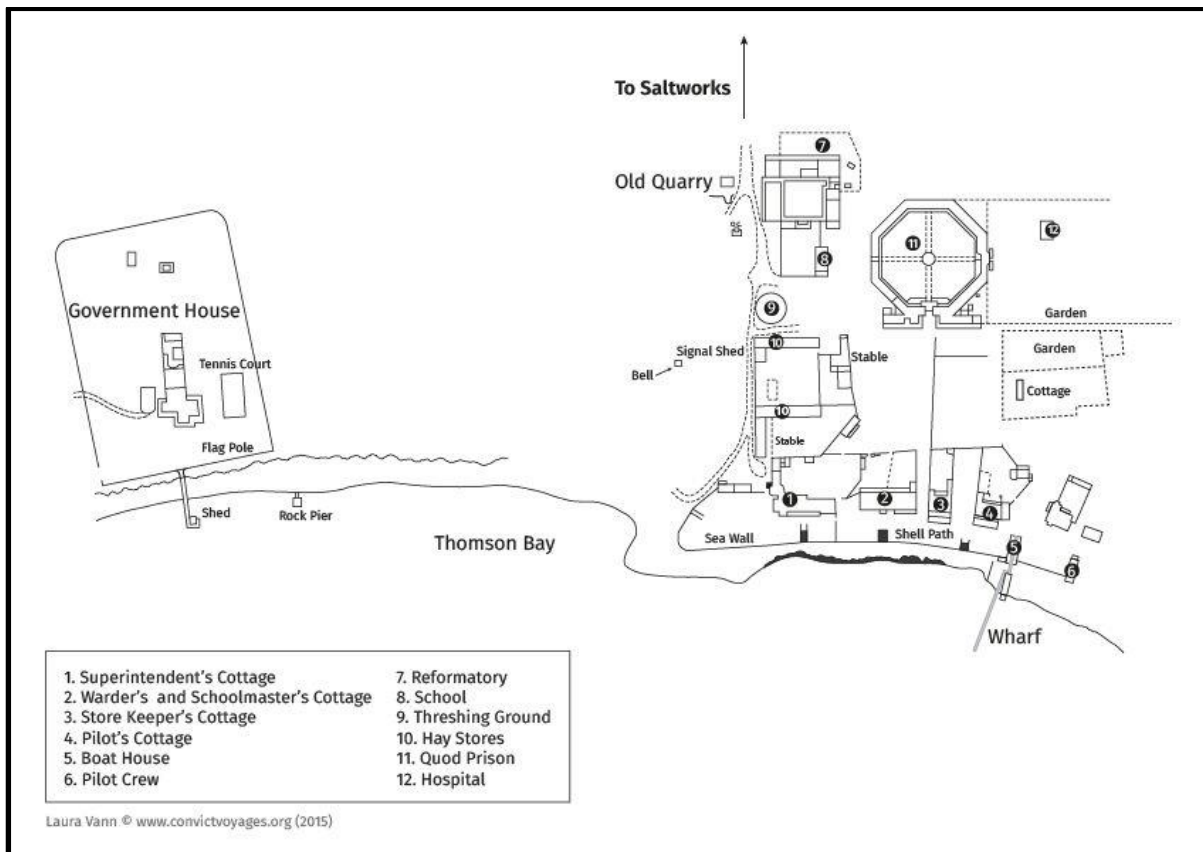
In the 1840s most of Rottneest's convicts came from the immediate vicinity of the coast south of Fremantle, and a small cluster west of Albany. As the settlement frontier pushed northwards Rottneest's inmates came from further and further afield in Western Australia. Western Australia encompassed a third of Australia's entire landmass, so many Indigenous convicts were transported over hundreds of kilometres on foot and by ship. These land and sea routes can be seen in the map below. On these journeys the Indigenous prisoners were often scantily clad, or even naked, and chained around the neck, arms and legs. An Indigenous prisoner known as Benjamin described how he walked naked for over 700 km between Eyre Sand Patch to Albany with a bullock chain around his neck. All these routes took convicts to Fremantle, where they would be held at Round House Prison awaiting a boat, and good enough weather, to be transported by pilot boat or steamer to Rottneest's Thomson Bay.



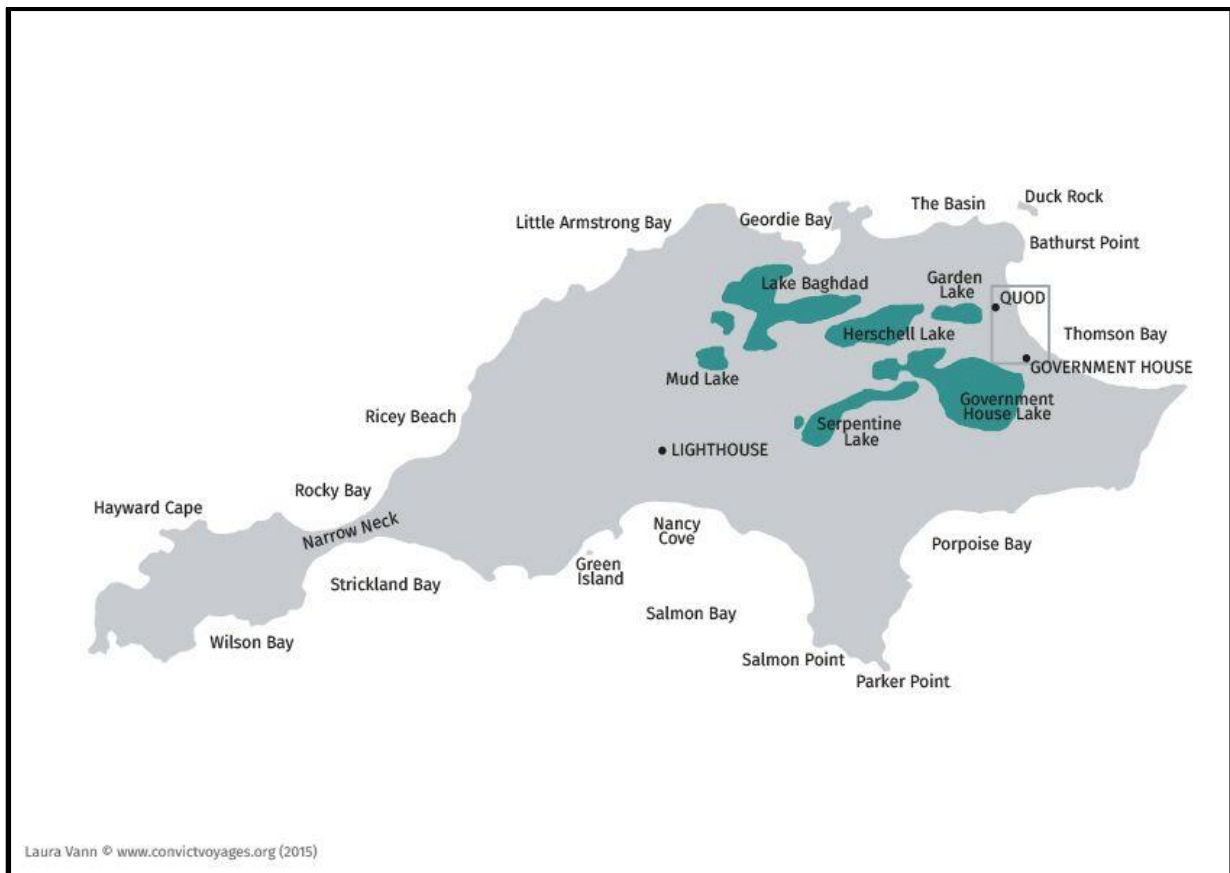
Inland Transportation Routes

The places in which Rottnest's convicts were arrested mirror the movement of settlers from the coastline into the interior of Western Australia. Brought up against an occupying force who were often violent towards them, Indigenous people responded with resistance. Such acts of frontier warfare [became criminalised](#) as "murder" or "assault". For these actions Indigenous people were held accountable in a court of law far more often than their European counterparts. The majority of Nyungar people who were sentenced to death for these crimes had their sentences commuted to imprisonment on Rottnest Island. The British also criminalised certain aspects of Indigenous politics, including spearing to kill or in the leg as retribution for former wrongs. More often the prisoners on Rottnest had been convicted for misunderstanding or not recognising European claims to territory and livestock. An inmate on Rottnest named Brandy said: "I came here for killing a sheep. I saw the sheep had strayed, and my woman said "kill it," and I did so." During the second half of the nineteenth century [several acts](#) were passed to make it easier to sentence Indigenous people to longer sentences of imprisonment, alongside corporal punishment such as flogging. In the 1850s most prisoners on Rottnest were sentenced to one year or less, by the 1880s the majority were were serving one year or more. For example, [Mullong and Billy](#) received 2-year sentences to Rottnest for the minor crime of petty theft in August 1876. At trial Indigenous people were severely disadvantaged. Not only were they were being tried by a European judge and jury forcing them to communicate through an interpreter, they usually did not understand the system of justice. It was not uncommon for Indigenous people to confess to spearing a sheep belong to a certain settler, simply because they had done so in the past.

Initially Rottnest was envisioned as an institution to train Indigenous individuals in cultivation and farming in the hopes they might become field hands for Europeans on their release. So convicts spent most of their time [clearing land to grow wheat and barley](#). In 1842 around a third of the convicts were labouring hard carrying quarried stone and digging the foundations for a [new lighthouse](#). In the same year the convict-run salt works produced 3708 tons of salt which was shipped to the mainland on the same ship that had transported them. Just as Western Australia accepted the need for convict labour from elsewhere in the British Empire, Rottnest's convicts were called upon to leave the island and work in gangs building the southern road to Albany and Perth prison from 1850-55. The new batch of convicts to arrive at Rottnest worked tasks similar to their 1840s predecessors. As prison numbers swelled, a number of significant building projects were completed by convicts. This included the construction of a holiday residence for the Governor, known as Government House and a new octagonal prison building (known as the Quod), in 1864. A new salt works with chimney stack followed 5 years later. However, despite successful crop yields and improved salt production Rottnest was a costly prison to run. From the 1880s there were frequent calls in the legislative council and the local press to close down Rottnest and [work the Aboriginal convicts locally](#) instead, as they had done between 1850 and 1855. In 1890 it was proposed that Rottnest's prisoners be employed in dredging the entrance to Swan River, to create harbour, and repaid the road between Perth and Fremantle. However, this suggestion was rejected because it would involve working the convicts in chains, which sat uneasily with prevailing humanitarian views.



By the 1890s Rottneſt was failing to keep up with its running costs thanks to declining prison population and depleted ſoil. The iſland had long ſerved as a ſummer reſort for the incumbent Governor of Western Australia and his family and friends. As gold ruſh money poured into Western Australia the legiſlative council argued that it was time to open Rottneſt up to the general public as a holiday deſtination. On 27 September 1894, the member for Fremantle, Elias Solomon, forwarded a motion at the legiſlative aſſembly to end transportation to Rottneſt and open it inſtead as a holiday deſtination for the public. The Premier John Forreſt was concerned that the lack of infrastructure on the iſland would diſcouraġe tourism and felt unconvinced of a proper alternative for the Indigenous priſoners. As a compromise, the priſon was kept open but it was noted in the minutes for that ſeſſion that [“it is deſirable that the iſland ſhould be thrown open to the public, as a place of ſummer reſort and recreation”](#).



The prison stayed upon for almost another decade, but was finally closed as a prison in 1903. Oddly, in January the following year it was declared a penal outstation as an annex of Fremantle Gaol. Most of the original occupants were released or transferred to prisons elsewhere, leaving behind 18 prisoners, mostly elderly or unfit for heavy labour elsewhere. Along with a number of European prisoners who were shipped in, the inmates were tasked with maintenance work for the new tourist industry on the island. In this capacity a number continued to be detained there until 1931. Rottnest was destined to serve as a prison again – for German and Austrian internees in the World War I and for Italian prisoners of war in World War II.

At regular intervals in Rottnest's 60 years as a prison, deaths in custody sparked inquiries into the poor treatment of the Aboriginal inmates. In 1840 Guardian of Aborigines Charles Symmons and Prosecutor George Fletcher Moore investigated the death of 3 convicts. They noted inadequate clothing, poor rations and threadbare blankets. In 1846 Superintendent Henry Vincent was [investigated](#) (and acquitted) after allegations were made that he had murdered and buried a number of Indigenous prisoners, as well as ripped off part of an ear of an inmate named Charlie. Twenty years later his son's violent behaviour as Assistant Warden came [under scrutiny](#). William was implicated in the suspicious death of an elderly inmate named Dehan in 1865. Several people testified that the superintendent's son, William Vincent, beat Dehan in the face with a set of keys. Dehan was found dead the next morning – less than a month after arriving on the island. Henry Vincent and his son tried to cover up the assault by burying the prisoner quickly. When the body was exhumed by order of the governor a full week later, the doctor ruled the cause of death as disease of the lung. Nevertheless, William Vincent's brutal attack on an old man was considered sufficient breach of duty to receive a sentence of 3 months hard labour. Yet, only apathy towards the fate of the surviving Aboriginal prisoners can explain why further inquiry was not made into the superintendent that condoned this kind of violence.

It was the unnecessary deaths of Indigenous convicts – in the plural this time – that prompted a [second inquiry](#) into Rottnest in 1883. In August of that year an epidemic of influenza broke out at the prison. Indigenous convicts were not supplied with spare uniforms, if they were supplied with any at all, so they often went to bed in damp clothes with thin blankets and no fireplaces to warm them. With the onset of a wet winter, these conditions became deadly – claiming the lives of more than 50 men. While the commission was investigating Rottnest, 100 convicts fell ill with a measles epidemic that was ravaging the colony at large. These diseases sped rapidly as extreme overcrowding left 4 Aboriginal convicts sharing small cells, with an average sleeping space just 60 cm wide. A correspondent for *The Perth Daily News* described how ‘prisoners at night are packed away in their cells like sardines in a box, having to lie down head to feet alternately to make room.’ The Forrest Inquiry delved deep into the daily life on the island and concluded that confinement was preferable to being worked in irons in the colony, but that health must be improved. They recommended the introduction of sanitary regimes, including shaving the hair and beards of convicts upon arrival, regular bathing with soap, and provision of uniforms. The latter stopped disease spreading through convicts swapping clothes, as a ceremony for welcome new arrivals. It also gave convicts a dry set of warmer clothes to change into when they got wet or dirty. The commission also suggested the construction of new buildings, the re-allocation of cells within the ‘Quod’ and the construction of a hospital ward to ease overcrowding. However, in 1896 a further commission still found the quod inadequate for housing convicts, describing cells as draughty and cold. A contributing factor to the sickness of many was the psychological trauma of being separated from their homeland and their communities. Henry Trigg described how “The prisoners will sit down and weep most bitterly...when they see the smoke from the fires’ from their homes on the mainland. Over the course of 79 years as an Aboriginal prison Rottnest claimed the lives of around 373 men. A further 25 died whilst serving their sentences or being transported to Rottnest on the mainland, bringing the total up to around 400.

As a tourist attraction, Rottnest Island has struggled to engage with its heritage as a site of Aboriginal suffering and incarceration. On 10 March 1988, 200 Aboriginal people landed on the island to protest the neglect of the graves of Indigenous prisoners on the island. In December 1990 ground penetrating radar was used to identify the most likely site of the Aboriginal cemetery. Two years later the area was fenced off and left to return to its natural state. Signs erected to inform the public of its significance and to inform them not to trespass. In 1992 a proposal put forward by the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority to erect a memorial and interpretation centre near the cemetery was rejected by The State Advisory Council. It is now believed that there is at least another Aboriginal graveyard that has yet to be cordoned off. The prison quod has been converted into luxury accommodation, with each “room” in Rottnest Lodge made up of three cells knocked together. Neville Green compared it to turning Auschwitz into holiday cottages. As of 2014, across the island and in the museum there are interpretation boards about the island’s history as a prison. Much of the historical commemoration, including the naming of streets and buildings are named, focuses on colonial administrators and prison staff rather than for the Indigenous people who were incarcerated there.

Despite a number of surviving colonial prison buildings, Rottnest is not advertised to tourists as a historical convict site in the same way that Fremantle and other UNESCO heritage sites are. Glen Stasiuk has argued that the prison should become a historically-interpreted site for tourists in his 2015 documentary *Wadjemup: Black Prison White Playground*. Although every Indigenous Western Australian alive today will have a descendant who was sent to Rottnest, it is not visited by vast numbers of Nyoongar people to remember the tragedy. Increased collaboration with Indigenous communities since 2007 mean that the possible roles of the island for Nyoongar descendants, as

well as for the general public, are being explored, The Rottnest Island Authority's [Reconciliation Action Plan](#), that spanned 2012-2015, stressed a new focus on Aboriginal culture and history. This included exhibitions and performances by contemporary Nyoongar artists, acknowledgement to island as land belonging to the Whadjuk Nyoongar people and emphasis on the Dreaming on materials provided to school children. However, the plan focussed primary on the pre-settlement history of Rottnest. This is [less problematic](#) from a heritage perspective than reminding visitors of its history as a prison. The majority of 500,000 visitors to Rottnest every year are non-Indigenous Western Australians. Many of these visitors would find it uncomfortable to be reminded of some of the worst excesses of settler colonialism. In January 2015 [it was announced](#) that the old prison was being closed as tourist accommodation, and was being redeveloped as an interpretation centre, with input from the Indigenous community.

Further Reading

R.J. Ferguson, *Rottnest Island, History and Architecture* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1986).

Peter Randolph, *Rottnest Island Aboriginal Prisoners Cemetery* (Perth: Department of Aboriginal Sites, 1993).

Neville Green and Susan Moon, *Far From Home: Aboriginal prisoners of Rottnest Island* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1997).

Stasiuk, Glen, [Wadjemup: Rottnest Island as Black Prison and White Playground](#) (Murdoch University, Documentary and accompanying PhD Exegesis, 2015).

Edward Jack Watson, *Rottnest: Its tragedy and glory* (Bicton: W.A., Daniel L. Watson, 1998).

Online Resources

History of the Nyoongar People, <http://www.noongar.org.au/noongar-people-history.php>

Rottnest Island Authority – Our History, <http://www.rottnestisland.com/the-island/about-the-island/our-history>

Rottnest Foundation, <http://www.rottnestfoundation.org.au/aboriginal-burial-ground/>

The Quod Project, <http://www.taniaferrier.com.au/quodproject/index2.html>

Storylines – State Library of WA, <http://storylines.slwa.wa.gov.au/archive/index.php>

Aboriginal Records – State Record Office of WA, <http://www.sro.wa.gov.au/archive-collection/collection/aboriginal-records>