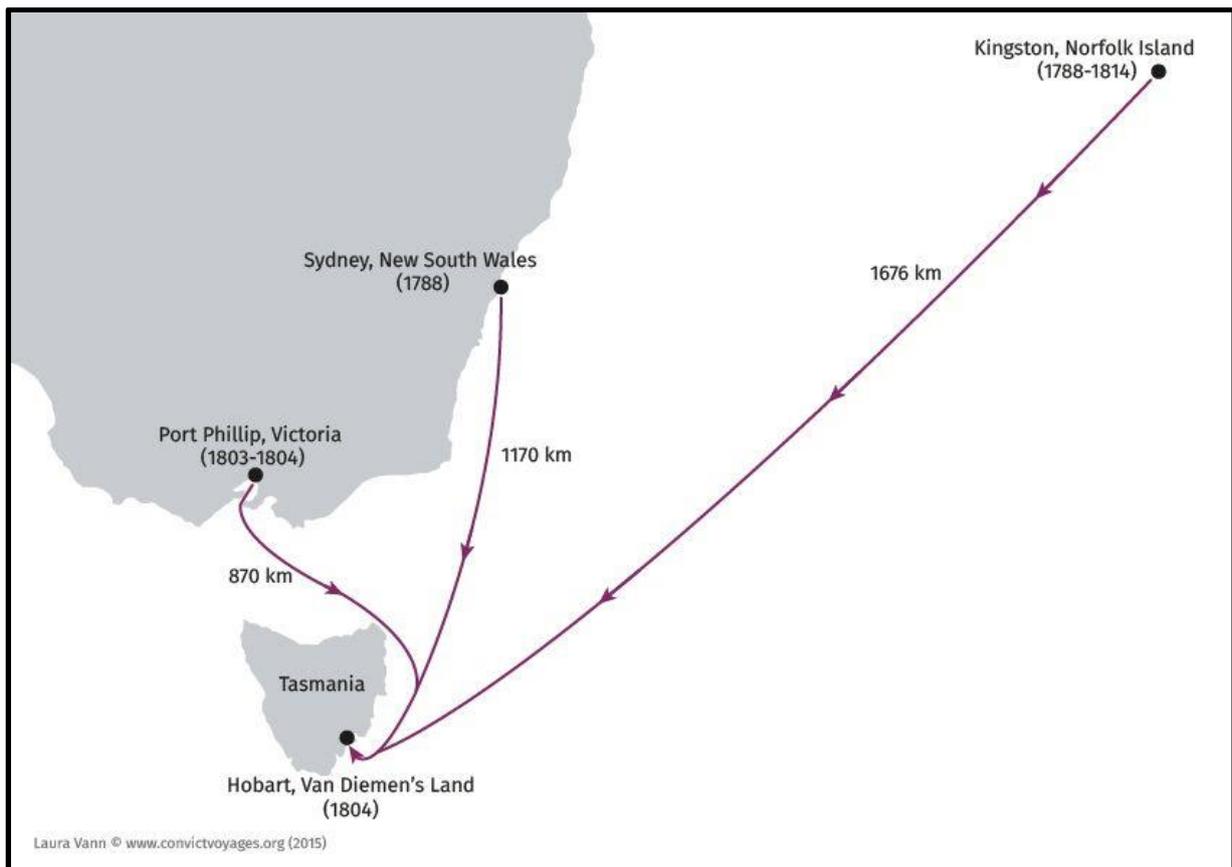


Tasmania: Van Diemen's Land, 1804-1853

Katherine Roscoe

Van Diemen's Land was the name used by Europeans for the large island of Tasmania, located off the southern coast of the Australian mainland. The British first took possession of Van Diemen's Land in 1803 when a small group of 33 convicts and 16 soldiers and officials established a small settlement on the Derwent River. The following year, 307 convicts who had failed to establish a settlement at Port Phillip, arrived on board the *Calcutta* to form a more permanent settlement at Hobart under the command of Lieutenant-Governor David Collins. It was hoped that settling Van Diemen's Land would deter the French from gaining a foothold in New Holland (as Australia was known). Furthermore, establishing a convict settlement at Van Diemen's Land would prevent an excess of convict ships arriving in New South Wales, which the British had settled in 1788. For the first decade, Van Diemen's Land was populated by convicts arriving from British settlements at New South Wales or Norfolk Island, who joined its founding population from Port Phillip. It was not until 1815, with the demobilisation of ships following the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815), that convict ships from Britain arrived at Van Diemen's Land as a first port of call.



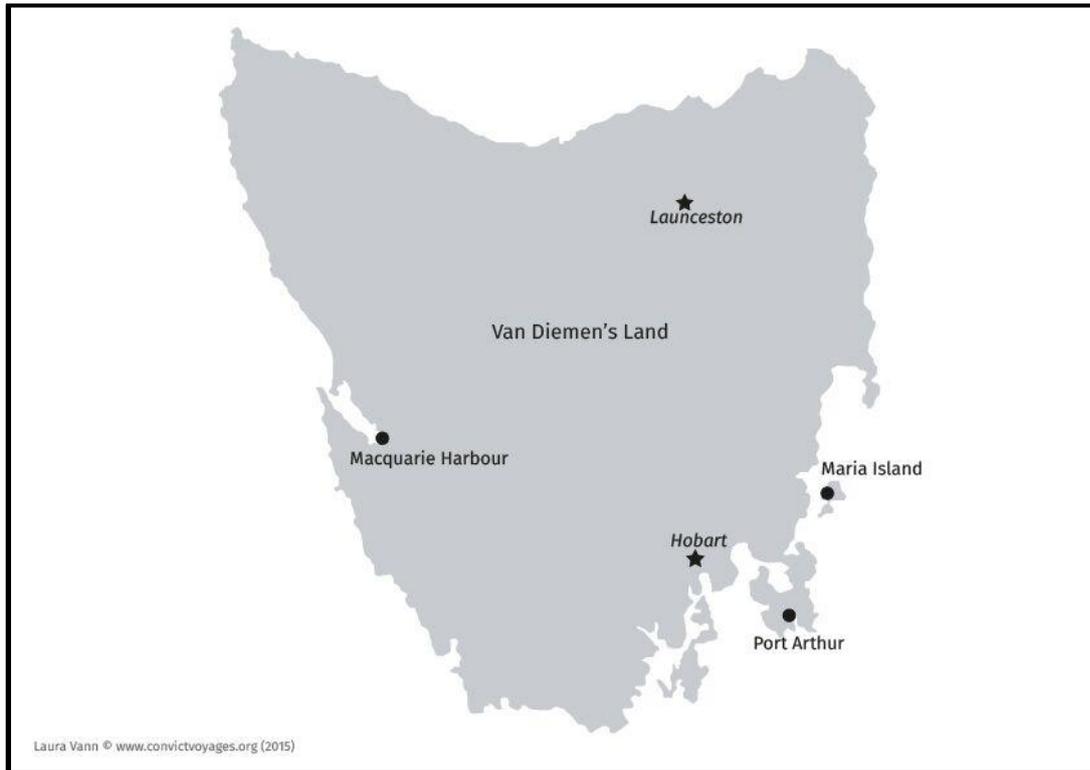
In the early years of the settlement the main aim was survival. Visited by few supply ships and having cleared only a little ground, kangaroo hunting became key to supplement the meagre rations of convicts and soldiers alike. In fear of encountering Indigenous people in the bush, convicts were armed when they were sent out by officers to hunt kangaroo meat. Many convict kangaroo-hunters realised they were capable of survival outside of the convict settlement, and escaped into the

bush. Many of these became bushrangers, remaining a challenge for the administrators of Van Diemen's Land until the mid-1820s. Some convicts were engaged in pastoral pursuits, either by assignment to free settlers or on government farms. They cleared land, planted crops, and reared livestock (especially sheep). Some convicts were put into chain gangs, building roads, bridges and buildings, to support the growing colony. As [James Bischoff wrote](#) in his *Sketch of the History of Van Diemen's Land* in 1832 "Van Diemen's Land is indebted for its present prosperous condition chiefly to the crimes committed in Great Britain."

The first case of recorded frontier conflict between the European newcomers and Indigenous people took place in 1804 at Risdon Cove. Isolated cases of conflict continued as a result of competition for natural resources. The main interactions between Indigenous people and the colonists were based around trading items such as coffee, flour, tea, and especially hunting dogs. In 1823, European land grants increased ten-fold. In the face of such large-scale dispossession, Indigenous communities engaged in resistance strategies that became known as the Black War. Between 1828 and 1830 Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur made several attempts to restrict the movements of Indigenous people, using a 2,200-strong "dragnet of police force and settlers to forcibly drive away and capture Indigenous people." George Augustus Robinson favoured the "incentivised" removal of Indigenous people to institutions in remote locations. By 1835 the British had deported the vast majority of surviving Aboriginal Tasmanians to Flinders Island. The issue of whether these violent strategies constitute [genocide](#) has become a subject of a heated historical and political debate, known as "[The History Wars](#)". Certainly, only 73 years after the Europeans' arrival around [6,000 Tasmanian Aboriginal people](#) had died from a combination of violence, disease and dispossession.

In 1817 John Thomas Bigge, a former Deputy Judge advocate of Trinidad, was commissioned by the British government to [report](#) on the convict system of New South Wales and Van Diemen's land. In 1822 his findings were made public. Bigge criticised awarding land grants to convicts. He proposed that the existing system of ad-hoc assignment should be systematised and centralised. He advised that land ownership should be restricted to free immigrants with capital, who would have convicts assigned to them as labourers. The settler would be responsible for maintaining the convict – providing food, clothing and accommodation – which Bigge estimated would reduce the costs for the British government by £24 and 10 shillings per convict. Settlers were not allowed to punish their assigned convict; instead they were tried by a magistrates' bench or a higher court and sentenced to a term of punishment in a road party, chain gang or at a penal station. Female convicts were also assigned, usually as domestic servants, but were sent to Female Factories if they were found guilty of misconduct. It was around this time that convicts began to arrive in Van Diemen's Land in large numbers enabling the large-scale assignment system Bigge envisioned. Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur, who arrived in Van Diemen's Land two years after the publication of Bigge's report, further expanded the assignment system, with over half the convict population assigned to settlers.

Bigge's 1822 [report to the British parliament](#) also recommended the establishment of penal settlements for secondary offenders. By establishing a site of punishment for those who had committed crimes whilst in the colony, Bigge hoped to motivate convicts to cooperate within the assignment system. In the following decade, three such penal settlements were established at Macquarie Harbour (1822), Maria Island (1825) and Port Arthur (1830).



The penal settlement at Macquarie Harbour, on the west coast of Van Diemen's Land, was established in 1822. Despite its reputation as a convict station for the very worst offenders, of the 1,136 repeat offenders who were sent there only 3% were convicted for explicitly violent offences. Almost half were guilty of theft, usually petty, and around a third were absconders, apprehended from as far afield as Mauritius, Bombay and Britain. In this sense Macquarie Harbour was principally concerned with upholding the convict system, as opposed to punishing an unreformable "criminal class". In the early years of the settlement flogging rates were particularly high. As time went on allowing convicts to progress from hard labour to skilled positions allowed the emergence of a disciplinary regime based on incentive rather than punishment. The key industry for the settlement was the felling of huon pine and construction of over 120 vessels in the boatyard. Since it was an isolated settlement, convicts fulfilled a diverse range of roles to keep the settlement operational, working as boat crews, carpenters, blacksmiths, as well as maintaining discipline over their fellow convicts as overseers and watchmen. A small number of female convicts worked in the hospital, in the laundry and as domestic servants to officers.

The isolated geography of Macquarie Harbour made supplying the settlement almost impossible, which, coupled with the infertility of the surrounding area, caused malnutrition and scurvy amongst the convicts. Though isolation was intended to act as a deterrent to escape, almost a quarter absconded during their time at Macquarie Harbour. This is the setting for, perhaps, the most famous escape narrative in [For the Term of His Natural Life](#) (1870) – a novel loosely based on the experiences of convict [Alexander Pearce](#), who turned cannibal on his companions after escaping from Macquarie Harbour. Macquarie Harbour was eventually closed in 1833 and its convicts relocated to Port Arthur, which was far more accessible to the centre of administration at Hobart.

Maria Island was established under the orders of Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur as a site of secondary punishment for those whose crimes were not "of so flagrant a nature" as those sent to Macquarie Harbour. In March 1825 fifty male convicts arrived with a small party of soldiers, and it is estimated that the number of convicts never [rose above 145](#). The convicts were engaged in a

variety of activities, chiefly timber cutting, but also manufacturing cloth, tanning hide, cultivating the land and quarrying limestone and sandstone. The chief problem was the frequency with which convicts tried to escape, using bark to make rafts or timber to construct canoes. This was attributed to a laxity of discipline resulting from the settlement's relative isolation from Hobart and the idea that these convicts were less hardened than their counterparts at Macquarie Harbour. In October 1832 Maria Island was closed down as a penal settlement and secondary offenders were consolidated in one penal settlement, Port Arthur.

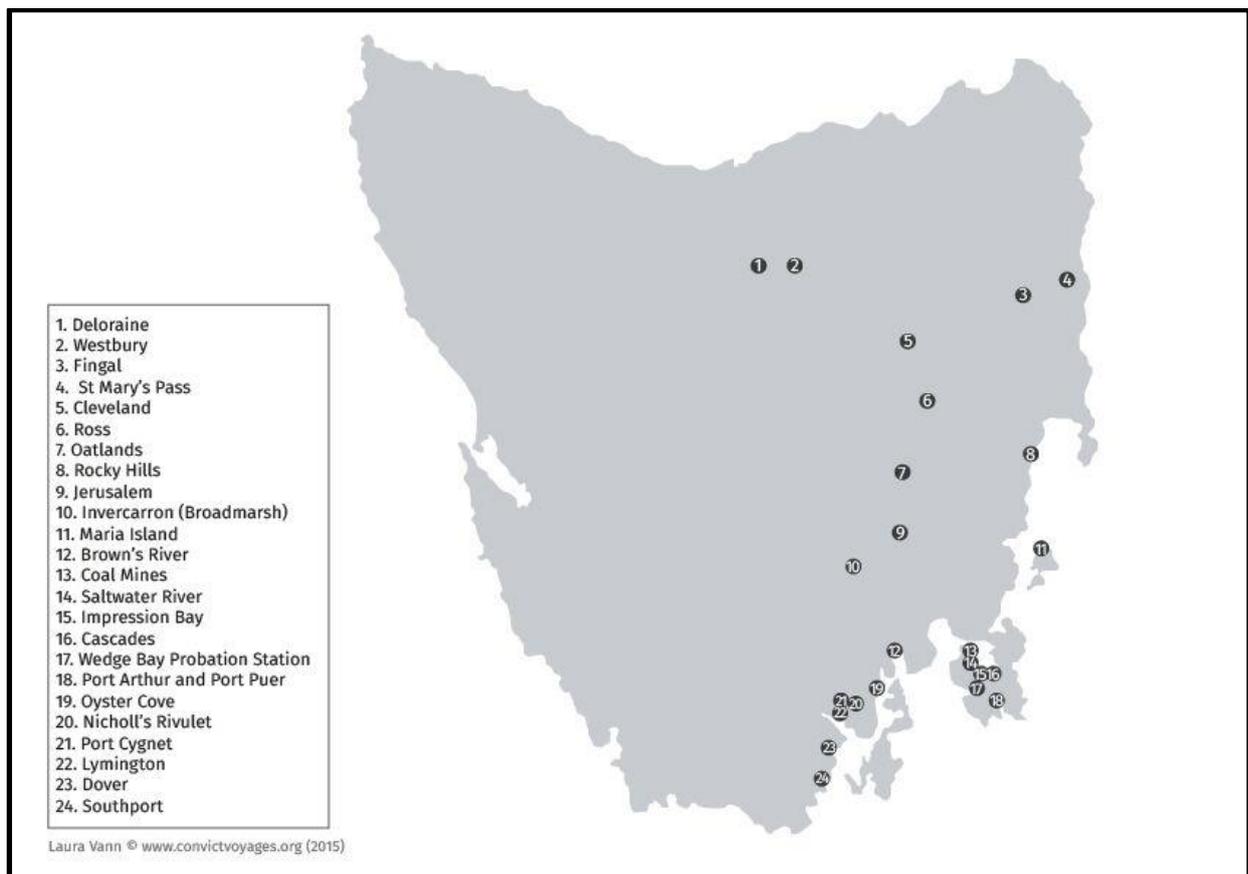
By the mid-1830s, more and more convict labour was being enlisted into chain gangs. This had the double benefit of saving the expense of domestic transportation and providing the work force to build useful infrastructure near urban areas. After closing Macquarie Harbour, two fifths of those who had been sentenced to penal settlements were sent to chain gangs instead. Chain gangs worked on big public works project like the wharves at Hobart and the causeway at Bridgewater. Discipline was difficult to enforce in mobile gangs. For one it was difficult to keep classes separate and differentiate them to incentivise good behaviour and punish bad. Those who conducted themselves well were rewarded with indulgences like sugar and tobacco. Those found guilty of "misconduct" were flogged or sometimes imprisoned in small solitary cells. To ensure fair treatment magistrates were supposed to make frequent visits to hear convict complaints, punish offenders and maintain accurate records.

Port Arthur began life in 1830 as a small timber station, designed to replace the recently closed Birches Bay. Convicts worked 2 at a time using a pitsaw to fell the trees, and gangs of up to 50 (so-called "centipede gangs") carried the timber beams on their shoulders back to the main settlements. The backbreaking nature of the work made it well-suited as a site for secondary offenders. Furthermore, as a peninsula separated from the mainland by a narrow isthmus known as Eaglehawk Neck, it was easy to secure with only a few guards and their dogs. The 1840s saw the consolidation of the industrial and penal nature of the establishment as it swelled to a population of over 1,100 people. In 1835, out of nearly 15,000 convicts on Van Diemen's Land, 1,172 (8%) were on Port Arthur. The penal settlement was so vast it was the "third largest town in the colony" and by the 1870s had a convict-built church, hospital, wharf, shipyard and a number of workshops.

The construction of Pentonville Prison in London in 1842 marked a shift in penal theory that favoured separation of convicts at all times, in order to punish and reform them. At Port Arthur flogging ended in 1848 in favour of solitary confinement in the "Separate Prison" which was built two years later. With the suspension of transportation in 1853, the number of convicts to Port Arthur began a slow decline. In the 1860s, the Paupers' Barracks and Asylum were built, reflecting the changing needs of an ageing convict population. With a labour force unable to complete strenuous tasks, Port Arthur's convicts were gradually relocated before its closure in 1877. In 1834 a juvenile reformatory was established at Point Puer across the bay from Port Arthur, to ensure they were not corrupted by the presence of "hardened" adult convicts. There was also an outstation coal mine, which became a "punishment station" for the badly behaved from Port Arthur because of the dark and dangerous work convicts undertook there.

The [Molesworth Report \(1837\)](#) criticised assignment for being a "lottery system" because the nature of a convict's crimes were unrelated to the possible severity of his or her master. From June 1840 (after a short trial in 1839) probation was installed as a new "staged" system that all those transported to Van Diemen's Land would have to progress through. The first stage was temporary incarceration in penitentiary in Britain. There followed transportation to Van Diemen's Land, where upon arrival they would work in roaming convict gangs, or at a penal settlement, engaged in hard labour. Upon reaching the third stage a convict would be eligible to earn a "probation

pass.” Passholders were accommodated in one of the more than 80 probation stations across Van Diemen’s Land, labouring on public works while waiting to be employed by individual settlers or emancipists (ex-convicts). It was possible to be awarded a Ticket of Leave if a convict showed himself capable of sustained good conduct at the probation station. Though intended to encourage moral reformation through progression, by concentrating convicts in one place – rather than dispersing them the way assignment had – concerns were raised about probation stations as breeding grounds for idleness, vice, and “[unnatural crime](#)” (homosexual acts). Colonists were outraged that convicts continued to arrive but were delayed in becoming useful employees. By 1846 there were 28 Probation stations, concentrated in the East side of the island were there most settlers. Administrative failures in organising such a complex system and the attendant costs borne by London continued despite successive modifications of the system from 1846 until the abolition of transportation in 1853.



By the time transportation ended in 1853, [nearly 12,500 women](#) had been sent to Van Diemen’s Land, mostly for theft. With the arrival of women came the perceived necessity to separate men from women. At first, the arrangements were makeshift, with female convicts accommodated in a house in George Town (1822-34) and in rooms attached to Macquarie Street Gaol (1825-28). As whole shiploads of female convicts began arriving, a failed rum distillery was converted into Cascades Female Factory in 1828. The factory was situated in a frequently flooded valley around 3 kilometres from Hobart town centre so damp and disease were constant problems. In 1834 the first custom built female factory was constructed at Launceston with an octagonal design. From the 1830s female factory inmates were placed in different yards depending on their class, which in turn depended on their behaviour: the third “criminal” class, the second “probationary” class, and the first “assignment” class. After working their way to release, there was the possibility they would return to the female factory if they were found “guilty” of drunkenness, absence without leave,

insolence or pregnancy. The labour they undertook was designed either to punish (picking wool hair and oakum) or to prepare them for their domestic service once assigned (needlework and laundry).

When New South Wales stopped accepting convicts from the British Empire, Van Diemen's Land received huge influxes of convicts from Britain and its empire. From 1844, The Anson Hulk, which was moored in Derwent River, housed female convicts for 6 months before they progressed to Cascades to combat overcrowding. A new factory opened at Ross in 1848, which relieved some of the pressure at Launceston. In 1853 the Cascades Female Factory was expanded to 5 yards designed to hold up to 700 inmates. In reality it held up to 1,020 women and 176 children within its walls. Once transportation was truly abolished, there was little demand for Female Factories, and Ross, Launceston and Cascades closed their doors between 1854 and 1856. Until the 1850s there was an average of 39 adult women to every 100 men, as transportation of male convicts far outstripped the transportation of women.

The failures of the probation system, at a time of economic stagnation, generated increasing hostility towards the convicts that were flooding into Van Diemen's Land. Systematic criticism of transportation took hold amongst colonial commentators in the mid-1840s. Anti-transportation critiques were strong amongst middle and working class Van Demonians living in towns and cities, as convicts competed for limited jobs and drove crime rates upwards. For landowners in rural areas, convicts remained desirable as a source of cheap labour, and it was these people who occupied the upper strata of the colonial administration.

People like John West, a clergyman and editor of the Launceston examiner, were morally opposed to convictism, insisting the colony could not have democratic institutions until it ridded itself of the "convict stain." Comparison with New South Wales seemed to bear out his conclusions, as the sister colony had been rewarded with responsible government after the demise of transportation. In 1851 Van Diemen's Land was granted its own legislative council, and its first polls saw the election of mostly abolitionists and the failure of pro-transportation campaigner William Denison to achieve re-election. The discovery of gold in the 1850s was the deciding factor in abolishing convict transportation to Van Diemen's Land. Transportation to Australia could hardly be held out as a deterrent, if, upon receiving a ticket, convicts could make their fortunes in the gold fields. When convict transportation was abolished in August 1853 celebratory bonfire were lit all over the island and commemorative cake handed to schoolchildren. A few years later Van Diemen's Land was granted responsible government. Its transformation from penal colony to independent colony was symbolised through its name change in honour of the first European to discover it (Dutchman Abel Tasman). Abolitionists had long referred to their colony as [Tasmania](#) to rid the island of the convict associations that came with the name Van Diemen's Land.

Further Reading

James Boyce, [Van Diemen's Land](#) (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2008).

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Bruce Hindmarsh, "[Yoked to the Plough: Male Convict Labour, Culture and Resistance in Rural Van Diemen's Land, 1820-40](#)" (PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2006).

Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A history of transportation of convicts to Australia, 1787-1868* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, *Closing Hell's Gates: Life and Death of a Convict Station*, (Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2008).

Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, "[The Bushrangers and the Convict System of Van Diemen's Land, 1803-1846](#)" (PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1991).

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Kirsty Reid, *Gender, crime and empire: convicts, settlers and the state in early colonial Australia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

Lyndall Ryan, *Tasmanian Aborigines: A history since 1803* (Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2012).

Online Resources

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

Cascades Female Factory Historic Site, <http://www.femalefactory.org.au/>

Female Convicts Research Centre, <http://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/>

Founders and Survivors, <http://www.foundersandsurvivors.org/>

LINC Tasmania: Convict Records, <http://www.linc.tas.gov.au/research/browse-by-category/familyhistory/convict>

Port Arthur Historic Site, <http://www.portarthur.org.au/>

"Van Dieman's Land" - Convict Ditty Australian Folk Songs, <http://folkstream.com/091.html>