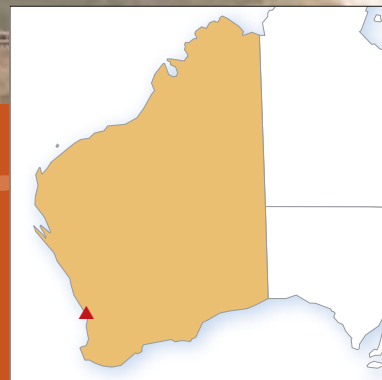


Fremantle Prison



Date of inscription: 1 August 2005

Fremantle Prison, Western Australia

After months sailing across the world, on 1 June 1850, a ship arrived at Fremantle, Western Australia, carrying 75 convicts. Banished from their homeland and sent to a harsh foreign land, these convicts played an important role in building the nation.

In the mid 1800s gold fever had struck eastern Australia, but in the west a shrinking population of settlers was struggling to make a living from the inhospitable land. With few hands available to build and expand the colony south of the Swan River the solution was sought in convict labour.

A striking landmark on a small hill, Fremantle Prison is a physical reminder of the contribution made by Australia's convicts to building this nation. It provides insights into a difficult and formative part of Australia's history.

Fremantle Prison's six hectares contain remarkably preserved remnants of the earliest phase of European settlement of Western Australia – a time when convict labour was used to develop the fledgling colonies. The transportation of convicts to Australia, while relieving England of the pressure on its own overcrowded prisons, also benefited those settlers who were struggling with their new environment on this distant continent.

Convicts were seen as the solution to the lack of resources and infrastructure that thwarted the settlers' progress. They could supply the physical labour needed to construct roads, bridges, houses, lighthouses, jetties, footpaths and public buildings, like the Perth Town Hall.

When Fremantle Prison was built between 1851 and 1859, its structure reflected the less physically violent approach to convict management. This had an impact on the design of the prison. It was built along the same lines of Pentonville Prison in London, one of England's first Model Prisons to focus on reform.

The Model Prison operated on the theory that complete isolation was an effective form of rehabilitation. Prisoners were not allowed contact with each other and were held in cells in complete isolation and absolute silence. Port Arthur also opened this type of prison in 1852.

Fremantle Prison contains fascinating structures which reflect changes that have taken place over the 133 year period it operated as a prison. Perhaps the most striking is the austere Main Cell Block which is Australia's largest and longest, measuring some 145 metres long and four storeys high. It could accommodate up to 1000 men. The prison also contains a chapel, a two-storey limestone gatehouse, workshops, cottages, guardhouses, a hospital, an underground reservoir, a kilometre-long tunnel network, limestone perimeter walls, a refractory block and gallows.

Some of these structures have been embellished by their human occupants through graffiti, murals, signs and notices, all of which create a vivid and layered insight into prison life.

Over time, Fremantle Prison has had an evolving role. It has been a public works prison, a convict distribution depot, the state's only place of execution, an internment camp for 'aliens' and POWs during two World Wars, and, after being decommissioned in 1991, a popular tourist and cultural venue.

As many of the prison's structures have been preserved from convict times, their integrity and authenticity provide a rich resource for researchers, archaeologists and the education sector. Many appreciate the prison as a place to connect with colonial roots, or to search for family links to this now-recognised part of Australia's history.