

RESEARCH REPORTS

The Fremantle Prison Project

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In 2013, the University of Western Australia and the World Heritage Site Fremantle Prison signed a Memorandum of Understanding to allow archaeological investigation of the Prison over a five year period, under the title “The Fremantle Prison Project”. This paper reports briefly on the first two years of that project. The project, designed to link with the UWA archaeology curriculum, and to meet heritage needs of the Prison, has produced a range of successful outcomes, including three research theses and two field schools. Initial research outcomes include a better understanding of refuse disposal practices within the Prison and the way it functioned as an industrial site in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the Discipline of Archaeology at the University of Western Australia (UWA) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the World Heritage Site Fremantle Prison (Figure 1). The MOU outlined a broad research project to be carried out at the Prison over a five year period, in response to stated needs of the Prison and with specific links to the UWA archaeology curriculum, and in particular, the *Masters of Professional Archaeology* course and *Field Methods* unit. This paper provides a brief outline of the first two years of the project and an overview of results so far.

BACKGROUND

Fremantle Prison, built as part of the convict system in Western Australia, commenced operation as a working prison in 1855 and was in use until its closure in 1991. Within months of closure the prison was converted to a tourist venue and since 1992 over three million people have visited the site (Fremantle Prison 2013). In 2010, it was listed as a World Heritage site along with ten other Australian convict sites. Prior to the commencement of the UWA project regular research was conducted at the site both before and since its closure. It was included in Kerr's (1984, 1988) survey of Australian colonial prisons and had been the subject of at least three research theses: Bavin (1994) included the Prison in her PhD research into colonial Western Australian gaols; Burke (1998) wrote her honours thesis on material excavated from beneath floorboards in one ground floor cell in the main cell block; and Millett (2003) wrote his PhD in history on the site as a place of punishment during the convict period. Additionally, two papers discuss graffiti at the Prison: Palmer (1997) and Casella (2009); while both

Gibbs (2001, 2006) and Winter (2013a, 2013b) discuss the Prison peripherally within wider research into the Western Australian convict period.

Beyond this there has been a range of archaeology carried out at the site within a commercial framework including a number of projects conducted during the 1990s, and then later Bolton (2005a, 2005b), Burke *et al.* (2009), Eureka Consulting (2008, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c), Fleming and Burke (2009), Fleming *et al.* (2008a, 2008b, 2009), and Winter and Sparks-Santos (2010). These have tended to respond to the mitigation needs of the Prison rather



Figure 1: Map of Western Australia showing the location of Fremantle Prison.

than provide consolidated research outcomes. Research at the Prison has been piecemeal in its approach, tending to concentrate on the convict period in Western Australia (1850–1875) and graffiti produced in the final decade of the use of the site (the 1980s). Research has also tended to concentrate on the lived experience of prisoners incarcerated at the site. There has been limited investigation of the use of the Prison during the period at the end of the nineteenth and

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early twentieth centuries, of the industrial nature of the site and of a range of other aspects of the Prison's working life.

THE UWA FREMANTLE PRISON PROJECT

The current project was in part intended to address some of the shortfalls in previous research at the site. It is a five year project commencing in 2013 with a broad framework designed to provide a consolidated overview of all aspects of the working life of the Prison, beyond the nineteenth-century convict period and the lived experience of prisoners. Aims were negotiated between the Discipline of Archaeology at UWA and heritage staff at the Prison, and were intended to meet the needs of both. It was agreed from the start that UWA would not provide general mitigation services and where these were needed the Prison would source them from appropriately qualified consultants. Instead, the MOU was designed to facilitate a research program that answered questions asked by both Prison staff and UWA archaeologists. The broad aim of the project was to understand the Prison holistically, addressing all aspects of its use from inception to closure. Specifically, the intention was to study the Prison beyond its use during the convict period in the nineteenth century. Within this broad aim, a number of specific functional processes were addressed, as follows:

- to use archaeology as a tool to allow the Prison to locate and investigate specific features within the bounds of the site and to enhance interpretation of those features;
- to conduct research on existing artefact assemblages collected as part of previous archaeological work carried out at the site;
- to link with the UWA archaeology undergraduate and post-graduate curriculum and provide training opportunities for UWA archaeology students;
- to develop a GIS for the Prison site that consolidated all known past maps and plans, and included information about all archaeological and conservation work conducted since 1991;
- to develop an archaeological management plan for the Prison; and
- to provide the Prison with the opportunity to target specific areas of the site for archaeological research in keeping with their management objectives.

To this end, a five-year research plan was developed (see Table 1) to address some of these aims. The intention from the outset was to conduct undergraduate and post-graduate field schools at the site and to provide research opportunities for students at honours, masters and PhD levels. In particular, the intention was for the research program to link into the 3rd year undergraduate *Field Methods* unit, and with the postgraduate *Masters of Professional Archaeology* (MPA) course. Field training is informed by the needs articulated by the discipline in Australia over the last decade (e.g. Ireland *et al.* 2013; Ulm

et al. 2013) and a pedagogical framework articulated in the international literature (e.g. Pyburn 2003; Mytum 2012). To date a two-week field school has been successfully run twice at the Prison, with a third iteration planned for 2015. Beyond this, however, targets suitable for a large field school excavation are limited and the material generated becomes a burden to the Prison's curation facilities.

The MPA course, however, has a smaller student cohort and is able to target more specific short-term needs at the Prison. For example, this program has been used to locate significant features such as a well in the Parade Ground which was successfully identified during 2013. The goals are to provide graduate students with the opportunity to hone their field techniques, to supervise and train a crew of unskilled undergraduates, and to gain experience writing and producing excavation and heritage management documents for the Prison. MPA student involvement does not stop in the field however. They have also participated in 100-hour placements with the Prison curatorial staff; primarily in the role of developing a comprehensive artefact database and treatment plans. To date the UWA MPA program has produced four excavation/management reports: Haast *et al.* (2013), Robertson and Haast (2013), and van Beek *et al.* (2014a, 2014b). Importantly this project is successfully run on a very low budget. One of the reasons for the Prison's willingness to develop a working relationship with UWA was their lack of budget to support research. UWA adopted an approach that facilitated quality research through the targeting of high quality students undertaking manageable projects within a larger consolidated framework. This approach has so far produced very good results on shoestring expenditure.

RESULTS

The project is successfully unearthing a range of information about the Prison, particularly in areas not previously subject to extensive investigation. The following is an overview of the range of projects carried out and individual publications expanding on each of these will be forthcoming.

Large-scale excavations have been conducted during two field schools. The first of these in 2013 successfully targeted the remains of the Prison bathhouse, built in 1855 and demolished during the 1940s (Figure 2). These demonstrated that the bathhouse had been significantly refurbished during the early twentieth century including the installation of new brick baths and a large boiler (van Beek *et al.* 2014a). The 2014 field school excavated the remains of a substantial limestone and brick chimney built in the late nineteenth century and demolished in the mid-twentieth century, used to vent gasses from the system of boilers in the engine house (van Beek *et al.* 2014b) (Figure 3). This excavation enabled the technology of the chimney and boiler to be reconstructed allowing a greater understanding of industrial processes at the site.

Table 1. Five year plan for archaeological research at Fremantle Prison

Year	Excavation area (Field school & MPA projects)	Survey/Building recording	Specific projects
2013	1850s Bathhouse part one	Women's Prison	– Underfloor deposits refractory cells – Development of archaeological GIS of entire prison
2014	Engine House	Refractory Cells	– Cell graffiti – Analysis of existing artefact assemblages – Underground tunnels – Archaeological management plan
2015	Wells and pumps – Exercise yard pump system/Exercise yard well	New Division part one	– Ground Penetrating Radar survey of the Prison yards
2016	Radiating exercise yard/prison drainage systems	New Division part two	– Target specific industrial aspects of the Prison
2017	TBD	Subsidiary buildings	– Analysis of data related to industrial aspects at the site



Figure 2: Subsurface remains of Prison bathhouse excavated during the 2013 field school.

Three research theses have also recently been completed. Mein (2012) used a fine grained examination of material recovered from under-floor and between-floor deposits in the main cell block to attempt to understand the life of incarcerated prisoners. She argued that prisoners used a range of coping strategies to deal with the boredom and monotony of prison life. Haast (2014) used two existing artefact assemblages excavated from within the Prison grounds to understand the impact of the convict system on the greater nineteenth-century Western Australian colonial economy. These demonstrated that both the Prison as an economic entity,

and individual wage earning officers employed by the convict system, accessed goods from the colonial economy but, as much of the goods purchased were imports, the capital used to purchase these left the colony rather than allowing the widespread development of industry. Finally, Romano (2015) examined twentieth-century graffiti within the Prison's main cell block. She showed that graffiti production was spatially influenced with more private messages placed in areas where they would be unobserved by guards and warders. Additionally, a GIS of the entire site, an Archaeological Management Plan, and a masters thesis examining underground tunnels at the site, are currently being undertaken.

Beyond these specific projects, a number of more general themes are also being examined, as follows.

Refuse disposal practices at the Prison

A range of excavations conducted in open areas of the Prison such as the Parade Ground have highlighted the practice of waste disposal within the bounds of the Prison walls during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Excavations throughout the Prison grounds have consistently located rubbish pits containing refuse from the kitchens, workshops and hospital. It would appear that for a time the Prison was in the practice of depositing waste material within the grounds rather than removing it to other locations. As well as rubbish pits, material was also deposited as backfill in privies, wells and cellars. Ash and charcoal from boilers and furnaces comprise a layer almost a metre thick in some places (Figure 4). Material recovered from these various rubbish contexts dates consistently from the 1890s to the 1920s, suggesting that



Figure 3: Students excavating the remains of a nineteenth-century chimney during the 2014 field school.



Figure 4: Ash and other rubbish layers seen in section during excavations in 2014.

the internal dumping of rubbish was a strategy employed only for a short period and based on economic restraints imposed by the end of the Convict System in 1886 (Haast 2014).

A similar process occurred during the 1940s when structures such as the Prison bathhouse (van Beek *et al.* 2014a) and a large chimney outside the 1890s engine house (van Beek *et al.* 2014b) were demolished. The remains of these structures were not removed from the site but simply spread and used as levelling within the grounds. Analysis of material from these rubbish contexts has provided a range of previously unknown information. Large amounts of faunal material deposited in the late nineteenth century have been interpreted by Haast (2014) as both relating to food consumption and to the use of animal products in industrial processes, such as the production of lye and soap. Other products both produced (e.g. shoes) and consumed (e.g. medicines) within the Prison have also been identified from these late nineteenth-century rubbish contexts. The 1940s demolition layers from the bathhouse and engine house chimney have allowed the technology of both to be reconstructed.

The Prison as industrial complex

A previously unexplored element of research has been the Prison's industrial history. From its opening in 1855 the Prison was not only a place of incarceration but also a place of industry. Workshops were built in the 1850s and used to train convicts in useful skills prior to their release (Bush 2012). After the end of the convict period in the 1880s these workshops moved to the production of a range of items including shoes, soap, and candles (Haast 2014) used within the Prison. Beyond that, however, convict labour improved infrastructure within the colony, and Fremantle operated as a public works prison throughout much of the nineteenth century. In particular, the digging of an extensive series of tunnels tapped a source of freshwater that supplied the entire town of Fremantle. Accessing this water required a sophisticated system of wells, pumps, boilers and associated infrastructure and recent work at the Prison (Haast *et al.* 2013; van Beek *et al.* 2014a, 2014b) has allowed the technology of these to be understood. There is significant scope for further investigation in this area.

CONCLUSION

Fremantle Prison is today a vibrant part of the tourist economy of Western Australia. As such, it maintains a high standard of quality as an interpretive site and museum. UWA's five year MOU with the Prison provides for opportunities to enhance

our understanding of this significant World Heritage resource, while contributing to a more complete and nuanced interpretation of the lives of people who lived and worked there. So far, the project has been extremely successful, allowing a range of research to be conducted across the Prison site and the entire temporal span of its use. Our on-going objectives are to focus on the stories that have yet to be told; of the Prison as a place for industrial production, as a dynamic and ever-changing economic engine, and as an environment for personal growth and expression even within the face of suppression. This cooperative agreement has far-reaching benefits. It helps broaden the students' engagement, builds their technical skills and abilities, enhances archaeological research and exhibits, helps clarify and prioritise management objectives, and ultimately enriches the visitors' experience.

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