St Helena Island

Chapters for the CyArk submission
CyArk is a digital archive of the world’s heritage sites for preservation and education. In 2017, staff from UQ and the Department of National Parks collaborated to create a submission for the Peel Island lazaret.

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The former penal settlement of St Helena, located in the homonymous island, lies within the waters of Moreton Bay, in South East Queensland, Australia.

Originally a quarantine station designed by notable architect Charles Tiffin in 1865, in 1867 it was converted into a prison in 1867, becoming Queensland’s highest security prison.

It was dismantled in 1933; today, the remaining buildings are one of the few examples of colonial-era architecture in the region and the island has now been converted in a national park.

After the prison was abandoned in 1933, many of the buildings were dismantled. This 3D model shows the remains of the original zones of the precinct: stockade, superintendent’s quarters, soldiers’ barracks and agricultural production areas.

### Description of the 3D model

After the prison was abandoned in 1933, many of the buildings were dismantled. This 3D model shows the remains of the original zones of the precinct: stockade, superintendent’s quarters, soldiers’ barracks and agricultural production areas.
A model colonial-era prison
St Helena Island is a former penal settlement located in Moreton Bay (Queensland). In operation between 1867 and 1933, it is the earliest attempt to create a reformative prison in colonial Australia. The prison complex was essentially self-sufficient and aimed to provide inmates with the opportunity for self-improvement and rehabilitation.

The prison was abandoned in 1933 and many of the buildings were dismantled. The island was used as a recreation area first and then as grazing land for cattle. In 1979, it became the first Historical National Park in Queensland. Today, the ruins of the stockade, wardens’ barracks and other secondary equipment are still standing, giving visitors today the opportunity to understand the functioning of a 19th century prison.

A significant site
For about 3000 years, the Quandamooka people of Moreton Bay used St Helena Island as a hunting and fishing area. Today there remains evidence of former aboriginal use providing a tangible link to this history including a shell midden and two areas of stone artefact scatters on the south-western beach ridges dated circa 1700 BCE. The first European sighting of the island took place in July 1799 by Matthew Flinders.

St Helena Prison is a protected heritage site under the Queensland Heritage Register since 1992. The island is associated with historical figures such as John McDonald, first Superintendent, Charles Tiffin, colonial architect, and William Hamilton and other strike leaders who were imprisoned here as a consequence of their roles in the Shearers’ Strike of 1891.

While St Helena is protected primarily for its cultural heritage values, the island is also significant in its biodiversity and ecosystems. St Helena Island is surrounded by Marine Park Green Zone, the area being included on the international Ramsar listing for its populations of migratory and resident shorebirds. The island is listed as part of the nationally significant Moreton Bay Aggregation wetlands under the International Directory of Important Wetlands and is home to endangered species such as dugongs and humpback dolphins.

Building the prison
In 1865, the Colonial government decided to build a quarantine station on St Helena Island. Construction commenced that same year following a design by architect Charles Tiffin. The station was built by prisoners from the prison hulk Proserpine, anchored in the mouth of the Brisbane River. The material used was mostly beachstone, a soft sedimentary rock found in parts of the island, which was dug out from the ground and let to harden under the sun. The lime for the mortar was produced on the island by burning crushed shells and coral in the lime kiln near the beach.

In 1867, the overcrowding of Brisbane prisons drove the decision for the St Helena quarantine station to be converted into a prison.
Life in the prison

Between 1867 and 1933, over 9000 men were incarcerated within its walls. Prisoners were racially segregated and they lived within the walled precinct of the stockade, which they only left to work in the nearby fields. The warders, superintendents and their families lived in several timber cottages scattered across the North and East of the island, of which a few brick chimneys and bathhouses remain.

Life in St Helena followed Colonial-era attitudes and practices on crime and punishment, which included lashing, isolation in underground cells and reduced meals. Nevertheless, following superintendent John McDonald’s (1867-1882) philosophy of self-improvement, living conditions were more humane that in previous Australian penal settlements: most prisoners were trained in different trades such as brickmaking, baking or blacksmithing, and were usually paid their wages at the end of their time in prison.

Financial hardships during the early colonial times meant that the penal settlement of St Helena needed to function as an independent self-sufficient unit. Economic activity, powered by forced convict labour, included agriculture with over 50 acres of land dedicated to the growing and processing of sugar cane, animal husbandry, brickmaking and manufacturing of clothes, rope and boots.

Preserving St Helena Island

St Helena Island has been regularly documented using laser scanning technology from 2012 until the present. Teams from the University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology and CSIRO work together with QPWS staff to document the site. St Helena Island National Park, established in October 1979, was Queensland’s first historic national park. The Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service works toward preserving the ruins and artefacts from further degradation and accurately presenting the park and its history to visitors.

Weathering is the greatest threat to the remaining fabric of the penal complex. Beachstone, or cay-stone, was the primary building material and was quarried from the island. It is soft, porous and consequently is very susceptible to the elements. Conservation of the cay stone walls has been undertaken using a variety of techniques. These include direct propping of walls, lime capping and constructing roofing over individual structures. The Stores Building, the largest original building on site, was protected by the installation of a floating roof structure in 2004. Several other structures suitable for similar works have been identified for future protection. These include the blacksmith shop and one of the remaining sugar silos.
References


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