



Historic Darlington, Maria Island

A brief history of Darlington

Maria Island was noted as the home of Aborigines during the visits of Cox in 1789 and Baudin in 1802. With an abundant supply of water, game and shellfish, the area (known by 1826 as Darlington) was probably first inhabited by the resident Aboriginal band — the *puthikwilayi*.

The European occupation of Darlington may conveniently be divided into four periods with interludes of leases.

The first convict era 1825–1832

Lt Peter Murdoch arrived as Commandant on 1 March 1825. Fifty convicts, military escorts and other officials completed the small agricultural settlement. Darlington was a depot for prisoners returned to authorities after having worked for settlers, or convicts guilty of light offences. It was a convenient location that dispersed convicts from Hobart and made distinct classes of convicts—the worst being sent to Macquarie Harbour on the west coast.

Initial problems included shortages of supplies, insolence and convicts attempting to escape, with Murdoch (in the absence of his Magisterial Commission) unable to dispense justice on the spot.

Lt Murdoch was replaced by Major T. D. Lord, a past associate of Lt Gov Arthur, as the new Commandant on 1 August 1825. It soon became clear that convicts



Darlington Photo: Joe Shemesh/Stormfront Productions

deliberately committed minor offences just to be sent to this island of 'ease and pleasure'. The island was to become notorious for convicts escaping by rafts or bark canoes. A number perished or gave themselves up, while a few (including George Lacey—a survivor of Brady's gang) ended life on the gallows.

If lax in discipline, Lord was effective in initiating trades, manufacturing processes or teaching useful skills like sawing and splitting. However, Lt Gov Arthur once evaluated Macquarie Harbour as 2½ times more productive than Maria Island!



The historic Commissariat Store erected late in 1825 to hold stores for the early convict station. Photo: Joe Shemesh/Stormfront Productions

Convict numbers were not large, and probably never much exceeded the 1828 figure of 145 prisoners.

Following a personal visit and scathing remarks concerning discipline and accommodation, Lt Gov Arthur commented that '... the main design had been a comfortable residence and agreeable pleasure grounds for the Commandant! ...' After this, a number of solid buildings were erected.

Behind the social life of the settlement, little dramas often eventuated and Major Lord had frequent disputes with his storekeepers, including Henry Condell, who was later Melbourne's first Lord Mayor.

Other major officials included Asst Surgeons and Religious Instructors (Catechists). Dr T. C. Brownell was both Catechist and Surgeon from August 1830 until the break-up of the settlement. This was on 1 October 1832, due to the success of Port Arthur and the ease of escape from Maria Island.

The second convict era 1842–1850

Besides leases involving the grazing of sheep, smuggling and whaling were active pursuits around the island before it was reported, in August 1841, to be a prospective Convict Probation Station. Within a year, convict tradesmen were sent to the island to prepare barracks etc. for 400 men. Samuel Lapham was appointed Asst Supt in charge. In August 1842, Capt George King was appointed Visiting Magistrate in charge of police and court affairs. A military detachment of two NCOs and 12 privates from the 96th Regt was sent to guard the station the following month and when the Rev Thomas Dove became chaplain a few months later, the settlement was fully into its stride.

Early in 1844, Dr T C Brownell returned as Surgeon and, later, as Magistrate. Rev Dove was removed and replaced by Rev Charles Dobson, who afterwards married Lapham's daughter, Frances.



Bernacchi Terrace houses (rear) Photo: Joe Shemesh/Stormfront Productions

February 1844 saw an attack on the military sentry, but the five offenders were soon captured. By the end of the year, convict numbers grew from 387 to 627, with prisoners mainly involved in agricultural activities.

James Boyd, one of the original wardens of Pentonville Prison, was appointed Snr Asst Supt, in May 1845 and an undercover report was published in England. Serious crimes listed included the bludgeoning of an officer and conspiracies to attack, shoot or poison officials, but details of homosexual activities were cut from the printed Parliamentary Paper.

A sombre incident of the period was the drowning of coxswain and crew. By contrast, an amusing event was a 'trap' which caught convicts making malt in the Hop House for the Magistrate's wife to brew beer! Early in 1846, a new Magistrate, the experienced Benjamin Bayly, was appointed. He died on 3 March 1850 and was buried in the cemetery. Dr Smart, the new

Surgeon, then became Visiting Magistrate. He was later Mayor of Hobart, besides being prominent in political, medical and cultural affairs.

In July 1846 an uproar was caused when the recently removed Asst Supt, Thomas Lafarelle wrote to Gladstone, the Archbishop of Canterbury and other dignitaries charging that officials 'passed over lightly' various 'indecent crimes'.

Five NZ Maoris were imprisoned on the island at the end of 1846 for 'open rebellion against the Queen'. One died, while the others returned to their homeland in March 1848.

In 1847, Darlington was cleared of all convicts to receive 369 prisoners, almost direct from England, under a new development in the convict system known as Task Work.

Early in November 1849, the Irish political prisoner, William Smith O'Brien (convicted of High Treason) was sent to the island. The friendship that developed with the Lapham family ultimately led to the dismissal of Lapham, due to his liberal treatment of O'Brien, who attempted to escape, and, possibly, to scandal associated with Lapham's daughter. O'Brien and the Lapham family were removed to Port Arthur on 21 August 1850.

Early in 1850, it was proposed to break up the station and numbers declined until the convict occupation of Maria Island was virtually over by the end of the year.

The first industrial era 1884–1896

Following intermittent leasing from 1852–1883 (mainly by Hamlet Fletcher and Thomas Dunbabin) the island interested the Italian entrepreneur, Diego Bernacchi, who saw a potential wine-making and silk industry.

On 17 April 1884, the Bernacchi family arrived to political controversy over their lease of 10 cents per year, under certain conditions. Vignerons arrived and by October 1886 thousands of vines were planted. Hundreds of Mulberry plants were thriving, and feted Members of Parliament surveyed the scene with satisfaction, while dining at night beneath a sky lit by fireworks and lanterns. The Maria Island Company was floated in 1887 to add agriculture, cement, timber and fishery to the enterprises already undertaken. Signor Bernacchi was resident Managing Director, and Darlington (renamed San Diego in 1888) became a bustling township of over 250 people with a school, shops, butcher, baker, blacksmith, shoemaker, post office, etc. Another year saw the first cement works and success of Maria Island wine at the Melbourne Centennial Exhibition. When the company went into liquidation in February 1892, Bernacchi resumed

possession of the island. A new Company was formed and soon founded, with most of the assets seized in November 1896. The family left for Melbourne, and later departed for London. San Diego once again became Darlington—a rustic retreat for a few holiday makers or the farming families that settled there.

The second industrial era 1920–1930

After World War I, Bernacchi's irrepressible urge to develop Maria Island resulted in the creation of a small company, registered in May 1920, which included Sir John Monash, a renowned soldier and engineer, as one of the Directors. The township and large limestone deposits were bought and Bernacchi's remaining stake in developments at Darlington was also purchased. National Portland Cement Ltd began preliminary excavations and milling of timber for the substantial construction works necessary. By early 1923, well over 150 men were employed, and Darlington was again a busy little township by the time the first shipment of machinery (worth around \$250,000) was landed at the new 640 ft (195 m) pier.

On 8 February 1924, the Cement Works were opened, with Bernacchi proudly present as his pioneering dreams were realised. However, with failing health, Bernacchi soon left for Melbourne, where he died a little over a year later with his illusion of success unspoiled by the economic realities that soon followed. Within months of cement leaving the island, the Company faced problems. The limestone cliffs included many sea-lilies unsuitable for making cement, and the 30,000 tons produced during 1924-25 had to be more than doubled to become financially worthwhile. The future of the Company looked shaky and prompted discussion during 1927. Two years later, a loss of \$200,000 and a bank overdraft of \$160,000 had to be faced. Employees were given notice to quit and the Company was taken over by the Australian Cement Company in 1930. Ordinary shareholders received 4 cents in the dollar and preferential shareholders 12 cents per dollar. The Great Depression had struck its first blow in Tasmania!

The population dwindled. Buildings were dismantled and removed. John Robey and Joseph French and Sons ran sheep and cattle on the island, with Darlington occupied mainly by the Howell family. Mrs Hunt lived in a house built over the old Visiting Magistrate's dwelling and operated the radio link with the mainland.

A national park

Following a brief attempt to revive the working of limestone deposits, the Government recognised the potential of the island, both as an historic site and a flora and fauna reserve. Properties were gradually acquired, until 1 June 1971, when the island was declared a Wildlife Sanctuary under the control of the Animals and Birds Protection Board. The National Parks and Wildlife Service was formed in November of that year, and assumed responsibility for the island, which was proclaimed a National Park on 14 June 1972. It is now managed by Tasmania's Parks and Wildlife Service.

Help us to look after Tasmania's cultural heritage

As you explore the Darlington area, please remember that all artefacts are protected in Historic Sites. Remains of brick, glass and china combine with other site elements to give clues to archaeologists about the lifestyles of the people who lived here, as well as the nature and extent of various structures. No artefacts should be removed from their location on the island.

Tasmania's Parks and Wildlife Service has an ongoing program of stabilisation, maintenance and restoration of the buildings and ruins. For the latest information on works planned or under way, consult one of the rangers on the island.

Maria Island National Park Office:
Phone (03) 6257 1420.



Bernacchi Terrace houses (front) Photo: Liz Wren, PWS

1 **Commissariat Store (1825)**

This is the oldest building on the island. Downstairs was the office, the provision store and the spirit room. Upstairs were stores belonging to the Ordinance Department. Three soldiers were posted here to protect valued possessions.

2 **Senior Assistant Superintendent's Quarters (1847)**

The Senior Assistant was responsible for solitary confinement of prisoners, mess arrangements, and the entire Probation Station when the superintendent was absent.

3 **Assistant Superintendent's Quarters (1849)**

The assistant superintendents were in charge of approximately 250 convicts. Initially three buildings were planned however one was never completed.

4 **School Master's House (1922)**

The resident teacher lived here but taught classes in an adjacent building. It is currently used as the Ranger Station.

5 **Bernacchi's Terraces one and two (1888)**

These two terraced cottages were established using bricks which were recycled when the Separate Apartments were pulled down. The buildings were constructed in the Victorian Georgian era with more emphasis placed on detailing. They were established after both convict periods by Diego Bernacchi, as accommodation for industrial workers in the first phase of development of the island.

6 **Oast House (1844)**

This Oast House is one of the oldest in the country. By 1847 it was producing three tonnes of hops per year. The two large brick drying towers with floors fitted with specially made ventilating tiles are still evident in the ruins.

7 **Officers' Quarters (1842), Smith O'Briens's (1842), Roman Catholic Clergyman's Quarters (1849)**

These terraced, single storey buildings reflect the Victorian/Georgian era in design. The Officers quarters were originally built to house the assistant superintendents. Smith O'Brien's cottage was occupied by the Irish political prisoner, William Smith O'Brien, before he was transferred to Port Arthur. The Roman Catholic Clergyman's house was the last addition to this row of houses.

8 **Chapel/Dayroom (1847)**

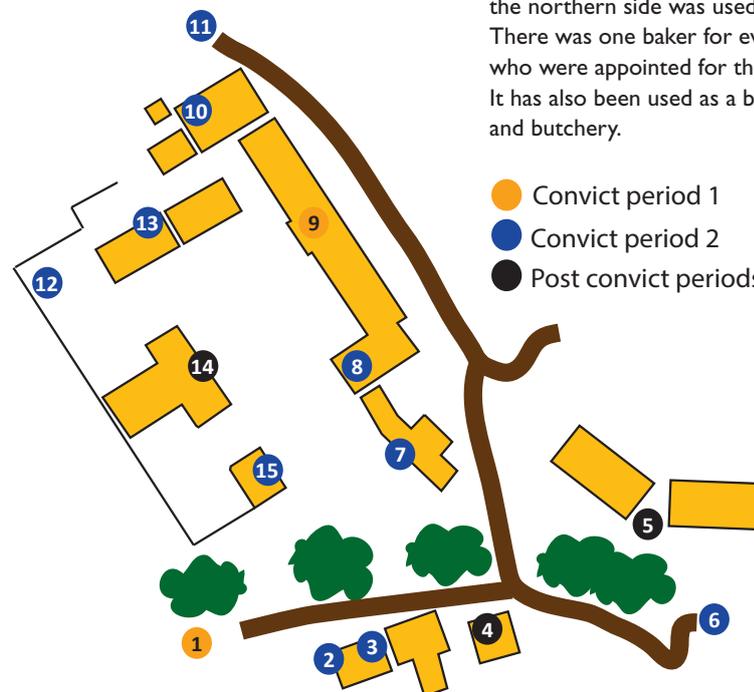
The Chapel and Dayroom was erected to provide a place for convicts to work during wet weather, as well as both the Sunday services for Protestants. Over the years this building has also been used as a school, cinema, church, shearing shed and a community hall.

12 **Bread Store (1842)**

Once used as a Bread Store and Cookhouse, this was the main cooking facility for hundreds of convicts. It was converted to a public toilet in the 1970s.

13 **Bakehouse and Clothing Store (1843)**

The southern half of this Victorian style building was used as a clothing store whilst the northern side was used as a bakehouse. There was one baker for every 150 convicts, who were appointed for their good behaviour. It has also been used as a blacksmith's shop and butchery.



9 **Penitentiary (1830)**

One of the few buildings that remain from the first convict period, the Penitentiary was established using 200,000 bricks. Initially there were only five dormitories and a laundry. In the second convict period the prisoners occupied 292 berths 'like bottles in a bin' with 66 men in each room. The convicts slept in a triple tiered system of hammocks—resembling a triple bunk bed.

6 **Oast House (1844)**

10 **Mess Hall**

Up to 400 first and second class convicts gathered in this building at meal times, sitting at twenty tables. These convicts were permitted the privilege of eating with cutlery. The third class convicts ate in the open courtyard, whilst the fourth class convicts ate in their separate apartments. Neither class was permitted eating utensils. The Mess Hall was a versatile building: it was also used as a school room and Roman Catholic Chapel on Sundays.

7 **Officers' Quarters (1842), Smith O'Briens's (1842), Roman Catholic Clergyman's Quarters (1849)**

11 **Brickfields**

The Brickfields region features the Workers Cottage, the Engineers Residence and the Engine House, plus many other structures including a tramway. Most of these constructions date around the Bernacchi Period, between the 1890s and the 1920s.

14 **The Coffee Palace (1888)**

Built by the Maria Island Company, the Coffee Palace had two dining rooms and a lounge at the front of the building. The rear of the house was used as living quarters and also contained a kitchen. The term Coffee Palace was a name commonly used to describe a type of restaurant.

15 **Visiting Magistrate's Office (1842)**

This building was constructed as the administrative centre for the Probation Station. It was here that convicts were also tried for minor offences. In following years it was used as a shop and Post Office.

AUSTRALIAN CONVICT SITES

Darlington Probation Station is one of 11 historic sites that together form the Australian Convict Sites World Heritage Property.



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Australian Convict Sites
inscribed on the World
Heritage List in 2010

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment



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