

Fremantle Prison excavation denotes incarcerated racial divide

August 27 2015, by Rob Payne



Euro-Australian inmates gained skills in areas such as plumbing, the use of drilling machines and engineering, which could help them transition back into the community. Credit: Wouter J. Boers

Archaeological work at Fremantle Prison is helping illuminate significant differences in how early Swan River Colony administrators treated Aboriginal and Euro-Australian inmates.

Since 2013, University of Western Australia scientists Dr Sean Winter and Associate Professor Thomas Whitley have led excavations of the prison's parade ground, original bath house and former engine house.

Home to the prison's industrial complex, the engine house played a significant economic role in the colony during the 19th century and was a pathway for inmates to reintegrate into the community.

During the [19th century](#) the prison only housed Euro-Australian inmates with Aboriginal convicts sent to Wadjemup (Rottnest Island) until 1903.

"Fremantle Prison had boundaries that were explicit and enforced, but it also acted as a centrepiece of a spatially distributed system of labour control across Western Australia," A/Prof Whitley says.

"Inmates could anticipate the possibility of work release as ticket-of-leave men, whereby they could live under limited restrictions at satellite locations throughout WA, and work in paid tasks as labourers.

"Their ability to become ticket-of-leave men was directly related to the skills they had, the demand for such skills outside the prison and their behaviour while incarcerated."

Engine house excavations turned up a Schwoerer superheater and boiler piping from a pumping system installed in 1898 capable of pumping 284,000 litres/hour—a vast leap from the hand-pumps used prior to 1892.

"The steam engines and boilers were highly technical—equivalent to the computer systems of their day," A/Prof Whitley says.

"The prisoners who gained the skills of operating this machinery were in high demand for C.Y. O'Connor's Goldfields Water Supply Scheme."

Started in 1899, O'Connor's project involved constructing a dam, pipeline and eight pumping stations to deliver water to Eastern Goldfields mining communities.

White prisoners trained in machinery use for community benefit

Euro-Australian inmates gained skills in areas such as plumbing, the use of drilling machines and engineering, which helped them transition back into the community.

However, Aboriginal inmates were denied such opportunities on Wadjemup where no skills training existed, something A/Prof Whitley says shows a form of social control and exclusion.

"Our documentary knowledge of the institutional structure of the penal system, in which reform and redemption played a substantial role, has little explanation for [Aboriginal] treatment," A/Prof Whitley says.

"Those travelling to Wadjemup—a forbidden place to most Aboriginals—were not expected to return, much like the convicts transported to Australia from England."

Researchers expect the ongoing project to identify more archaeological expressions of these different human experiences.

Provided by Science Network WA

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