

An Archaeology of Aboriginal Agency at Wadjemup Rottnest Island Prison and Forced Labour Camp, 1838-1931

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island People May Find Content Distressing

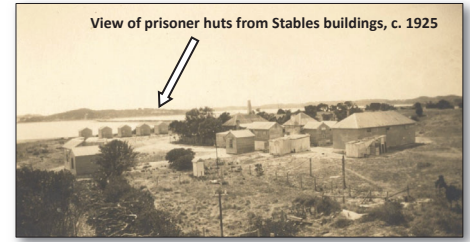
Australia's largest death-in-custody site

State records show ~3700 Aboriginal men and boys were imprisoned on Wadjemup.

At least 373 people died in custody and are buried in the Wadjemup Aboriginal Burial Ground.



The place across the water



For most of its history, Wadjemup was a low ridge with ancestral Noongar activity evidenced as stone artefacts found in 17,000 - 27,000-year-old sediments. About 6,000 years ago, rising seas made Wadjemup an island, which people no longer visited but maintained in Lore as "the place across the water where the spirits are". After British invasion, as the colonial frontier expanded, at least 3700 Aboriginal men and boys from across Western Australia were sent there as prisoners from 1838 to 1903, and as forced labourers until 1931.

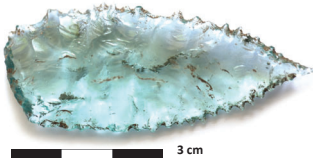
Archaeology and Agency

Wadjemup's prison history featured inhuman conditions, disease, and cultural shock. But prisoners had days off when they fished and hunted, made artefacts, and sustained culture. In 2020, Rottnest Island Authority, consulting with the Wadjemup Aboriginal Reference Group and UWA, initiated work that uses archaeology as a primary source of evidence of prisoner agency and adaptation - and heritage more broadly. In 2023 we investigated *Aboriginal Place ID 3784 Rottnest: Stables*. This area connects to the Settlement via a limestone causeway and consists of a salt works (1869-1902), and early 20th century labour camp - including 6-9 wooden prisoner huts. Guided by magnetometer and Ground Penetrating Radar, we excavated ~45 m² in seven locations, yielding thousands of artefacts.

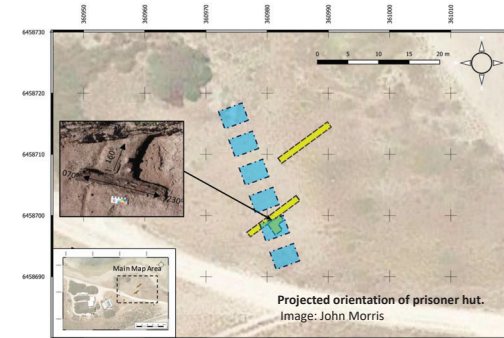


A Kimberley Connection?

An exceptional find was a 6.0 cm Kimberley point made from blue-green glass. This find adds to more than 10 points or broken points found previously at The Stables. This culturally-specific artefact concentration suggests this was a 'Kimberley area' where men congregated during the prison phase. Kimberley points are potent and required cultural safety protocols for all fieldwork participants.



Excavation at Trench 3 with inset map of Stables 3784



Projected orientation of prisoner hut. Image: John Morris

Prison Artefacts

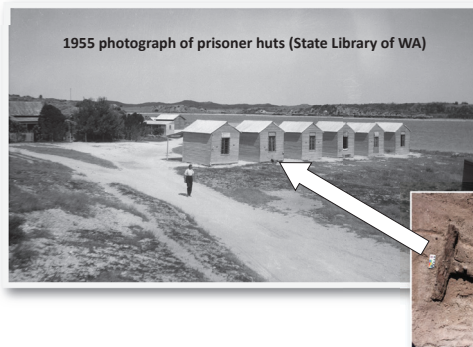
A wooden joist bolted into the ancient lake-bed rocky sub-stratum is thought to be a prisoner hut footing. This interpretation is supported by historic photographs and associated domestic items: a clay pipe, buttons, and glass. The joist is a rare prison-diagnostic find - others being uniform buttons and small metal 'prisoner discs' like ones found at Fremantle Prison.

Foodways

Chosen foods also give insights into agency, and we are identifying faunal remains to determine what kinds of fish were preferred, and if the sheep and quokka bones support records of prisoners working as stockmen of a small sheep herd and hunting quokka. Cowrie shells also found were not processed and perhaps were collected for aesthetic reasons.



Faunal remains and glass from Trench 4



1955 photograph of prisoner huts (State Library of WA)

Whose Heritage?

Western Australia has three heritage laws - Maritime Archaeology Act 1973; Heritage Act 2018 & Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (and, briefly, the repealed Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2021).

Aboriginal people built structures like houses and probably the causeway connecting the Stables to the Settlement.

Under which Act does their labour fall?

Truth and Reconciliation

We will continue our collaborative 'archaeology of agency' to understand people's lived experiences. We do this in the spirit of truth-telling and reconciliation, noting how recent these events are - one project participant's great-uncle was the last prisoner to be released on 9th December 1931.

References

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- Stasiuk, Glen and Lily Hibberd. 2017. *Rottnest or Wadjemup: Tourism and the forgetting of Aboriginal Incarceration and the pre-colonial history of Rottnest Island*. In: Jacqueline Wilson et al. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism*. London: Palgrave.
- Ward, Ingrid, et al. 2016 Chronostratigraphic context for artefact-bearing palaeosols in late Pleistocene Tamala limestone, Rottnest Island, Western Australia. *Journal of the Royal Society of Western Australia* 99:17-26.