

FREMANTLE PRISON



KEY TO  
KNOWLEDGE

BUILDING THE  
*Convict*  
ESTABLISHMENT



FREMANTLE PRISON  
The Convict Establishment

# BUILDING THE *Convict* ESTABLISHMENT



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KNOWLEDGE

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Research and Text: Luke Donegan  
Design: Axiom Design Partners  
Text editing: Maia Frewer, Oonagh Quigley

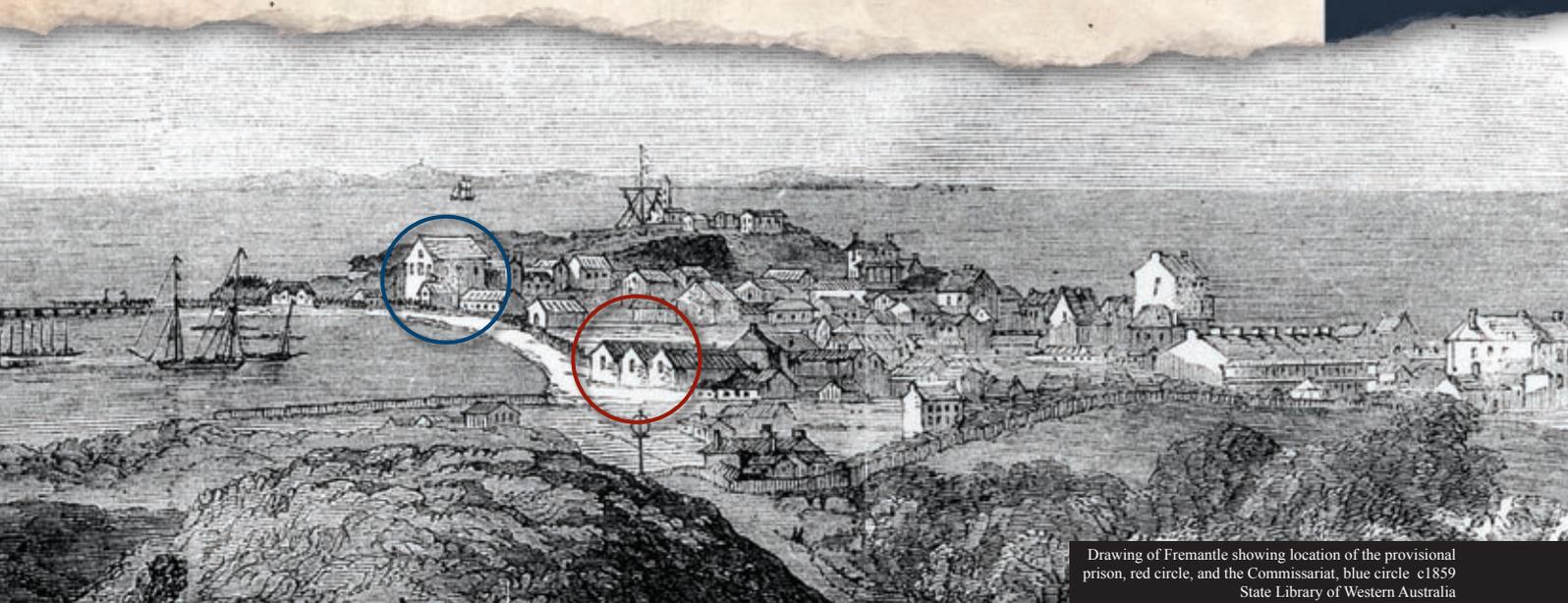
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#### Front cover illustration:

Officers' quarters and guardroom, convict prison, Fremantle - detail 1859, Henry Wray (1824-1900)  
National Library of Australia

# THE PROVISIONAL DEPOT



Drawing of Fremantle showing location of the provisional prison, red circle, and the Commissariat, blue circle c1859  
State Library of Western Australia

**In June 1850, the first convict transport ship the *Scindian* arrived at Fremantle. On board were Royal Engineer Captain Edmund Henderson and his family, the Superintendent of Convicts Thomas Hill Dixon, 75 male convicts, some warders, and 50 Pensioner Guards.**

Because the *Scindian* had overtaken the ship carrying the news of the transport's arrival, no-one knew they were coming. There was no welcoming party and no prison large enough to hold the convicts.

Henderson rented a warehouse on the beachfront at South Beach from the harbourmaster. The convicts slept aboard the *Scindian* for another three weeks while the warehouse was converted into a temporary prison. Henderson wasted no time. Within three weeks a 10 foot wall had been built around the building, and sleeping hammocks for 168 prisoners had been installed. A kitchen, laundry and toilets, plus two extra cell blocks to hold an extra 360 prisoners had also been built.

The provisional depot was a temporary prison while the main prison was being constructed. The convicts stayed here for five years before they were moved into the new prison on the hill behind Fremantle.

In the first year of transportation, four ships unloaded 676 convicts. In 1850 before the convicts arrived, Fremantle had a population of less than 500 people. Very soon the number of convicts outnumbered the free settlers.

Because of the convicts the amount of supplies arriving at Fremantle from England greatly increased. Once the provisional depot was built, Henderson built a commissariat store to hold supplies including food and building materials. Today this building is the Shipwrecks Gallery at the Western Australian Museum – Maritime.

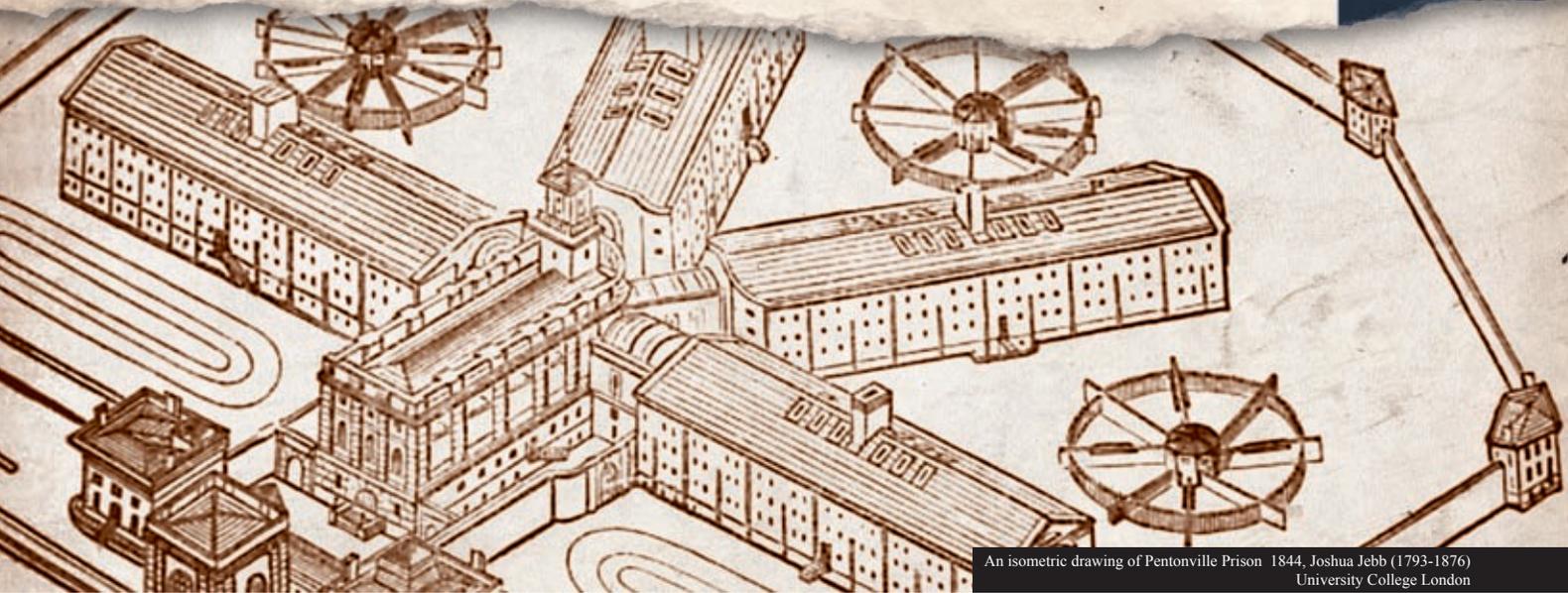
The convicts also built a new jetty on Anglesea Point called the South Bay Jetty, or Short Jetty. A cart shifted cargo from the convict ships to the Commissariat along a wooden railway track. In the space of a few short months the first convicts had started to transform the colony.



View of the convict built Commissariat and the Short Jetty c1870s  
Fremantle Local History Collection



# BUILDING THE PRISON



An isometric drawing of Pentonville Prison 1844, Joshua Jebb (1793-1876) University College London

**The site of Fremantle Prison was originally chosen for its proximity to the town below and the harbour. Its elevated location caught the fresh sea winds which, it was believed, would help prevent disease. The limestone ridge above Fremantle town was levelled and the stone used in construction of the buildings.**

Comptroller-General Edmund Henderson reported on the location to his superior in London:

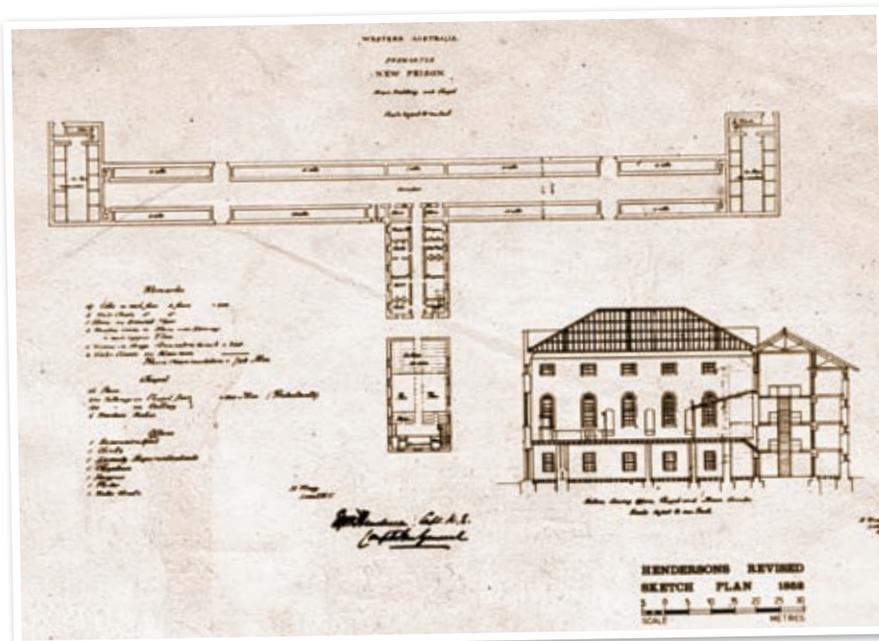
*[t]he site proposed is in every way well suited for the purpose; it is a healthy and elevated spot - removed from the business part of the town, and within convenient distance of the harbour; in the improvement of which there will be the employment for the Prisoners for many years after the Government works are complete.*

Comptroller-General's report, 1 January 1851

Henderson submitted his plan for the Convict Establishment to Joshua Jebb, Director of Convict Prisons in 1851, based on Jebb's own design for the Pentonville Prison.

The original plans included the two diagonal cell blocks similar to those at Pentonville. These however were omitted from Jebb's revision of the plans as they were considered to be too expensive. The linear range was increased to 500 feet in length and four stories – once built this would be the longest and tallest cellblock in the southern hemisphere. Once the final plans were approved and Captain Henry Wray arrived with the Royal Engineers, the building project began.

The first part of the establishment constructed was a graded limestone-capped slope leading from the town up to the building site. This ramp later became Fairbairn Street. A tramway linked the ramp to the Commissariat on Anglesea Point.



Left: A sketch plan of Fremantle Prison and Chapel, revised by Captain Henderson 1852 Fremantle Local History Collection

# ACCOMMODATION FOR PRISON OFFICERS



Officers' quarters and guardroom, convict prison, Fremantle 1859, Henry Wray (1824-1900)  
National Library of Australia

**Paid accommodation was very expensive in Fremantle and one of Henderson's first priorities was to build prison-owned accommodation for his warders. Three sets of warder's cottages were planned and built out of limestone at the bottom of the ramp. The cottages formed the frontage of the convict grant along Henderson Street.**

The first set of cottages was completed in 1851. These were built to accommodate the warders with large families – however, two sets of families had to share each cottage leading to overcrowding and discomfort.

Henderson reserved a plot of land for himself to the south of the prison buildings, set apart from the other accommodations. The Knowle, designed by Henderson and built for his family, was completed in 1853. From the verandas of this majestic, spacious building Henderson could survey the entire convict range and observe the comings and goings of convicts and warders along the ramp and around the prison site.

In 1867 after Henderson returned to England the Knowle became a convict invalid depot, then in 1897 the Fremantle Hospital. The building remains intact and can still be seen within the grounds of Fremantle Hospital today.

The frontage of the prison, now known as The Terrace, was originally called The Esplanade. During the 1850s four main houses as well as the gatehouse were constructed on The Terrace. These provided accommodation for the senior officers including the Superintendent, the Deputy Superintendent, the Chaplain, and the Surgeon Superintendent.

These grand buildings helped confirm the officers' high status in the society of the colony. The houses continued to accommodate staff until the 1960s when they were taken over by the expanding prison administration.

On the northern end of The Terrace a guardroom was constructed in 1857 to accommodate 19 men. Charles Nicolay who was the prison's chaplain from 1878 to 1893 started a geological collection of rocks and minerals which he kept in the old guard's quarters at number 2. His rocks were moved to the Old Perth Gaol in 1889 and this collection formed the beginning of the Western Australian Museum.

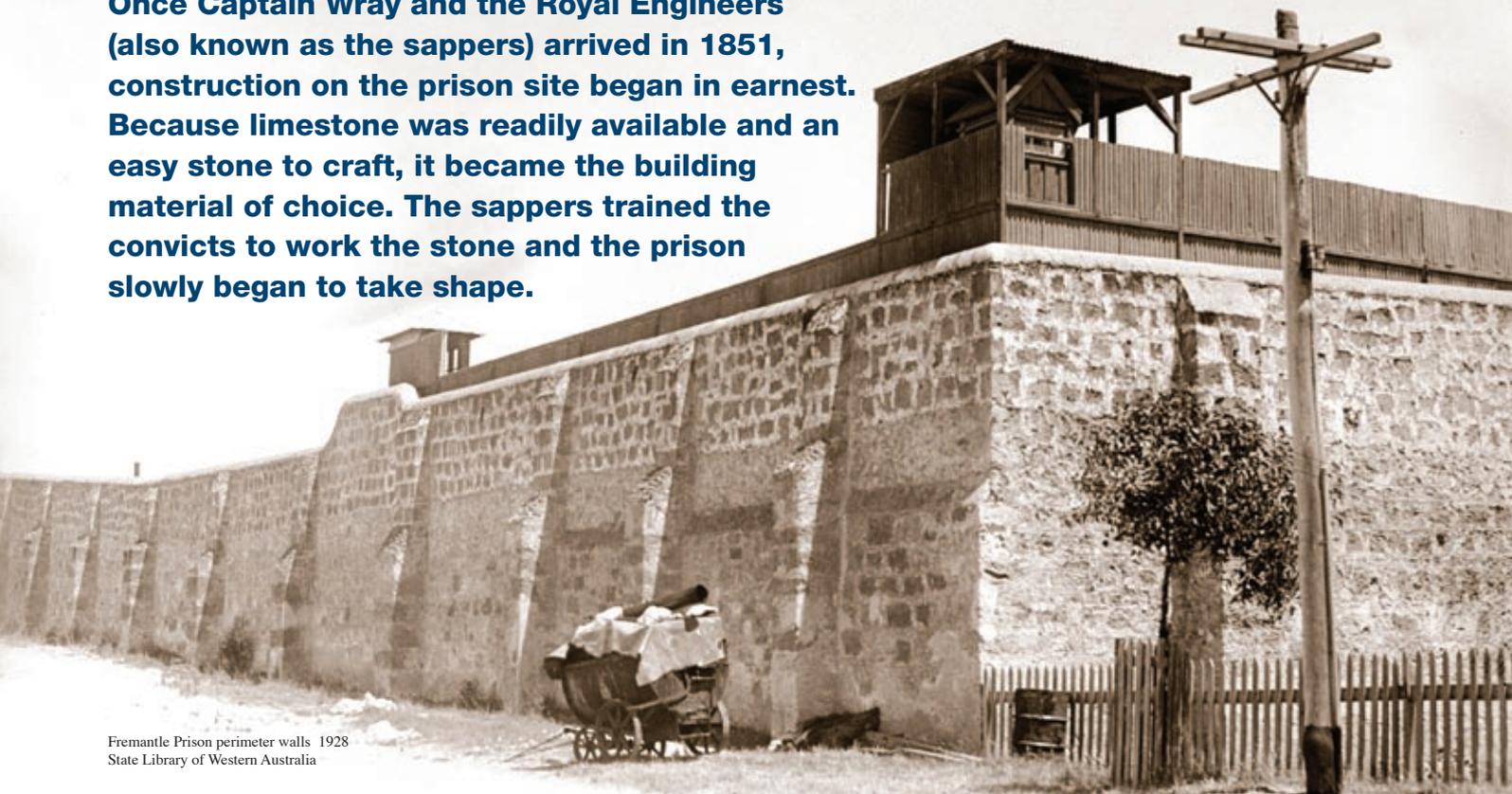
The arrival of convicts during the first few years of transportation to Western Australia and the building projects they completed both on the prison site and in the settlement transformed Fremantle from a small village into a town. The size and luxury of these prison accommodations were a clear indication of the social structure of the Convict Establishment, as well as the position of the prison officers in Fremantle society. The largest building of them all, the Main Cell Block, was yet to be completed. Despite its grandeur and size, the convicts who were to be accommodated here were at the bottom of the social ladder.



Left: The Knowle c1890s  
Fremantle Local History Collection

# PERIMETER WALLS

**Once Captain Wray and the Royal Engineers (also known as the sappers) arrived in 1851, construction on the prison site began in earnest. Because limestone was readily available and an easy stone to craft, it became the building material of choice. The sappers trained the convicts to work the stone and the prison slowly began to take shape.**



Fremantle Prison perimeter walls 1928  
State Library of Western Australia

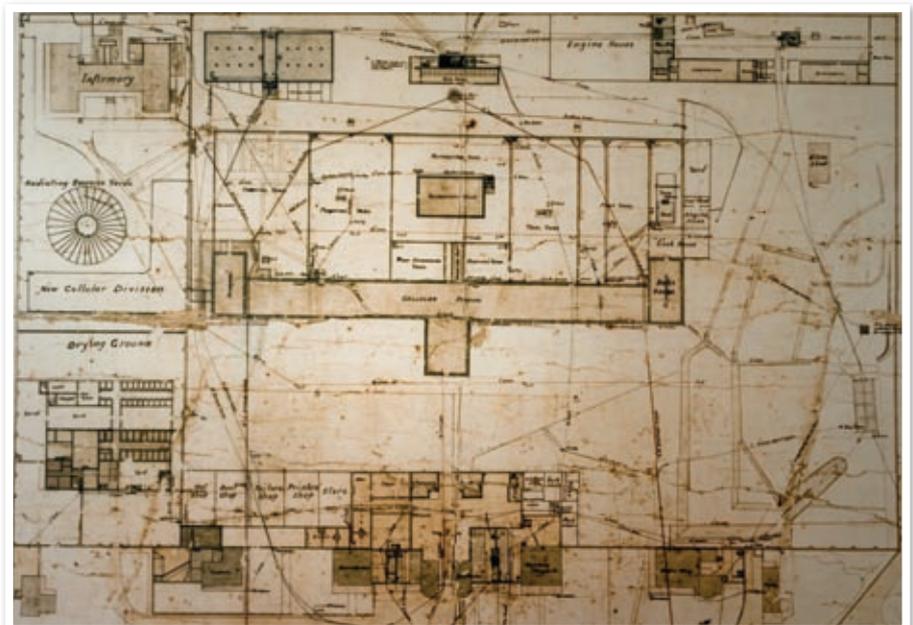
In 1853 work on the perimeter walls began and these were completed two years later. The walls were built of solid limestone, eighteen inches thick and fifteen feet high. The walls formed a perfect rectangle with only one opening at the main gatehouse in the centre of the western wall (as compared with the six major openings that can be found in the walls today).

While the site for the Main Cell Block was levelled and excavated, the perimeter walls were built to follow the natural contours of the land. As such they provide a clear indication of the original contours of the location, most dramatically along the southern wall. This wall graphically demonstrates the extent of the excavation work completed by the convict labourers in preparing the ground for the Main Cell Block. The walls were extensively rebuilt and widened after a mini tornado knocked down much of their length in 1856.

Henry Wray described the incident in his diary:

*About 5:30pm yesterday, a whirlwind passed over the prison premises from, north to south-east and has done damage to a large extent ... tearing off branches from the trees and carrying everything it came across up to a great height in its vortex. As soon as it reached the prison wall, nearly the whole of the northern boundary 150 yards long, 20 feet high and in some places two feet six inches thick, was laid perfectly flat, turning over on its side like a hinge.*

Henry Wray, Personal diary 1856



Right: Site plan for Fremantle Prison c1910s  
Fremantle Prison Collection

# THE ENTRY COMPLEX



Three warders outside gatehouse c1912  
Fremantle Prison Collection

**The entry complex was built between 1854 and 1855, including the gatehouse with its two towers on either side of the main gate, the entry courtyard and the two guard houses flanking the inner Wray Gates. The gatekeeper lived in the ground floor of the northern gatehouse building. The Deputy Superintendent lived in the upper floors of the two towers.**

The main gate was installed in 1855, and the tower clock, made in London in 1854, arrived and was installed above the main gate in 1856. The gatehouse was designed to look like an English fortress to make the settlers feel protected from the convicts on the inside.

In 1854 the guardhouses flanking the inner iron gates were completed. The northern gate was occupied by the military and the southern by the civilian warders. The guardrooms were manned to defend the gatehouse area against attack from both inside and outside the prison.

Rifles positioned in the slot windows could fire upon anyone threatening the prison. The slot design allowed guards inside to manoeuvre and aim their rifles while having maximum protection.

# WORKSHOPS, HOSPITAL AND SERVICES



Fremantle Prison Hospital c1970  
Fremantle Local History Collection

**The prison needed more than just cells in which to lock up prisoners. It also needed buildings in which to cook food, do laundry, care for the sick, and provide work for the convicts.**

The services building was constructed in the northwest corner of the prison site and completed in 1855. The building included:

- a kitchen with four boilers, a scullery, a pantry, a cool room and adjacent stores – the kitchen was capable of feeding up to 1,000 convicts three meals a day
- a bakehouse and ovens, with a storeroom for flour and another for bread
- a washhouse, laundry and drying room.

Once the establishment became a colonial prison in 1886 the services building was converted into a women's prison and the above services moved to other areas on the prison site.

The east workshops consisted of the blacksmiths shop, built in 1852, and a carpenters' shop, built in 1858. Woodwork and metalwork used in the construction of the prison was prepared in the workshops. The east workshops were the prison's earliest attempt to provide the convicts with training in preparation for re-entering the community.

The hospital was one of the last buildings to be constructed during the convict era. Construction commenced with the laying of the foundations in 1857, plans were altered in 1858 with the addition of another six wards and construction completed in December 1859. The additional wards allowed prisoners with contagious diseases to be quarantined. It also meant violent prisoners could be segregated from others.

The finished building included a general ward for thirty patients, fever and ophthalmic (diseases of the eye) wards for ten patients each, four observation wards for single patients, two skin diseases wards for three patients each, as well as a kitchen, scullery, bathroom, store, medical store, surgery and dead-house, and five toilets.<sup>1</sup>

While the support infrastructure and buildings were vital to the functioning of the Convict Establishment, they paled in comparison to Henderson and Wray's main project, the building of the Main Cell Block itself.

<sup>1</sup> Memorandum of Buildings, Royal Engineers Office, Fremantle, 1860

# THE MAIN CELL BLOCK

## BUILDING THE SOUTHERN WING

**Limestone was excavated from the site and shaped by the convicts. Stone too soft for building was used as landfill throughout Fremantle to fill in swampy ground. Once all the good stone was excavated from the prison site, other quarries were opened up, including one at the base of Arthur Head. Wells forty foot deep were sunk to provide working convicts with fresh water.**

In 1853 works on the southern wing of the Main Cell Block began. By the following year the masonry work on the southern wing was almost complete. The convicts had also almost completed eighteen cells in the Refractory Block (solitary confinement) and its surrounding wall. In 1855 the southern wing was completed including the two southern association wards. A circular stairwell made of jarrah was built to gain access to the upper association ward.

While the southern wing was being constructed, a short-term wooden division was built in the parade ground to accommodate convicts during the construction phase.

Henderson ordered iron fittings for the gallery guardrails and doors from England in 1852. However, by 1855 the iron still had not arrived. Keen for his convicts to move into the prison, Henderson ordered that iron be scavenged from the convict transport ships and refashioned into doors and gallery railings. The original railings still exist and can be seen in the southern wing. Where the two-rail railings end in 2 division and the five-rail railings begin marks the limit of the southern wing building project.



Inside the Main Cell Block, 2 division 2005, Roel Loopers  
Fremantle Prison Collection

On 1 June 1855 the convicts moved from the provisional depot on South Beach into the southern wing. Henderson had been waiting five years for this day – his words below suggest a sense of excitement and pride in what had been accomplished:

*The removal of prisoners from the old hired buildings, which were low and surrounded by swamp, to the airy, well-ventilated new prison is most beneficial in every way both as regards discipline and health.<sup>2</sup>*

*The convict bends to his task, quarrying stone and lime. He reaches to the earth, bowing in obedience and submission to the land. His workmates are the blinding summer light, enervating heat and alkaline limestone that burns and scours the skin. He is entrapped by a grim task, literally hewing from a stony outcrop a place that will serve as a scene of punishment.*

Trinca, M. *Convicts and the Construction of Controlling Space in Western Australia*, 1993, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Henderson 1855, quoted in Ayris, C. *Fremantle Prison: A brief history*, 1995, p. 15.

# THE MAIN CELL BLOCK



Convict Prison, Fremantle – detail 1859, Henry Wray (1824-1900)  
National Library of Australia

## BUILDING THE NORTHERN WING

**The end of 1856 saw the foundations of the northern wing laid and two fifths of the masonry completed. At this stage the Royal Engineers were called away to fight in the Crimean War. Henderson was in England on leave and Captain Wray stayed behind as Acting Comptroller-General to see the construction completed.**

During the following year the convicts completed the masonry works on the northern wing, constructed the basement, slated the roof and paved the corridor. Whereas the southern wing had been paved with Yorkshire flagstone, the northern wing was paved instead with a hard limestone quarried locally in North Fremantle. A sunken area for light and ventilation surrounded the basement. Because the basement was the coolest location in the prison it was used as the storage area. The morgue next door was constructed with a barrel vault ceiling and designed to store corpses waiting burial or post-mortem investigations by the prison's surgeon.

Henderson's original plans for the prison had focused on single cells. He believed that keeping the prisoners separate would help prevent the development of a 'criminal brotherhood'. However, while Henderson was in England, Captain Wray came under pressure from the Governor to increase the number of prisoners the prison could hold. His solution was to build larger cells on the upper levels of the northern wing.

In 1857 he reported:

*In constructing the upper tier of cells it was considered desirable to throw 2 cells into 1 in order to accommodate 3 men in each, 24 cells are thus formed giving increased room for 24 men; 6 cells on each floor have also been converted into 2, each holding 5 men, affording increased accommodation for 16 men.<sup>3</sup>*

While packing more men into the same space solved his accommodation problems, it did nothing for the wellbeing of the prisoners.

As Acting Comptroller-General, Henry Wray was responsible for all costs and building budgets. In 1857 it became clear that the building project was running over budget. Back in 1851 Wray had surveyed the site without the help of a theodolite which resulted in the southern wing being six feet longer than planned. To keep the prison symmetrical, he had added an extra six feet to the northern wing, making the prison twelve feet longer than originally intended. This extra length however helped Wray to increase the accommodation of the prison.



The restored Main Cell Block, 2007  
Fremantle Prison Collection

## COMPLETION OF THE MAIN CELL BLOCK

**By 1856 the Refractory Block was completed and work began on excavating the exercise yards from the hillside behind the prison. These were completed and walled the following year. In 1858 stairs were built and the northern wing fitted out with guard railings and doors. By December 1859, Henderson had returned from England and the prison was officially completed.**

After 10 years of planning and building, the establishment was ready to receive more convicts from England. The Main Cell Block was designed to hold 882 men, or up to 1,000 men if required.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, in 1860 the grand total of new convicts to arrive in the colony numbered only one. Economic uncertainty temporarily stopped convicts being sent to Western Australia. This would have been a major disappointment to Henderson and Wray who, after years of work, must have felt it had all been in vain. However, by 1861 the transportation of convicts had begun again and Captains Henderson and Wray were able to shift their attention to other building projects that were required throughout the colony.

<sup>3</sup> Wray, H. 1857, reported in Kerr, J. *Fremantle Prison: A policy for its conservation*, 1998, p. 51

<sup>4</sup> Trinca, M. *Convicts and the Construction of Controlling Space in Western Australia*, 1993, p. 23