

FREMANTLE PRISON



KEY TO  
KNOWLEDGE

*Convict*  
DAILY LIFE



FREMANTLE PRISON  
The Convict Establishment



# Convict

## DAILY LIFE



KEY TO  
KNOWLEDGE

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#### Front cover illustration:

Flogging Prisoners, Tasmania - detail c1850s, James Reid Scott (1839-1877)  
National Library of Australia



# DAILY ROUTINE

Daily life for the convicts was strictly controlled and defined by routine. One day melted into the next with little change to mark the passing of time. The table below shows the daily routine for convicts in 1855.

4.30am	Wake up bell
4.45am	Convict cells unlocked
5.25am	Officers and convicts muster in Parade Ground
5.30am	Convicts to work
7.27am	Return from work to breakfast in cells
8.00am	Sick parade (small bell)
8.10am	Morning prayers (small bell)
8.25am	Convicts to work
11.57am	Bell rung to leave off work
12.00 noon	Muster
12.15pm	Dinner in exercise yard or at work site (small bell)
1.55pm	Convicts to work
5.50pm	Bell rung to leave off work
6.00pm	Supper in cells
7.15pm	Night officers' parade
7.30pm	Bell rung for day officers to leave the prison

Muster was when the convicts were assembled so that they could be checked off to make sure no-one was missing. In 1855 most of the convicts would have worked on the prison site building the prison. After the prison was completed in 1859, many of the convicts worked on building projects in Fremantle and Perth and out in the country building roads.

## RULES

At the Convict Establishment there were strict rules which the convicts had to obey. In 1851, the year after the convicts first arrived at Fremantle, the rules were as follows:

No prisoner shall disobey the orders of the overseer or any other officer ... or be guilty of swearing, or any indecent or immoral expression or conduct, or of any assault, quarrel, or abusive language, or smoking inside the ward, cell, privy cookhouse, washhouse, or workshops, or any talking or other noise during meal-hours, or after the silence-hours at night; leaving the square allotted as their exercise-ground on any pretence, except to the closet, or converse or hold intercourse with any other prisoner or tradesman employed about the yard, except as authorised by the prison rules, or cause annoyance or disturbance by singing, whistling, or making unnecessary noise, or pass or attempt to pass, without permission, out of his ward or beyond the bounds of the ward or other place to which he may belong, or when at work go without leave beyond the limits assigned for such work, or disfigure the walls or other parts of the prison by writing on them or otherwise, or deface, secrete, destroy, or pull down any paper or notice hung up by authority in or about any part of the prison, or wilfully injure any bedding or other articles, or commit any nuisance, or have in his bay or possession any articles not furnished by the establishment or allowed to be in the possession of a prisoner, or shall give or lend to or borrow from any other prisoner any food, book, or other articles without leave, or refuse or neglect to conform to the rules and regulation or orders of the prison, or otherwise offend.

*Rules and Regulations for the Convict Department Western Australia, 1862.*

If a convict disobeyed any of these rules he was quickly punished.



# CONVICT CLOTHING

**Like the daily routine, clothing and food were strictly controlled at the Convict Establishment.**

Imperial prisoner uniforms called 'slops' were issued once a year from England. In 1862 the convict uniform consisted of:

- a leather belt
- two pairs of boots
- four pairs of socks
- four handkerchiefs
- four cotton shirts and two flannel shirts.

In winter they received one fustian (coarse dark grey wool) jacket and one duck (untilled cotton or canvas) jacket, a woollen vest and a pair of grey trousers. In summer they received one vest, two pairs of trousers and a felt hat.<sup>1</sup> Convicts involved in messy work wore a long-sleeved, knee-length smock of duck or calico. Convicts working on pilot boats on the Swan River wore oilskin coats like drizabones.

Convicts sentenced to work in leg irons on work parties were made to wear the particoloured or 'magpie' uniform. This uniform was a descendant of the 'fools' or jesters' uniform designed to further shame the convict and make him stand out.

The magpie uniform was made of coarse wool in black or dark brown and light brown or yellow halves.

Convict uniforms were stamped or stencilled with the broad arrow mark, a symbol dating back to the 17th century that featured on all British Government property. A black arrow was marked on light fabrics and a white or yellow arrow marked on dark fabrics. Because of their poor quality, few of these uniforms have survived. Fremantle Prison has three jackets (two particoloured and one plain), one flannel short sleeved shirt and the remnants of a belt in its collection.



Particoloured convict uniform  
National Library of Australia



Detail of a diorama showing the convict uniform  
Fremantle Prison Collection

<sup>1</sup> *Rules and Regulations for the Convict Department Western Australia, 1862*, pp 32-33.





# PUNISHMENT

**During the convict era punishments included hard labour in leg irons, solitary confinement, floggings and diets of bread and water. Apart from leg irons, these punishments continued well into the 1900s at Fremantle Prison.**

## LEG IRONS

Leg irons were shackles placed around a prisoner's ankles joined by a chain to restrict movement. They varied in weight according to the severity of the punishment. Prisoners in leg irons were assigned to hard labour, working ten hours a day for months on end. This severe punishment often ended in injury. Reports in the Prison's Medical Journal refer to severe groin pain, bruising of the skin, lesions and skin ruptures.

*The chain gang of Fremantle is the depth of the penal degradation. The convicts wear from thirty to fifty pounds of iron, according to the offence. It is riveted on their bodies in the prison forge and when they have served their time the great rings have to be chiselled off their calloused limbs.*

John Boyle O'Reilly, *Moondyne Joe: A Story from the Underworld*, 1878



Convict leg irons and  
Fremantle Prison Collection

## SOLITARY CONFINEMENT



Refractory block 2006  
Fremantle Prison Collection

Prisoners who attempted to escape were flogged and locked in solitary confinement on a diet of bread and water. There were 12 punishment cells and six windowless 'dark' cells. Each cell had double chambers with inner and outer doors for added security which also prevented communication between prisoners. The only things the convicts had for company were a toilet bucket, a bed without a mattress, a blanket and a bible.

Dark cell prisoners lost track of time and became disorientated. Stays in solitary were between one and six months.

*The dark cell was occasionally as much feared as the cat-o-nine tails ... The braggart ... whimpered and prayed for a little light ... the dark cell made him as temporarily willing and obedient as a dog.*

James Battye, *Cyclopedia of Western Australia*, 1912

## FLOGGING

Convicts who broke the prison rules or who tried to escape were often flogged. Difficult convicts could be whipped up to 100 times. Flogging instruments included the cat o' nine tails, a whip with nine knotted strands or cords, and the birch, a bundle of long birch twigs bound together by cord. Flogging was a brutal punishment that caused extreme pain and physical scarring.



Cat o' nine tails and  
Fremantle Prison Collection

A prisoner being flogged was secured to the flogging triangle, their legs were tied to the base of the flogging post and their hands to the top. Their back was stripped bare and a protective leather kidney belt buckled around their waist to protect their vital organs. A neck collar was buckled around the neck to protect the major arteries. Depending on the sentence, the prisoner was then flogged up to 100 times. The prison's surgeon witnessed each flogging and sometimes intervened if he felt the prisoner's life was in danger. If a flogging was stopped prematurely, the flogging was completed at a later date once the convicts wounds had healed. After a convict was taken down from the flogging post his wounds were rubbed with salt to prevent infection.

*... a degrading and brutalising punishment not only so far as it affects the person who is whipped, but also those who have to perform the act or witness its performance.*

Mr Justice Murray, 1983

## RELIGION

**The chaplain was the second highest paid officer in the prison administration after the Comptroller-General. He was a central figure in the prison chain of command and instrumental in the aim of reforming convicts. Reformers such as Henderson and Dixon felt religion was the best way to turn convicts away from the evils of crime. Henderson indicated in his half yearly report in 1853 the value he placed in the chaplain's position: 'I hope you will send us a good Chaplain for this Establishment, I attach much importance to his office, our present locum tenens is a stick and no use.'**<sup>2</sup>

Reverend Richard Alderson arrived on the *Dolphin* in 1857 with Doctor George Attfield and remained in WA for almost twenty years. It was Alderson's job to care for the minds and souls of each convict in the establishment. He earned his pay, being one of the busiest members of staff at the prison. He was required to:

- read prayers in the chapel, once in the morning and once in the evening, every day of the year
- perform divine service every Sunday, as well as on Christmas Day and Good Friday
- visit and read prayers daily to patients in the prison hospital
- perform burials
- superintend the school and direct religious and moral instruction as well as other lessons
- keep the library, issue and approve all reading material
- keep a journal recording all occurrences of importance
- visit each convict in the prison and keep a 'Character Book', which recorded information about them
- read all letters written and received by prisoners
- write a yearly report
- visit the inmates of the Lunatic Asylum
- visit the depots and work parties in Fremantle and Perth at least once a week.<sup>3</sup>



Anglican Chapel – interior 2005  
Fremantle Prison Collection

Apart from these duties, during the first decade the chaplain also had to oversee the construction of the Anglican Chapel.

The Anglican Chapel was the centre of religious life for the early prison community. Because Protestantism was the state religion during the 1850s it was initially decided that the Anglican Chapel would serve all of the prisoners' religious needs. However, after a number of complaints about Catholic prisoners being taught by Anglican chaplains, a Roman Catholic priest was appointed to administer to the Catholic convicts.

By 1856 services for Protestant convicts and warders were held in the Anglican Chapel while services for Catholic prisoners were held in the corridor of the southern main cell block. Each group had a church choir, and prisoners received marks and remissions from their sentences for regular attendance at choir training.

<sup>2</sup> Henderson's Half-Yearly Report to J. Jebb, 1853. Fremantle Prison Research Database Document 1087.

<sup>3</sup> Rules and Regulations for the Convict Department Western Australia, Comptroller-General Henderson, 1862.



## RELIGION



Catholic Chapel 2009  
Fremantle Prison Collection

## CATHOLIC CHAPEL

**Catholics were amongst the first convicts to arrive in Western Australia in 1850. It is also likely that there were Catholics amongst the Enrolled Pensioner Guards sent to look after the convicts. At this early stage, however, Catholics were in the minority.**

Throughout the 1850s the number of Catholic prisoners increased. Eventually Fremantle's Catholic community asked the government to build a Catholic Chapel at the prison for the Catholic convicts, Catholic prison officers and their families. The Comptroller-General forwarded the request to Governor Kennedy. He in turn referred it to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London, Henry Labouchere, for advice.

Labouchere rejected the request saying he could:

*... find no precedent in any part of the Queen's Dominions for undertaking to supply prisons with separate chapels, they (the Catholics) must continue to be accommodated as hitherto with a separate apartment for the present purpose."*

Despite this advice, in 1861 the upper northern Association Ward in the Main Cell Block was set aside specifically to be used by Catholics for daily worship. The furniture and fittings of the Chapel were provided by donations from the Catholic community in Fremantle.



# TICKETS OF LEAVE

## TICKET of LEAVE.

No. 7892. Richard Western

You have my permission to enter any Service approved by the Res  
 rate of your district.

You are not allowed to leave your district, without the written authority  
 of the Controller General, or the Resident Magistrate of your district.

Ticket of Leave issued for convict number 7892 Richard Western - detail 1868  
 State Records Office of Western Australia

**Few convicts at the Establishment ended up serving their full sentence, particularly if they were well behaved. Newly arrived convicts were incarcerated at the Establishment and during the day worked on construction sites in Fremantle. If he stayed out of trouble, a convict could be issued with a ticket of leave within one to three years of his arrival.**

## ASSOCIATION WARDS

Convicts who were close to earning their tickets of leave and were not deemed to be flight risks were allowed to sleep in large shared rooms called Association Wards. The Convict establishment had four Association Wards, two at each end of the Main Cell Block. These wards allowed these men to experience communal living in preparation for being released into the community. Convicts who had already gained their ticket of leave but were unable to find alternative accommodation in Fremantle, or who were yet to earn a wage to pay for accommodation, were also allowed to stay in the Association Wards. One warder was assigned to watch over each ward.

Convicts slept in hammocks that were folded away each morning. Each ward had a large wooden tub that served as a communal toilet. The convicts had to carefully carry these tubs outside daily to be emptied and cleaned. Each of the wards held up to 60 men.



Fremantle Prison library, originally the southern upper Association Ward 2009  
 Fremantle Prison Collection





# TICKETS OF LEAVE

## TICKET OF LEAVE

A ticket of leave allowed a convict to work outside the prison before their sentence had expired and to receive a wage. These men had to observe a strict set of conditions and could quickly lose their ticket if found breaking the rules. For example, ticket of leave men were not allowed to drink alcohol.

Convict depots were set up throughout the colony to serve as accommodation and employment depots for ticket of leave men. They had to report regularly to local magistrates and to present their ticket to anyone who asked. These men were not allowed to leave the colony. These rules were set out clearly on the slip of paper that was the convict's ticket to conditional freedom.

## CONDITIONAL PARDON

A convict who followed the rules of his ticket of leave eventually was given a conditional pardon.

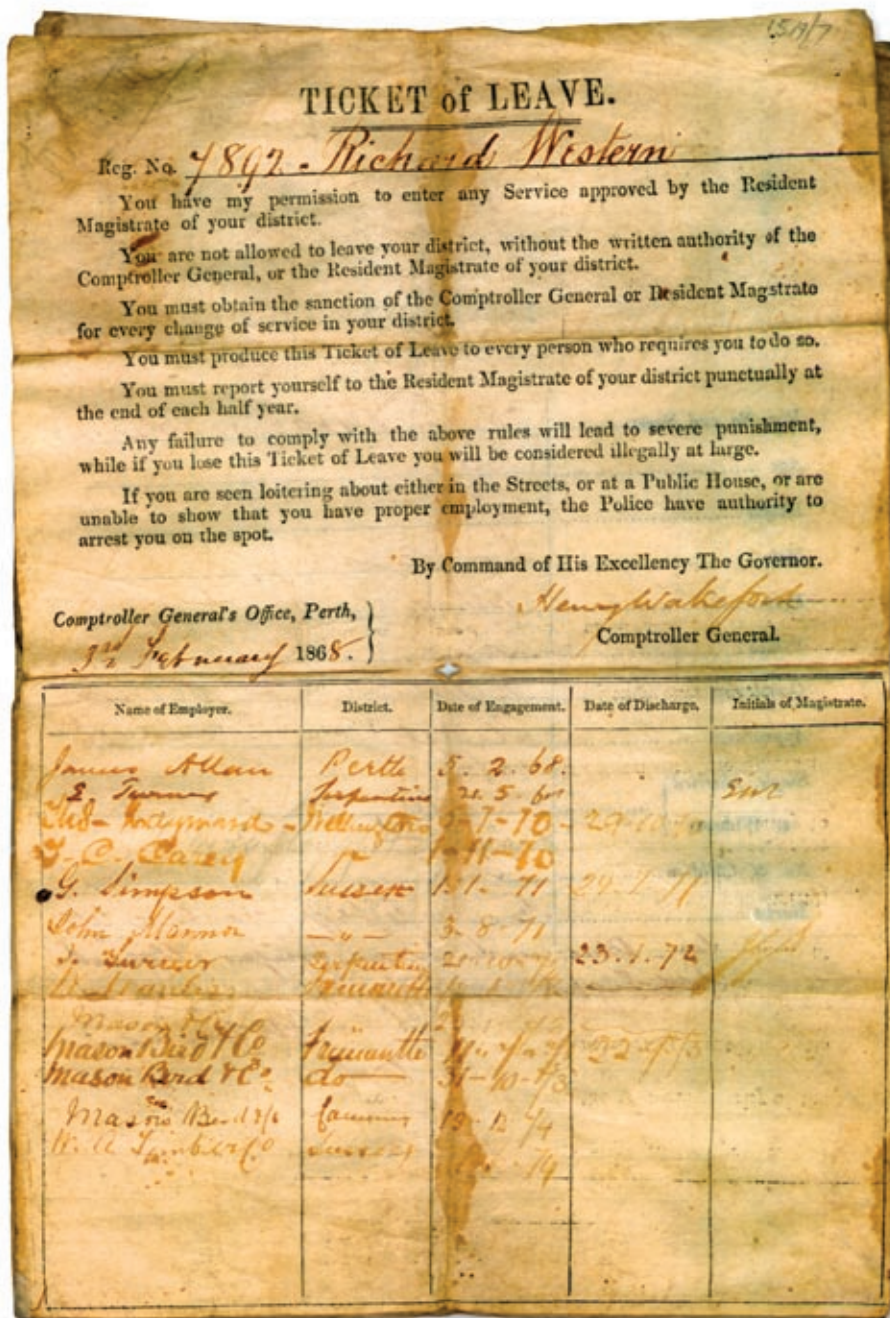
Once a convict received their conditional pardon they were effectively free. However, while they could leave the colony, they were not allowed to return to Great Britain. They were also not allowed to join any official organisations or associations. For many of these men, the convict badge was a stain on their character which they were forced to wear for the rest of their lives. Very few convicts ever received a free or full pardon which would give them the same rights as other free citizens.

## CHALLENGES FOR EX-CONVICTS

The convict era was a period of gradual transformation for Fremantle town. Having a population of roughly 500 settlers when the first convicts arrived in 1850, the township grew to 1607 residents in 1854 and 2946 residents five years later in 1859.<sup>4</sup> Ex-convicts made up the majority of these people. In Fremantle during the 1860s men outnumbered women by five to one. It was difficult for freed convicts to find a partner if they wanted to marry and raise a family in the colony.

Fremantle during this time had a lot of anti-social behaviour and crime and drunkenness was a major problem. Ex-convicts were particularly vulnerable to the temptation of alcohol.

But perhaps the largest problem facing ex-convicts was the shame of being a 'bonded man'. Ex-convicts found it difficult to find work or to be treated as equals in the community. Ex-convicts were not allowed to be members of associations and were subject to prejudice in their dealings with the business sector and the government.



Ticket of Leave issued for convict number 7892 Richard Western 1868  
State Records Office of Western Australia

<sup>4</sup> Hitchcock, J.K., *The History of Fremantle – the front gate of Australia 1829-1929*, p. 43.



# WORK PARTIES



One of the few images of a work party in Fremantle, returning to the Convict Establishment c1870  
Fremantle Prison Collection

**A work party or chain gang was a party of convicts assigned to hard labour in chains. Convict work parties were used to build public works and buildings throughout the colony. Work parties worked up to ten hours a day, each convict linked to his companions by a long length of chain. Residents of Fremantle during the 1850s and 1860s would have been very familiar with the early morning sound of jangling chains as work parties made their way through the streets to the various construction sites.**

## THE 1850S

While the convicts were building the Convict Establishment in Fremantle they were also working on other building projects throughout the colony. During the 1850s a number of important buildings were constructed, as well as the infrastructure that slowly transformed Fremantle, Perth and the wider colony from a sleepy backwater into a busy community.

Between 1850 and 1862 the convicts built 563 miles of road and 239 bridges. They also cut down more than 4,000 trees, dug 44 wells and made 543 culverts.

A number of important public buildings were also constructed during this time including the Fremantle Courthouse, Perth Gaol and Courthouse, Perth Colonial Hospital, Perth Boy's School, and Fremantle Boy's School.

Convict depots were built at North Fremantle, Mount Eliza, Guildford, York, Toodyay, Bunbury, Albany, and Port Gregory. These depots were used as employment offices organising the employment of ticket of leave men and conditional pardoners on construction sites throughout the state.

During the 1850s convicts built the South Bay Jetty at Anglesea Point and the North Bay Jetty in the mouth of the Swan River.<sup>5</sup> The South Bay Jetty was 484 feet long and was Fremantle's main jetty until the early 1870s.

In 1852 convicts built a road between Albany and Perth plus overnight stations every thirty-six miles, which formed the beginning of the townships of Bannister, Williams, Arthur River, Kojonup, Gordon River, and Mount Barker. These stations provided overnight accommodation plus fresh horses for the coaches that carried the official mail service.

<sup>5</sup> Le Page, J.S.H. *Building a State – The Story of the Public Works Department of Western Australia 1829-1985*, 1986, p. 74.



South Bay Jetty c1870  
Fremantle Local History Collection



# WORK PARTIES



Three convicts under supervision of gardener at Government House c1860s  
State Library of Western Australia

## THE 1860S

During the 1860s convicts built a number of significant public buildings including Government House between 1859 and 1864, and the Perth Town Hall between 1867 and 1870.

Government House cost almost 20,000 pounds to build, more than twice as much as planned and roughly the same as the Convict Establishment, making these two buildings the most expensive in the colony. Much of this increased cost was due to expensive furnishings ordered by Governor Hampton, including several very large gilt mirrors which can still be seen in the building today.

The Perth Town Hall is the only convict-built town hall in Australia. The tower is 120 feet high and decorated with a number of convict motifs, including windows in the shape of the broad arrow and decorations in the shape of a hangman's rope.



Convict working on road during construction of the Perth Town Hall c1868  
State Library of Western Australia

One of the most significant convict built projects for the development of the colony was the North Fremantle Bridge, or the Stick Bridge, the first bridge to cross the river linking Fremantle and North Fremantle. Construction began in 1864 and was completed two years later. Although the bridge was built by convicts working in leg irons, the construction site was the location of repeated escape attempts.

The bridge itself was 954 feet long and 2078 feet with the approaches.<sup>6</sup> At the midpoint it was 42 feet above the water to allow for the passage of boats. On its completion the Clerk of Works, James Manning, arranged for the convicts who had worked on the bridge be given extra rations in appreciation for their work. Improvements immediately commenced on the northern road (later to be named Stirling Highway). Convicts used sawn sections of jarrah to strengthen the road's surface which were anecdotally referred to as Hampton's Cheeses.



The North Fremantle Bridge c1870s  
Fremantle Local History Collection

<sup>6</sup> Le Page, J.S.H. *Building a State – The Story of the Public Works Department of Western Australia 1829-1985*, 1989, p. 97.