



The Penitentiary with the Hospital behind c1875 PAHSMA

The damaging vegetation growing from the higher levels of the building is to be removed. The decayed lime-based mortar joints between the bricks and pieces of stone are to be replaced to help protect the vulnerable masonry. Fragile pieces of original internal plaster work are to be stabilised.

Because of the time consuming, complex and expensive nature of the work being undertaken here it is essential that the stabilisation works can see the building through the next 30 years of weathering and human impact. This work will not only serve the ruin for the long term but will also form part of a much more extensive programme of works to be undertaken over the next five years. A Penitentiary Precinct Conservation Management Plan and a Master Plan are to be prepared. These documents will also inform the improvement of walkways and interpretation which we hope to complete, subject to funding, by 2015.

FACT SHEET

Penitentiary Conservation Works 2010-2015



The ground floor of the Penitentiary, showing cells on the left and the outer wall of the building on the right, c1880 PAHSMA

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The story of the Penitentiary

When the convicts first arrived in September 1830 they were housed in a hastily-built Prisoners' Barracks of weatherboard huts, formed around a central yard with a flogging yard nearby. In 1834-5 these huts were replaced by more extensive buildings. They continued in use until the former flourmill and granary was converted into the Penitentiary. This mill had been completed in 1845 to try to supply all the settlement's flour. The complex never operated as hoped and by 1848 was 'a large useless store'.

The water supply to the flourmill proved unreliable and, between 1845 and about 1850 manpower occasionally drove the millstones. A gang of between 18 and 48 convicts was set to work on a tread wheel, climbing an eternally revolving staircase. This served to reduce prisoner idleness, harness their labour and enforce corporal punishment.

When Norfolk Island closed in 1854 the convicts there were sent to Port Arthur. These men had a fearsome reputation as the most desperate and hardened men in the convict system. Commandant Booth called them 'the lions', 'prisoners of bad character under heavy sentence'. They had to be separated from each other and from the better-behaved, so new accommodation had to be found for them. The disused flourmill was converted into the new Penitentiary. It had 136 separate cells on the bottom two floors for men in chains. The men ate and slept in individual cells but worked around the site during the day.

Above the cells was a dining hall (which doubled as a school room at night), the prisoners' library of 'useful and entertaining books' and a Catholic chapel. On the top floor was a dormitory for about 480 better-behaved men. At the western end was a kitchen and bakery. In front was a yard surrounded by a low wall. Here men were assembled to hear prayers and be counted before and after work.

The laundry and toilet block lay behind the main building. It included sheltered exercise yards with fireplaces, toilets, a clothing store, laundry and drying room. As the harsh regime relaxed in the early 1860s, the big central room became a 'day room' or 'smoking room', with seating and a fireplace at one end.

Gutted by fires in 1897 the Penitentiary has remained the largest ruin on site for more than 100 years, presenting many complex conservation and interpretive challenges for those involved in its care. The sheer scale and nature of the ruin, the poor quality of convict-made and quarried materials used in its construction and its complex history make ensuring the preservation of this significant structure difficult, costly and time consuming.

Conservation 2010-2015

As custodians of this important site and in keeping with the guiding principles of *The Australian ICOMOS Burra Charter* it is our intention to do 'as much as necessary, and as little as possible' to ensure the Penitentiary ruin can be enjoyed by many future generations of visitors to Port Arthur. We are conscious of the fact that in replacing old material with new we are losing valuable information about how people lived and worked here. Our work on the Penitentiary today is guided by the need to ensure that as much as possible of this significant ruin remains.

The timber walkway and structural supports that you see within the building today were installed in 1979. The last major conservation works were carried out on the ruin in 1982 -1984, with stabilisation works on all structural walls. These included brick and stonework repair and replacement, insertion of tension bars into masonry joints, cleaning and vegetation removal.

The works being undertaken here today form part of a project to be carried out over the next 6-9 months, stabilising the fragile brick and stone work of the perimeter walls of the building. The exposed and fragile bricks and stones require repair and, in extreme cases, replacement to ensure the building's overall structural stability.

The Penitentiary, showing how the original flour mill and granary grew into accommodation for prisoners.

