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# RECOVERING CONVICT LIVES

A Historical Archaeology  
of the Port Arthur Penitentiary

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Martin Gibbs

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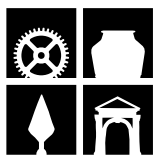
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## INTRODUCTION

The penitentiary is the most well-known structure at one of Australia's most visited historic heritage sites – the former male penal station of Port Arthur, Tasmania (1830–77). The imposing brick edifice has been captured in millions of photographs and depicted in hundreds of illustrations. Its angular façade, broken at intervals by the regimented lines of iron-barred windows, sits in stark contrast to the soft green of the manicured grass that surrounds it. Like much of the park-like nature of the modern historic site of Port Arthur, it can be difficult to reconcile such a scene with what we know about its past. Today, the penitentiary represents the challenge of giving access to difficult and complex pasts through site conservation, research and interpretation.

The obvious story of the penitentiary is told through the historical record and the upstanding architecture. Its high walls were built from clay dug, shaped and fired by prisoners, its frames and floors from timber felled and hewn by convict gangs. Beginning its life in the 1840s, as a flour mill and granary designed to convert convict-grown wheat into ration flour, by the 1850s it had become the place where these convicts were incarcerated. This book takes these stories and adds other layers, both metaphorical and literal, delving beneath the grass to tell the story of Port Arthur's most imposing structure via archaeological practice. Through those things left behind – the sandstone footing of a wall, the accumulated dust of years, or the lost object – we gain insight into previously unwritten histories, from the intensely personal to the bigger social, economic and political contexts.

This book is about archaeological excavations which took place in and around the penitentiary between 2013 and 2016. During 2013–15 the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority (PAHSMA) carried out a series of investigations linked to stabilisation works within the structure, as well as the reinstatement of interpretive elements associated with the former muster ground. In 2016 a large-scale investigation of the former ablutions and laundry spaces adjacent to the penitentiary took place. Together, this suite of excavations facilitated critical conservation work on an important historic structure. It also presented us with an opportunity to engage with the lesser-known aspects of Port Arthur's fascinating past, providing a window into the spaces where convicts worked and spent their limited free time.

The archaeological excavations – and therefore this book – also delved back beyond the history of the penitentiary. From the moment the penal station was first established in 1830, the area became a hub of industrial and penal activity, the site of work yards, wharves and workshops. The construction of the flour mill and granary between 1842 and 1845 stands as the perfect symbol for the administrators' never-ending quest for economy, its story intertwined with wider goings-on in colonial Tasmania and the faraway corridors of power in London.

These investigations provided an opportunity to understand some of the key aspects of the penal station's past. Through its early history we can learn about how economy was incorporated into penal regimes and how station administrators sought to balance day-to-day management realities against the expectations of colonial and British governments. The site's later history provides insight into how prison populations were managed, as well as how these populations managed to express agency and individuality throughout their incarcerated lives. The configuration of these spaces, as well as the material culture left behind, tells us much about the administrators' attitudes toward the management of the unfree men in their charge.

This book examines these aspects through an integrated application of the methods and approaches of history and archaeology. It is a work of historical archaeology, melding records created by the administrators and – more rarely – the unfree, with the very physicality of the places and spaces that they created. It is not designed to provide an exhaustive accounting of the excavation or the artefacts that were found. There are reports for those

who wish to lose themselves in this type of minutiae. Instead, we want to talk about histories – both big and small, of a space and the lives that were carried out within it. Within this space we find the genesis of the modern prison and prisoner. Only through multidisciplinary investigations such as the one outlined in this book can we even start to understand such beginnings.

### About this book

This book began life as archaeology reports, written by and for PAHSMA. Although the preparation of such reports is an essential part of any excavation, they can be incredibly dry, full of tedious descriptions and tables of artefacts. While they are an essential part of any investigative program, these reports do not lend themselves to engaging reading.

This book aims to distill the results of our excavations into palatable form, divested of most of the strictures of archaeological reporting. In Chapter 1 we open with a short history of Port Arthur, establishing how and why this isolated station came to fulfill such an important role in the management of transported convicts in Australia. We also outline the known history of the area in which the excavation was situated, establishing why this small patch of waterfront is so important for understanding how the penal station was formed and how it developed over half a century.

In Chapters 2 and 3, we provide a narrative that sets the changes to the natural and built landscape of the penitentiary precinct against an expansive context, demonstrating how this contained landscape reacted to influences ranging from the local to the global. To do this, we draw upon the results of the historical and the archaeological investigations, weaving a developmental narrative with the lives and labours of Port Arthur's unfree and free.

In Chapter 4 we present the results of the archaeological investigations in a format that favours immediate comprehension. Context lists, matrices and endless descriptions of stratigraphy have been relegated, replaced by photographs, illustrations and maps. It is designed to provide the archaeological background to Chapters 2 and 3. The whole section has been divided according to the five main phases of occupation that we identified as a result of the investigation: an early industrial waterfront phase, the two main phases of penitentiary occupation, an intermediate phase of activity,

and post-abandonment. This phasing is discussed in more detail at the introduction to Chapter 2.

For those interested in the raw archaeological information, an online data repository containing the original excavation reports has been established.

The repository is located at: <https://open.sydneyuniversitypress.com.au/recovering-convict-lives.html>

A collection of photogrammetry can be found at: <https://une.pedestal3d.com/r/68pm-yOWaL?sorting=1>

A detailed overview of how Port Arthur evolved during the convict period can also be found at: [www.convictlandscapes.com.au/portarthur](http://www.convictlandscapes.com.au/portarthur)

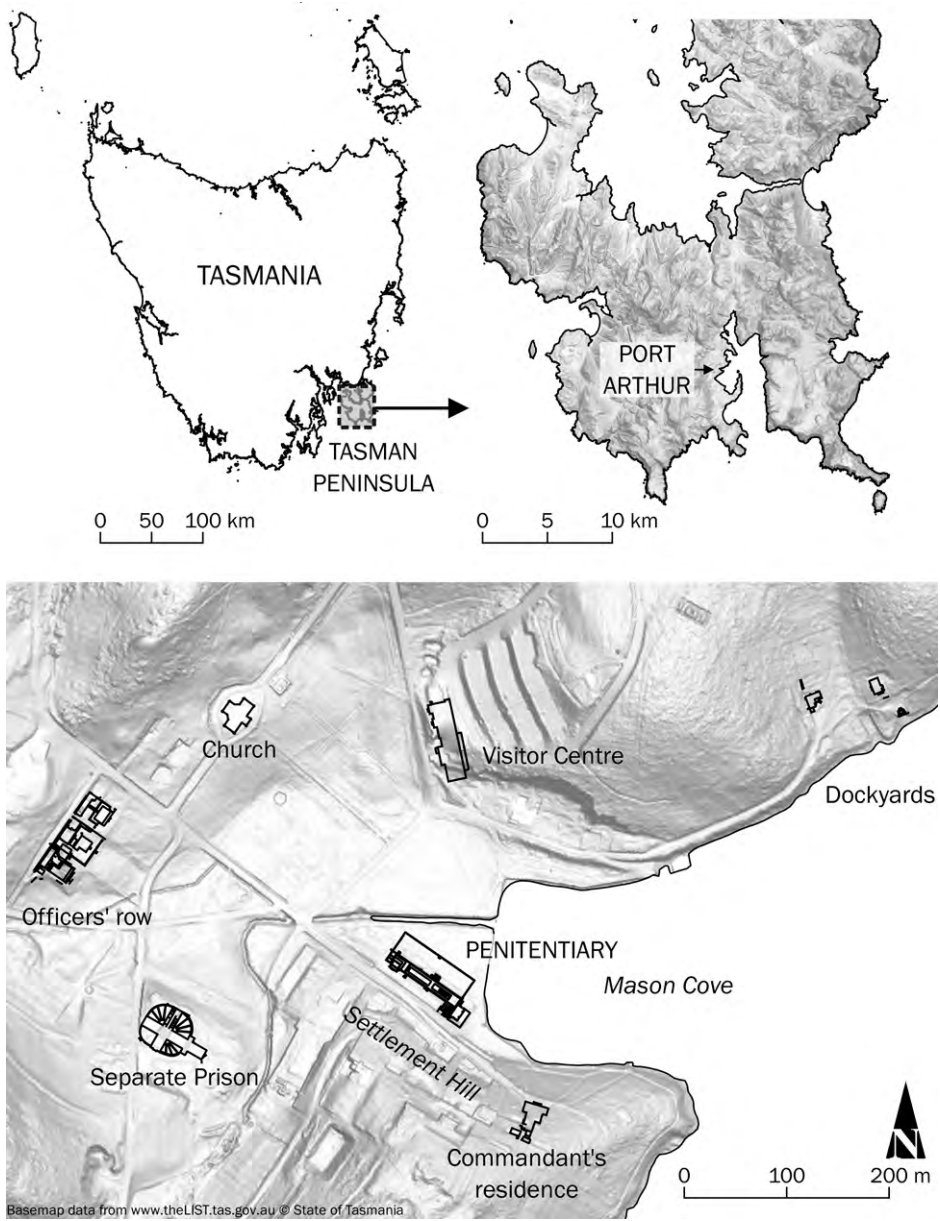
### About the site

Port Arthur is located on the Tasman Peninsula, south-east Tasmania. With the peninsula accessible only by sea or via a narrow isthmus, it is easy to see why its security and isolation made it an attractive location for a penal settlement. Clustered around Mason Cove, the boundaries and layout of today's historic site remain much as they were during the convict period. The bulk of the settlement is located on the southern side of the cove, spread along the eminence known as Settlement Hill. Officers' quarters, the church and cleared ground stretch to the cove's west, while the station's former dockyards and the modern visitor centre occupy the northern ground.

The penitentiary stands on the southern side of Mason Cove, occupying ground at the base of Settlement Hill that was formerly waterfront until reclamation of the bay commenced in 1854 (Figures 0.1 and 0.2). To the rear of the penitentiary (south west) runs the elevated formation of Champ Street, then – as now – the settlement's main thoroughfare.

Much of the structure that we see today was actually built between 1842 and 1845, when a large brick flour mill and granary were erected on the former site of a waterside lumber yard and workshops (Figure 0.3). The largest portion of the structure housed a large 35-foot overshot waterwheel, the mill machinery and a timber treadwheel. The latter was a punishment device for convicts, the motive power generated by 48 men stepping on the treads of a 12-foot wheel. The power of man and water were harnessed to the grinding machinery. The smaller portion of the building housed a granary and offices.

## INTRODUCTION



**Figure 0.1.** The location of Port Arthur and its penitentiary.



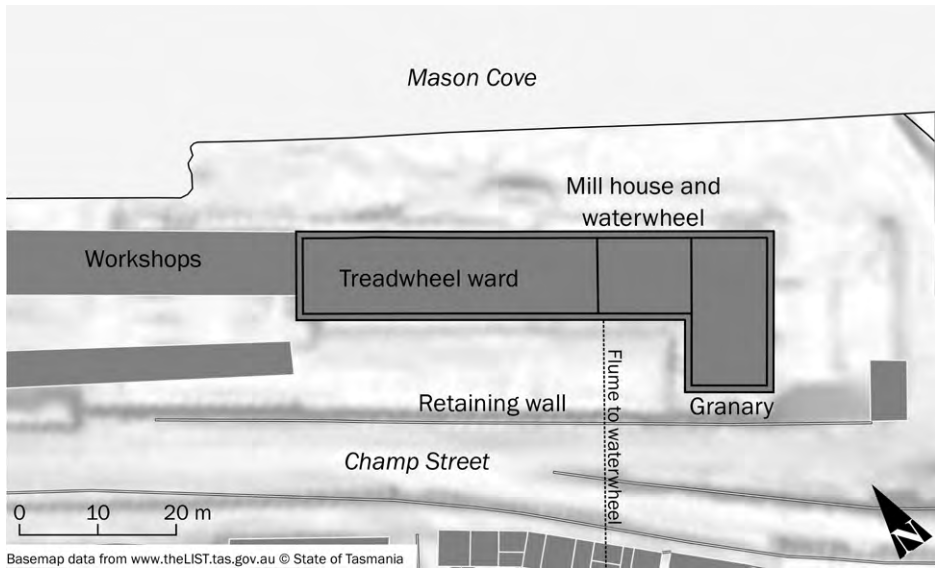
**Figure 0.2.** The penitentiary is situated at the base of Settlement Hill (left), on the former edge of Mason Cove. The cove was partly reclaimed during the 1850s. (Hype TV for PAHSMA, 2017)

Alterations to the structure between 1854 and 1857 turned it into a secure penitentiary building capable of incarcerating 480 prisoners (Figure 0.4). The mill and granary were gutted, leaving behind a retrofitted shell containing cells, a mess hall, dormitory, chapel and library. A new bakehouse was built to the west and a building for watchmen added to the east. At the front of the building a muster ground was laid out on newly reclaimed ground, while to the rear were added exercise yards, ablutions buildings and a laundry.

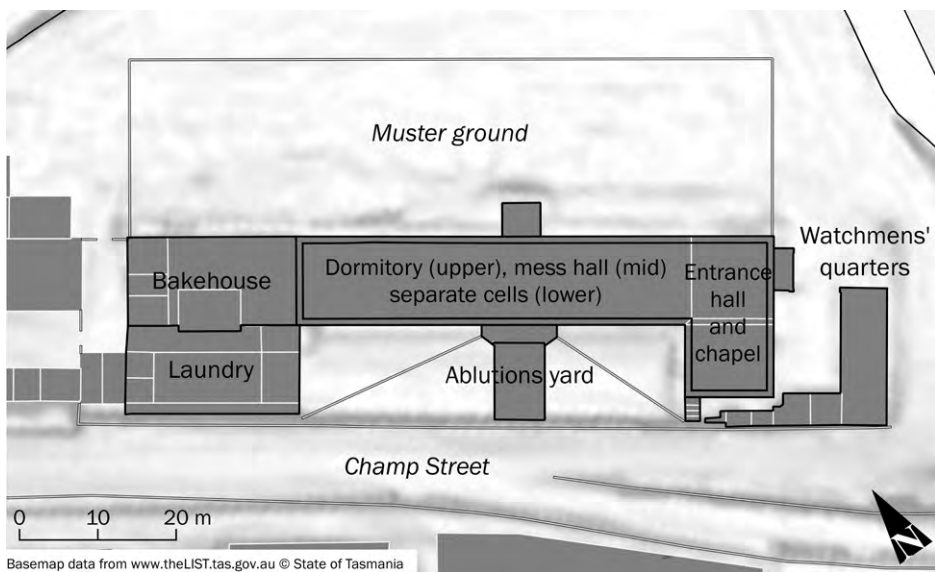
The structure that remains today reflects both these phases of the building's occupation: an 1840s façade and the remnants of an 1850s interior. Much of the latter, including the structure's roof, was lost in an 1897 fire during the post-convict period. Fire and salvage claimed the penitentiary's ancillary structures, with the muster ground, exercise, ablutions and laundry spaces levelled and grassed over. This is how they remained for much of the 20th century. Today, thanks to the archaeological investigations, the area has been landscaped and interpreted to reflect its use between 1856 and 1877 (Figure 0.5).

Throughout this book, reference will be made to five main areas where excavation occurred: the penitentiary, encompassing the area of the former mill and granary; the bakehouse, referring to the footprint of that building; the muster ground; and the ablutions and laundry areas (Figures 0.6 and 0.7). Of these, the penitentiary, bakehouse and laundry were enclosed, multi-storey and multi-roomed buildings. The muster ground and ablutions were largely open, the latter fitted with exercise yards, shelters and sheds.

## INTRODUCTION



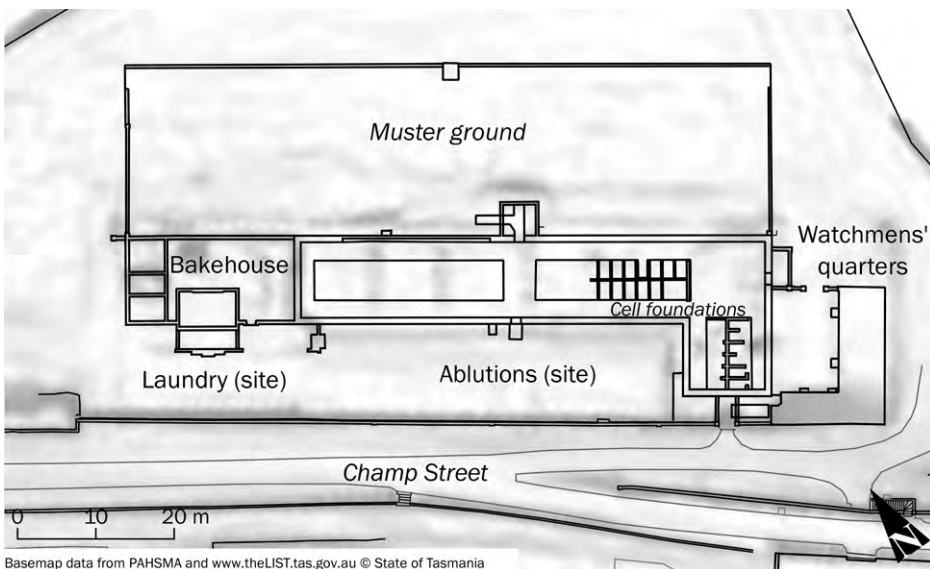
**Figure 0.3.** Detail plan showing the layout of the mill and granary in 1846.



**Figure 0.4.** Detail plan showing the layout of the penitentiary in 1857.



**Figure 0.5.** View looking east from the location of the bakehouse over the penitentiary. The muster ground is on the left, with the ablutions area on the right. Champ Street runs above the ablutions area. (Hype TV for PAHSMA, 2017)



**Figure 0.6.** Plan showing the penitentiary today.



**Figure 0.7.** Aerial view of the penitentiary. (Hype TV for PAHSMA, 2017)

### Project background

The archaeological excavations upon which this book is based were carried out during 2013–16 (Figure 0.8). They were undertaken as part of the larger penitentiary precinct conservation project which began in 2011. The project has been guided by the *Conservation Management Plan 2011: Penitentiary Precinct, Port Arthur Historic Site, Tasmania* and involved the large-scale conservation and structural work within the main penitentiary building, as well as improvements to existing drainage infrastructure.<sup>1</sup>

Integral to the work was a program of archaeological excavations and monitoring. These were tied to a series of significant research and interpretive goals, outlined in *Research Design for Archaeological Excavations within*

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1 Andronas Conservation Architecture, 2011, 'Conservation Management Plan: Penitentiary Precinct, Port Arthur Historic Site, Tasmania', Melbourne.



**Figure 0.8.** Photo taken from the muster ground during conservation works in 2015. (PAHSMA 2015)

*the Penitentiary Precinct, Port Arthur Historic Site.* The high research value stemmed from the excavations' potential to provide information on the use and evolution of Port Arthur's waterfront space, as well as the lifeways of the convicts and supervisors associated with the penitentiary.

The first program of investigation was a series of 22 research excavations completed in 2013 in advance of conservation work. This was followed in 2014 and 2015 by a program of archaeological monitoring by PAHSMA staff and Pragmatic Cultural Heritage Services as the conservation work progressed.

The excavations in 2016 comprised the open-area excavation of the ablutions and laundry areas (Figure 0.9). The former was excavated by a team of seven archaeologists between January and May 2016. During November and December 2016 the laundry was excavated by a team of five archaeologists. These large investigations resulted from the need to carry out further conservation works within the precinct, at the same time as providing an opportunity to research and interpret some of the lesser-known stories and areas of the site.

### Authorship

As with all good works, the making of this book has been a collaborative effort. After directing the 2016 excavations, Richard Tuffin completed the reports, mapping and illustrations and, together with the results from the 2013 work, then turned them all into this book. During this time he worked for PAHSMA, then as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow for the University of New England.

David Roe, Archaeology Manager at PAHSMA, was the driving force behind the investigation, arguing for the importance of incorporating a well-planned archaeological research project into the penitentiary stabilisation works program. He oversaw the completion of the 2013 archaeological works, as well as the later 2016 program.

Sylvana Szydzik, Conservation Project Officer at PAHSMA, was in charge of the post-excavation handling and cataloguing of artefacts during the investigation of the laundry area. Since that time, she has been instrumental in the implementation of the artefact x-ray program at PAHSMA.

Ashley Matic directed the 2013 research excavations and returned to Port Arthur in 2014 (as Pragmatic Cultural Heritage Services) to conduct the primary monitoring of the stabilisation project's in-ground works.

E. Jeanne Harris was a consultant on the excavation of the ablutions area, in charge of post-excavation artefact handling and cataloguing of all the assemblages. Jeanne produced the reporting from which the analysis of the artefacts was derived.



**Figure 0.9.** During the 2016 excavations of the ablutions area. (PAHSMA 2016)