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Saint Helena Island

- Place ID: 600315
- St Helena Island, St Helena Island

General



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Also known as

St Helena Island; Nungoon

Classification

State Heritage

Register status

Entered

Date entered

21 October 1992

Type

Law/order, immigration, customs, quarantine: Prison/gaol

Themes

- 1.2 Peopling places: Migration from outside and within
- 2.4 Exploiting, utilising and transforming the land: Agricultural activities
- 7.1 Maintaining order: Policing and maintaining law and order
- 7.3 Maintaining order: Customs and quarantine services

Construction periods

- 1860, Saint Helena Island - Store (1860s -)
- 1860, Saint Helena Island - House - chief warden (1860s -)
- 1865–1933, Saint Helena Island (1865 - 1933)
- unknown, Saint Helena Island - Shop - blacksmith (unknown -)
- unknown, Saint Helena Island - Shed - fodder (unknown -)
- unknown, Saint Helena Island - Kiln - lime (unknown -)

Historical period

1840s–1860s Mid-19th century

Location

Address

St Helena Island, St Helena Island

LGA

Brisbane City Council

Coordinates

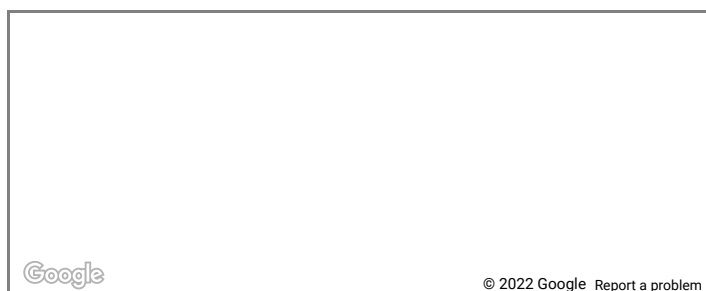
-27.39163761, 153.23283713

Map

- [Enlarge map](#)



Street view



Photography is provided by Google Street View and may include third-party images. Images show the vicinity of the heritage place which may not be visible.

Request a boundary map

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Significance

Criterion A

The place is important in demonstrating the evolution or pattern of Queensland's history.

St Helena Island is important in demonstrating the evolution or pattern of Queensland's history. It is the earliest attempt in Queensland at providing prison facilities which were essentially self-sufficient and aimed at providing inmates with the opportunity for self-improvement and rehabilitation.

Criterion B

The place demonstrates rare, uncommon or endangered aspects of Queensland's cultural heritage.

The remains of the settlement on St Helena Island are rare evidence for the operation of a colonial era prison.

Criterion C

The place has potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of Queensland's history.

They have the potential to provide information for the manner in which the island was utilised, the range and diversity of uses during this period being well represented by the remains of structures existing there today.

Criterion D

The place is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a particular class of cultural places.

St Helena Island is important in demonstrating the characteristics of a penal settlement as, despite the partial demolition of the island's buildings, much remains which demonstrates this function.

Criterion E

The place is important because of its aesthetic significance.

St Helena Island is important in demonstrating aesthetic characteristics valued by the community. The group of ruined buildings standing against the backdrop of pasture land and interspersed with remnants of the formal gardens once present provides a strong aesthetic statement within the waters of Moreton Bay.

Criterion H

The place has a special association with the life or work of a particular person, group or organisation of importance in Queensland's history.

St Helena Island has a special association with the life of John McDonald, the first Superintendent of the prison and with the works of Charles Tiffin, government architect who designed the first buildings to be constructed on the island. The island is also associated with William Hamilton, MLA and other strike leaders who were imprisoned here as a consequence of their roles in the Shearers' Strike of 1891.

History

St Helena Island in Moreton Bay contains evidence of both Aboriginal use and a number of structures of stone, brick and timber associated with the operation of a quarantine station and a prison during the period 1865 to 1933.

The name of the island recalls an incident in 1828 regarding an Aborigine nick-named Napoleon for his resemblance to the French general who was exiled on the island of St Helena. 'Napoleon', whose real name was Nugoon, stole an axe from the government stores at Dunwich and was 'exiled' by the authorities on one of the Green Islands, however, he constructed a canoe from materials on the island and returned to Dunwich within days. For many years the name of the island alternated between St Helena and Nugoon, however it was the former which gained official recognition.

During the 1840s and '50s the island was a base for the hunting and processing of dugong for meat and oil, which was valued for medicinal purposes. For some time this business was highly profitable, however due to mismanagement and diminishing supplies of dugong it eventually failed.

In 1865 when a quarantine station was planned, the vegetation of the island was divided between mangrove swamp, scrub land and grass flats. Its isolation made it ideal as a location for a quarantine station. Buildings were designed by Charles Tiffin, Colonial Architect, and construction work commenced in 1865 using labour from the prison hulk 'Proserpine', moored at the mouth of the Brisbane River. The first structure completed was a lock-up for the prisoners working on the island. Work proceeded slowly and by 1867 overcrowding in Brisbane prisons had increased to such an extent that it was decided to convert the proposed quarantine station into a prison and to retain the existing quarantine facilities at Dunwich. Despite this, the island was apparently used for quarantine purposes during this period and at least two graves for unidentified immigrants are within the vicinity of prison burials on the eastern shore of the island. The official prison cemetery is on the southern end of the island.

The first superintendent of the gaol was John McDonald, who served in this post for fifteen years, during which time he did much to establish the prison and its associated activities. The philosophy of prisoner rehabilitation was changing from the earlier ethos of punishment and isolation. The aim was to provide prisoners with a full day of constructive activity and instruction which would equip them with life skills. In addition, the financial strictures of the colony made it desirable for the prison to be as self-sufficient as possible. McDonald showed considerable initiative and perseverance in meeting these demands.

Punishment for defaulting prisoners, though considered less brutal than in many prisons, was still strict and included gagging and shot drill. Flogging was reserved for extreme offences and was eventually replaced by incarceration in underground isolation cells. Under McDonald's care the prison was described by newspaper journalists as being of the highest standard with clean, healthy prisoners engaged in constructive enterprises that provided them with excellent opportunities for self improvement. The aim of self-sufficiency was reflected in the process by which new prison buildings were constructed when they were needed. Plans were prepared by several long-serving prisoners to the requirements of the Superintendent, the government architect not being employed. The materials were obtained on the island when possible. The scrub was not sufficient to meet the demand for building timber, but the island stone and the lime extracted from neighbouring coral reefs provided raw materials for many of the structures. The lime was burned in a kiln constructed on the island by 1869 using bricks and the local stone. Later, when the sugar mill was operational, the lime produced was used for settling the vegetable matter suspended in the sugar syrup.

In 1868 a substantial timber barracks to house approximately 130 prisoners was completed, in addition to the buildings and jetty previously constructed for the quarantine station. A bakehouse, wash house, kitchen, punishment cells and a convalescent ward for sick prisoners were also built. On the rising ground behind these buildings, a large timber structure housed store rooms, doctors rooms, clerks rooms, quarters for twelve military personnel and one officer, and accommodation for ten warders. Also on rising ground, though separate, was a five room cottage for the superintendent in an acre of fenced land. A further area was devoted to growing maize, sugar cane and vegetables for the prison. Fifty acres were cleared with the intention of planting sugar cane. This was to be processed in a sugar refinery on site. A boat house of local stone, a coarse conglomerate, was being constructed near the landing area. It was also planned to construct a church and schoolhouse within the stockade.

One of the most successful early enterprises undertaken on the island was the growing and processing of sugar. McDonald trained himself in the processes involved and the mill was considered something of a wonder in its own right. The crushing rollers were horse-driven and hand fed by the prisoners. The syrup was gravity fed into vats for boiling down and crystallisation. The final product was a fine golden coloured sugar of table quality which was used, not only by other government institutions, but was sold commercially. Both cane and sugar won many awards at the annual International Exhibition. The cane served other useful functions on the island, the trash providing fuel for the warders' fires. The chief disadvantage of the cane crop was the cover it provided for malingers or absconding prisoners. Following Macdonald's departure in 1882, his successor, Capt. Townley, reduced the acreage on the island to provide only for the prison's needs. This crop was subsequently reduced even further, until in 1890 the prison commenced purchasing sugar from external sources. The sugar mill was converted into a laundry and a herd of dairy cattle was introduced to provide milk, butter and cheese for the prison. A low flat area on the western side of the island was used for pasturing prison animals. It had stables, cowsheds, piggeries, sheep yards and a slaughter house.

The prison continued to expand until, at its peak, it could accommodate approximately 300 prisoners. Townley enforced a more rigid discipline than McDonald and the harsh conditions on the island soon earned St Helena the nicknames of the 'hell-hole of the Pacific' and 'Queensland's Inferno', although the press described it as a model prison. The shark-infested waters of Moreton Bay were a barrier to escape, although this was achieved on a few occasions.

A tramline had been constructed between the prison compound and the jetty in the late 1870s to move goods and raw materials. A series of temporary lines were also laid down and relocated as required to transport everything from laundry to the nightsoil brought from the mainland and buried in trenches on the island in the 1880s. A variety of rolling stock was used over the years including a two-handed pumper vehicle similar to that used on railways. This was eventually superseded by a horse drawn tram car which operated for some thirty years. In the 1930s the tramway fell into disrepair and the rails were removed, although much of the associated earthworks remain.

In 1891 five political prisoners were imprisoned on the island for their role in the Shearers' Strikes of that year. One of these, William Hamilton, was later to become Member of the Legislative Assembly for Gregory, Minister for Mines and President of the Legislative Council of Queensland. He later enjoyed reminding others that he had been incarcerated on St Helena for three years.

By the early twentieth century conditions had changed once more under the superintendence of James Ryan and visitors to the island extolled its virtues at length. It was described as the 'pearl of Moreton Bay' and 'the garden of beauty'. Such descriptions aroused public interest and in 1912 a campaign was mounted by the Moreton Bay League for the closure of the prison and the conversion of the island into a place of public recreation. The Government quashed this movement by announcing plans for a new, more substantial prison on St Helena, but this did not proceed and in 1921 it was decided to close the prison and make the island a prison farm. Most of the inmates were removed to Boggo Road Gaol and those who remained were occupied with the demolition of most of the gaol's infrastructure, including fences, stockade walls, workshops and other buildings. A few buildings were retained, possibly because they continued to be of use to the farm. Much of the material removed was later re-used in other government projects. In 1933 the farm was closed down and the remaining prisoners were transferred to Boggo Road Gaol.

In 1933 the island became the responsibility of Brisbane City Council whose plans for the island included golf courses, landing strips, holiday cabins and tennis courts. Of these, only a dance hall and kiosk were erected and a few trees planted to provide shelter at the picnic area near the wharf. A regular ferry service was supplied to carry people to the island, but the scheme proved uneconomic. In 1939 the Council surrendered its control of the island and a dairy farm was established once more.

In 1979 the island became the first 'historic' National Park in Queensland in recognition of the significance of the island's past and those buildings which remained. The island is now an open air museum and studies have been made of the island's history and of the ruins of the prison. Conservation and reconstruction work has been carried out on the surviving buildings and interpretive signage has been installed. In 1997 the Rotary Club of Wynnum/Manly constructed a tram track between the jetty and the principal group of buildings partially following the route of the old tramline.

Description

St Helena Island is an island of approximately 182 ha in area, located in Moreton Bay to the east of the Brisbane River mouth. The island is low lying with an elevated portion at the northern end. 'Beach rock', or 'cay sandstone', a coarse conglomerate of quartz and other grains bonded mainly with calcite spar, forms the basis of the island which is ringed by mangroves. A large midden extending across the southern portion of the island is evidence of the island's early use by Aborigines. There are numerous ruins relating to the former quarantine station and prison. Later additions include trees at the landward end of the jetty and a modern tram track.

Although physical evidence for the existence of the gaol and of previous Aboriginal use is scattered across the island, buildings and substantial remains visible above ground are grouped in several areas. These are shown on the accompanying map and are:

A causeway of stepped stone blocks with a rubble core which extends approximately 360 metres into the Bay from the south west corner of the island. A timber jetty extends for some distance beyond the causeway and carries the tram lines. The remains of a bathing enclosure of vertical train lines is near the seaward end of the jetty. Near the landward end of the causeway is wall and rubble from the stone boathouse.

On the western side of the island is the prison compound site with the remains of late nineteenth century gaol buildings. This area also includes underground tanks, sections of stone wall and traces of the tramway route. Substantial remains include those of the stores, a long, single storey gabled structure built of rendered local stone with brick quoins and door and window reveals. A platform of rendered stone used for loading runs along the north western wall of this building, which has four rooms, the largest containing a loading bay. The barred grilles to the windows survive and conservation work has recently been carried out to the stone and brickwork of the walls. It has no roof.

Near the stores is the former blacksmith shop. It is a simple rectangular building of large stone blocks and has gabled ends. Stone walls remain from a small office building, a ward building, a bakehouse, gas house lime house and lumber shed. There are small unidentified structures in the site of C yard and near the bakehouse.

Further towards the shore there is a low flat area that was used for prison animals. The only substantial remains of the complex of yards and buildings is the former fodder shed. It is a rectangular stone building with gabled ends and an iron roof. Concrete floors from the piggeries and several wells can be seen.

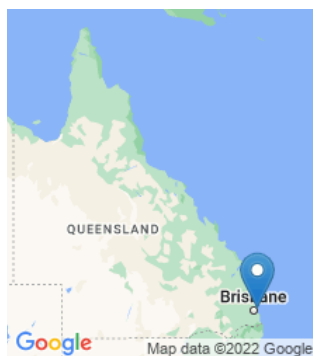
To the north of the prison buildings is the Chief Warder's house and its detached kitchen. The house is a weatherboard building and has been fully repaired and reconstructed. The detached timber kitchen has recently been conserved. Both are roofed with corrugated iron sheeting. There is a timber laundry building near the house. The site of warders' cottages, the school and church is on the eastern side of the island.

To the south of the prison compound are the remains of the sugar mill and silos and the remains of tramway earthworks linking them to the main complex and jetty. Further south, near the shore line, is the graveyard. It has been fenced with modern plain timber pickets and has over fifty precast concrete crosses with numbers, rather than names, in four rows. These mark the burials of prisoners. Nearby, in a separate section, are civilian burials of which five headstones stand. Some of the inscriptions are no longer readable. Further west along the shore line is the lime kiln constructed of bricks and large blocks of clay sandstone. Between the kiln and causeway and a little further inland is the quarry used to obtain building stone and the midden is close to this.

Image gallery



Location



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