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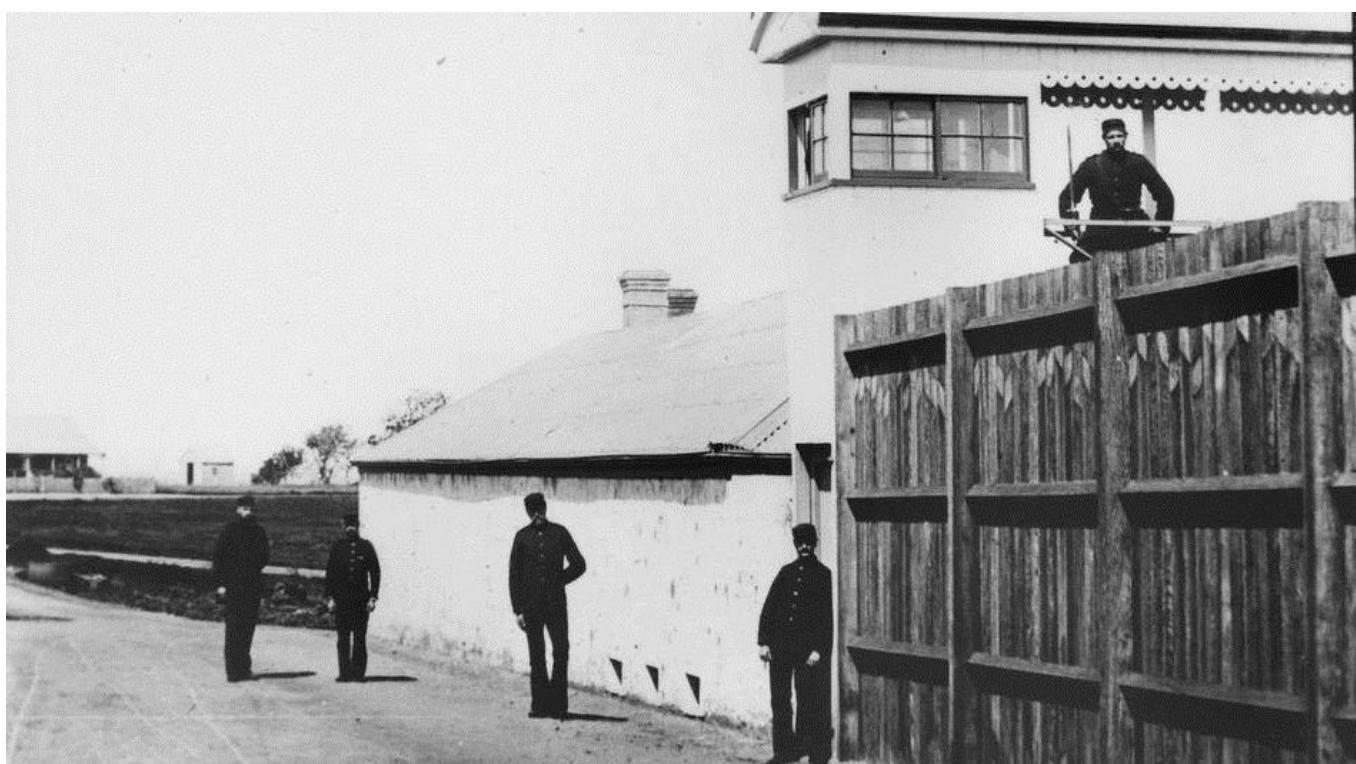
Way We Were: St Helena Island's history stained with brutality, madness and painful death

Today it's a National Park but this island has a brutal past in which many men cut their own fingers off, writes Dot Whittington.

Dorothy Whittington

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Warders pose outside the St Helena Island prison, at the mouth of the Brisbane River, in 1893. Picture: State Library of Queensland

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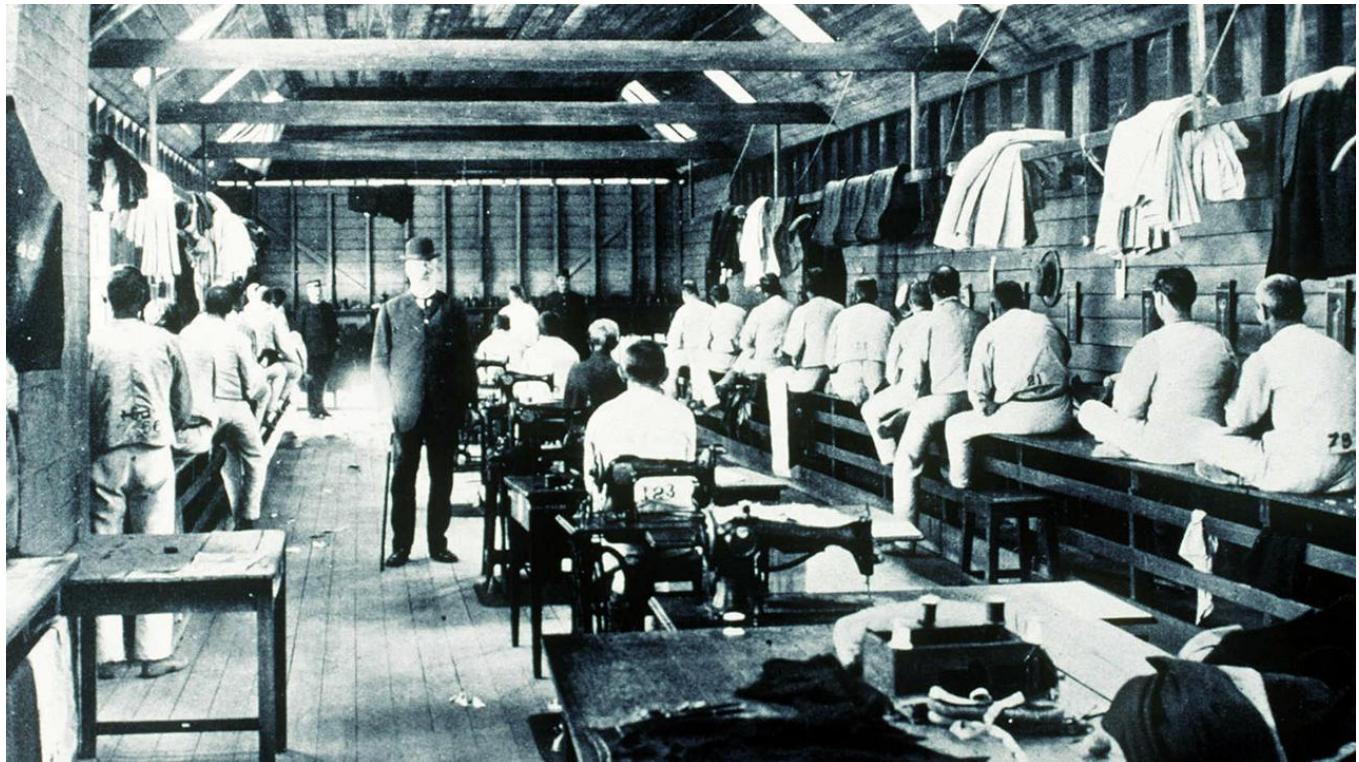
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More than two decades after the Moreton Bay penal settlement closed to convicts, a pretty little island in the bay became the new hell on earth for law-breakers.

St Helena opened in 1867 as Queensland's first penal establishment for long-term male prisoners.

A quarantine station had been built there a year earlier, but it was soon realised it would be put to better use housing prisoners from the crowded cells at Petrie Terrace who were spilling into the hulk Proserpine moored at the Brisbane River mouth.

Over the next 65 years, St Helena confined 7500 hardy souls and was the scene of some brutal business.



St Helena Island's prison tailor shop with disgraced prisoners forced to avert their faces. Picture: Courtesy of the John Oxley Library

And, as one correspondent put it, attention paid to the physical or moral diseases

of prisoners was slight: "The ruffian hoary-headed with crime and villainy of every description is allowed to herd with the lad sent here for a, perhaps, venial offence."

The very worst and nameless of vices were rampant among them so that many a young man came out with his criminal education complete.

Prisoners had no name, only the number allocated on arrival. For many years, they were forbidden to speak. A hasty word or even an ugly look could earn a flogging.

The maximum was 50 lashes, but this had to be done in two sessions as 25 was enough to see skin become bone and end at the infirmary.

But even this was preferable to solitary confinement, sealed below ground in a metre-wide cell with a dirt floor that turned to mud when it rained, to sleep on. It was pitch black and silent.



A prisoner stands by prison cell doors on St Helena Island. Picture: Courtesy of the John Oxley Library

An 1878 correspondent said it might be imagined that solitary confinement would be favourable to sleep and thought, but the reverse was the case.

"From what I can learn, their time in solitude is spent in contemplating a series of

horrible mental phantasmagoria”; and 28 days was enough for at least one prisoner to lose his mind.

St Helena was good business for the government though, as various profitable industries were established using the abundant free labour. There were carpenters, bricklayers and masons, quarrymen, shoemakers, saddlers, tinsmiths, and labourers. Ironically, the island’s tailors made the Queensland police uniforms.

Prisoners quarried stone and built a 400m pier. They also built Queensland’s first tramway to carry produce and people from the stockade and workshops to the wharf at the end of the pier. Four-wheeled trolleys were at first hauled by prisoners, and later by horses.

Sugar cane was planted and a mill built in 1869; and coral was collected for a limekiln producing cement for construction.



Day trippers explore the old convict settlement on St Helena Island. Picture: News Corp Australia

Sugar production wasn’t entirely successful as it was feared escapees could easily hide in the cane but then a new lark was discovered. A prisoner who cut off his finger on a knife while harvesting cane was given lighter duties. This led to a spate of similar “accidents” and a collection of St Helena fingers.

Escapes were rare, any attempt considered “a gratuitous self-infliction of punishment”.

Warders watched every movement from sentry boxes above the four corners of the stockade and even if an escapee did make it out, they had to survive swarms of mosquitoes in the mangroves around the island before tackling the strong currents and shark-infested waters for more than 5km to the mainland.

While a former prisoner wrote in 1886 of a lad convicted for horse-stealing successfully paddling a washing tub to the mainland, history records only one successful escape. Gunman Charles Leslie had accomplices waiting in a motor boat offshore early one morning in 1924.

Production dropped away during World War I when prisoners were returned to the mainland to cover for young men shipped off to the battlefields.



St Helena Island's graves are a reminder of the island's penal past. Picture: Supplied

During the 1920s, with only a few prisoners remaining, the good citizens of Brisbane bemoaned the use of a picturesque island as a jail and began calling for Brisbane City Council to take control and turn it into a pleasure resort for the people.

It finally closed in 1932 when, during the great Depression, it simply became unviable.

There were some grand plans for its future, including a golf course and rabbit hunting, but in the end, it was leased as a cattle farm, and was a dairy in the 1950s.

Finally, in 1979, St Helena was declared a historic national park where visitors can today wander through the ruins of the infamous prison grounds.

Only 56 of the incarcerated remain on the island, buried in graves with a number on the headstone because, without a name, they will forever remain prisoners of St Helena.

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