

# Nature, culture and history | St Helena Island National Park

## Nature, culture and history

- [Culture and history](#)
- [Natural environment](#)

## Culture and history

Aboriginal middens record that local people visited the island to hunt dugongs and flying-foxes and to gather shellfish.

The island did not receive the name "St Helena" until 1828. A story is told that an Aboriginal man known as Napoleon stole an axe on North Stradbroke Island. Like his namesake, Napoleon Bonaparte, he was exiled to another island, thereafter called St Helena. His exile lasted only as long as it took to build a canoe and paddle back.

In the 1860s, a short-lived dugong industry exported dugong oil to England for medicinal purposes. Also short-lived was the quarantine station, built in 1866 by prison labour from the prison hulk "Proserpine". Few vessels were quarantined before authorities deemed the buildings would be better used to house prisoners from overcrowded jails and hulks.

St Helena Penal Establishment was proclaimed in May 1867 and was a high security prison for long-term inmates until the 1920s, when it was decided to wind down the prison. It then functioned as a prison farm until it closed in December 1932.

Early attempts by the Moreton Bay League to turn the island into a recreation destination were defeated by the depression years. In 1939 the Brisbane City Council handed ownership to the Lands Department, which allowed various graziers to lease the land.

In October 1979, the island was gazetted as a national park, to be conserved as an historic site. Today, the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service works toward preserving the ruins and artefacts from further degradation and accurately presenting the park and its history to visitors.

## The prison era

St Helena Penal Establishment was considered a model prison of its time. The superintendent and warders managed a highly disciplined prison, where security was tight and successful escapes were few. Distance and isolation enforced basic self-sufficiency. While this came about through necessity, it also resulted in economic profit.

The early years saw prisoners clearing native vegetation, planting crops and constructing buildings. The island's resources were used wherever possible - buildings were constructed from sandstone blocks quarried from the southern flats and bricks moulded from island clay mixes. A lime kiln was constructed to burn coral for cement.

Maize and vegetable crops, supplemented with sheep and cattle herds, provided much of the island residents' food requirements. The most successful island produce included sugar cane and award-winning Ayrshire dairy cattle. Olive oil produced from the island's olive groves also won prizes in Italy.

As the prison became established, the range of industries was expanded. In the 1870s, trade workshops were erected and many products were sold to the mainland. Warders with trade skills trained prisoners to become saddle makers, tinsmiths, boot makers, tailors, blacksmiths and carpenters.

Warders' accommodation varied in style and placement according to their position in the hierarchy. The superintendent occupied a large home with extensive gardens considered some of the best in Queensland. Further along, smaller cottages were home to the wives and children of some warders, while dormitories housed the remaining warders.

## **The prison decline**

Despite the prison's successes, problems emerged. Families were removed from the island in the 1890s, causing dissatisfied warders to live apart from them for up to six weeks at a time. The age of the buildings made them a fire hazard, while their 19<sup>th</sup> century design did not accommodate new ideas for prisoner reform.

From the 1920s, St Helena became a prison farm. Long-term prisoners were transferred to Boggo Road Gaol while the remaining prisoners dismantled the prison buildings. The prison was finally closed in December 1932.

## **Natural environment**

Although the original dry vine forest was cleared, some natural regrowth and revegetation has occurred. Mangroves and mud flats provide an essential nursery for juvenile fish, crabs and shellfish. Dolphins, turtles and occasionally dugongs can be seen surfacing above the waters of Moreton Bay around the island.

St Helena Island has been internationally recognised as an important site for migratory wading birds. Each summer, these birds can be seen feeding around the shoreline before their marathon flight north. During winter, birds of prey such as kites, ospreys and sea eagles can be seen soaring above the island.

Moreton Bay has been designated as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention. For more information see the [Australian Wetlands Database\(external link\)](#).