The Alcatraz of Moreton Bay

Story and photographs by Jean Bull

Ruins of an old sugar mill on St Helena. The cane was crushed by three vertical rollers powered by four horses.

FROM the time of Matthew Flinders right up to the present day, passengers on ships entering Moreton Bay seldom fail to comment on the particularly red soil of a small island lying five miles off the mouth of the Brisbane River. A few, more observant than the rest, may even speculate idly about the origin of the tumbled stone ruins, surmounted by chimneys, on the island's seaward side, but these are soon forgotten in the excitement of nearing port.

Yet for many a reluctant voyager, making the trip against his own wishes, the sight must have sent a shiver down the spine; for the island is St Helena, for sixty-eight years the Alcatraz of Moreton Bay.

"Advance Australia" is carved below this crude representation of the Australian coat of arms on a crumbling cement plaque on the wall of the superintendent's office.

Given its name when, for some misdemeanour or other, an aboriginal nicknamed Napoleon was exiled there by the early authorities, St Helena was gazetted a penal settlement for convicts in 1866. And long after the transportation system was done away with, the island remained Queensland's main prison, though one without bars. In its latter years, after the majority of the prisoners and the workshops had been removed to the mainland, it became a prison farm, worked on the honour system — a system which seems to have been rather unnecessarily applied. Although many escape attempts were made, only one man ever got away from St Helena. The sharks in the surrounding waters saw to that.

To-day St Helena's 500 acres are leased for share-farming, and the ruins of the buildings constructed by the convicts form a sombre background for the green of crops. The farmer's cows rest in the lee of the high stone walls, and chew their cuds beneath the olive trees that once shaded the prisoners labouring beneath the overseer's eye.

Within a few months of the proclamation of St Helena as a penal settlement, convicts from the hulk *Proserpine* in the Brisbane River were at once set to work building their own gaol. Eventually the settlement was extended to house 300 convicts. St Helena operated as a fairly self-contained unit, and even exported some of its produce to the mainland. In the island workshops the convicts were taught various trades such as boot-making, bread baking and sewing their rough uniforms, while the blacksmith's shop dealt with the riveting of the leg-irons which were worn both day and night. Another of the blacksmith's jobs was the maintenance of the tram-line, along which the men pushed a wooden carriage between the settlement to the jetty.

The island was extensively farmed. Corn, potatoes, lucerne, and vegetables all flourished in the volcanic soil. Twenty acres were planted with sugar-cane. The first small crushing mill erected in 1869 was replaced, in 1903, by a bigger one which now stands derelict. The cane was crushed by three vertical rollers, 18 inches in diameter and 15 inches high, powered by four horses, but the animals were later supplanted by a steam engine. Two vats, each 40 feet deep, in which the sugar was roughly crystallized for prison use, now lie open to the sky, the lantana clustering thickly about their smooth stone sides. Cane-growing was finally stopped by the authorities, for the crop provided a convenient hiding-place for malingerers.

Though all the gaol buildings are now unroofed, their various functions are easily discerned. The high black walls of the exercise yards, for instance, stand as firmly as when they were erected, as does the cell block with its windows still barred with rusty iron. The best state of preservation is probably in the domestic offices—the bakeries with their stone ovens, the primitively equipped laundries — and in what must once have been the superintendent's office which bears a crude representation of the Aus-

The derelict stone church of St Helena was originally intended for the use of the gaol staff and their families, but the tiny building was never consecrated or used as a church, as during its erection, one prisoner murdered another at the place intended for the altar.

tralian coat of arms on a crumbling cement plaque half-way up one wall.

Towards its outer end, the island rises to a kind of shelf. Here are the remains of the staff cottages, standing like a row of broken teeth against the skyline, and the superintendent's house, now occupied by a share-farmer and his family. A few stone troughs and fountains, the work of a sculptor convict, are strewn incongruously through the fowl-yards and pig-pens. On the island's highest point, which was practically in the superintendent's backyard, there stood at one time a flag signal tower from which messages were sent to the quarantine station at Lytton, right at the mouth of the river. A 20-lb. cannon was fired if help were needed urgently during the night.

Down on the shore facing the Brisbane bayside suburb of Wynnum, is one of the saddest spots on St Helena, the convict graveyard, with its row of numbered stone crosses hiding the identity of the men who lie beneath them. Another is the derelict stone church, huddled under the down-drooping branches of the surrounding trees. Intended for the use of the gaol staff and their families, the tiny building was never consecrated or used as a church, for, during its erection, tempers flared and one prisoner murdered another at the empty space intended for the altar.

Still, murder on St Helena was not altogether unexpected, for men were driven to desperation by the harshness of the convict system. Some committed suicide; others lost their lives in trying to escape. Newly-arrived convicts were taken to the blacksmith's shop to have their leg-irons riveted on, then immured in the dungeons for several days to "cool off" before being allowed to mix with the other prisoners. Until 1867, when an an inquiry resulted in a ban upon its use, the lash was a common punishment. After that year, shot drill was substituted. Another irritating punishment was the stopping of indulgences, such as tobacco, for minor offences. And although solitary confinement was officially frowned upon, there are still the remains of a single cell running back into an earth bank, out of sight and earshot of any other buildings. It could, of course, have been a rough and ready cold-storage room in the days before refrigeration, except for the heavy wooden door with the small barred grating at the height of a man's eye.

To wander round the island is to stumble over all sorts of evidence of its unhappy past—the kiln in which coral was burned to provide lime for the buildings; the buoys which marked the closest point a boat could approach without being fired on; rusted pieces of iron which could easily have fastened about a chafed ankle. Everywhere are underground tanks and wells. When St Helena was first mooted as a penal settlement, the one drawback was its lack of surface water. Preliminary drilling, however, showed water to exist at an average depth of 10 feet. So the island is dotted with tanks and wells, all now in a state of decay, and many a hazard for the cattle and the incautious.