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St Helena Island the 'hell-hole of Pacific'

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Located several kilometres from the mouth of the Brisbane River, St Helena Island's prison ran for more than 60 years, and was considered one of the foremost penal establishments at the time.

When the Petrie Terrace gaol became more and more crowded in the early 1860s, about 30 prisoners were transferred to an old hulk anchored near the mouth of the river. As a part of their labours, they were taken across Moreton Bay by whaleboats to St Helena Island from 1866. They began sinking wells, clearing scrubs, quarrying stone and building accommodation for a new quarantine station.

Plans for a quarantine station were eventually replaced by the more urgent need for a new prison. On May 14, 1867 the island was declared a penal prison.

The prison was a place of punishment - the lash, dark underground solitary confinement cells, the gag, and the shot drill were common consequences.

St Helena gained a reputation as the "hell hole of the Pacific" and "Queensland's inferno".

Prisoners were taught trades in the island's workshops, including tailoring, boot-making, bread baking and butchery.

The island's prize dairy herd won many awards at the Brisbane Ekka.

Potatoes, maize and other vegetables grew very well in the rich volcanic soil. The island's sugar mill produced about 75 tons of sugar each year.

In 1911, mainland Brisbane erupted in panic with news that two prisoners had escaped from St Helena and could not be located. Residents reported sightings of the convicts, and hysteria ensued. Henry Craig and David McIntyre were found two weeks after their "escape" - hiding in the ceiling of the tailor's workshop ... on St Helena!

Only one prisoner was not recaptured after escaping from St Helena. He got away when his criminal accomplices picked him up in a motor boat.

The last prisoner left St Helena on February 15, 1933.

Olive trees on the island still produce fruit.