

The St Helena Island Community - connecting today's community to a prison island of the past



Photo: Belinda Daly

The turquoise waters and white rock faces of Walkerville are reminiscent of the Aegean Sea surrounding the Greek Isles. But standing in the southerly most point of Victoria, Australia, we're 15 000 kms and a hemisphere away from the warm lazy waters of the ancient land of Greece. In Walkerville, the story of the landscape is written in limestone and the remnants of that story stand solidly today in the form of enormous lime kilns and quarry sites created around 140 years ago when Walkerville was a small town called Waratah.

We're also 2 000 kms away from St Helena Island in Queensland, where a lime kilns stands solidly on the foreshore of a volcanic island with no limestone cliffs in sight. This lime kiln is older, having been constructed in 1869 by prisoners incarcerated on the island. They needed to create lime to produce mortar for the building of the prison walls that would eventually contain them and their product of choice was the [lime rich shells and coral fragments](#) found in the shallow waters and coral reefs surrounding the island.





St Helena's lime kiln continuously produced large quantities of lime, with 360 bushels in the first year of 1869 and 1302 bags in 1890. So much was produced that excess lime was supplied to other Government Departments or sold in Brisbane. Photo: Amanda Thepanda

Walkerville also desired to create lime for the production of cement, but it was the rock from the high limestone bluffs (calcium carbonate) that supplied the base product. Wandering through the fascinating ruins of old Waratah yesterday, the comparison and contrast with St Helena was foremost in my mind. Walkerville kilns – of which there were 6, were made of a strong granite, with large walls extending out to funnel the wind and fan the flames inside the kiln. St Helena's is the same design, but made from sandstone capped with a lime whitewash to aid preservation.



Having stood in situ for around 140 years, some of the original Walkerville lime kilns remain as strong sentinels in the landscape, despite native vegetation gradually creeping back. Some of the kilns were destroyed when a road was put in place decades ago. Photo: Belinda Daly

The process for lime burning in kilns was the same:

1. Collect or quarry the base product
2. Stack the limestone or coral/shells and firewood cut from the nearby forests in layers inside the kiln funnel. Light this and keep burning for days or weeks at a time, adding more firewood and limestone/coral as the burning progresses.
3. Lime produced dropped to the base of the funnel where it was shovelled out of the small opening by a worker.

An account from Waratah in 1902 describes the final part of the process:

"All the fuel had been completely burnt, and the man each time drew out a shovelful of lime and emptied it onto a bag fixed on a frame beside him. As each bag was filled, he wheeled it away, placing it with a heap in another part of the shed."



Photo: Belinda Daly

Prisoner James Heathcote described St Helena Penal Establishment's 8 week period of lime burning as "*painful laborious work.*" Trade Instructor and mason John Labbett Sanders, who oversaw the whole operation as well as the No. 6 gang of prisoners, requested a pay increase in 1888 due to his hours:

"I am out at 5 o'clock in the morning until half past six at night and again visit the lime kiln between 9 and 10 o'clock before retiring. This includes Saturdays and Sundays....I am working over 70 hours a week..."

By 1890, 80 workers were employed on the Walkerville kiln site, and with them came their families. The town of 'Waratah' was said to resemble a Cornish village, containing a store, school, post office,

many cottages and even a ‘coffee palace!’ It was in the visit to the historic Walkerville/Waratah cemetery that really cemented the connection between the St Helena Island and Walkerville lime burning sites (pardon the pun!), as it is here that evidence of families can be seen. In the Waratah cemetery, James Dewar, the manager of the lime-works is buried next to his wife Margaret, his daughter and grand-daughter, all of whom played out their lives here from the 1880’s. Despite the ongoing hardships, families were integral components of building a solid community and the subsequent success of the operations.



Centre photo is the headstone of James Dewar, Walkerville mine manager who died in 1907, with his wife Margaret Dewar, deceased in 1898. Their daughter's grave is in the front left corner. The headstone of Kilns manager William Hughes can be seen on the right. Photo Belinda Daly

Similarly on St Helena Island, an entire family lived on the island well before the prison was in existence, engaged in lime-burning as a means of earning money to support the family. The existence of the Crompton family first came to my attention via my fellow St Helena researcher Sandy Liddle

and another local Lisa Weightman. They were able to supply a death certificate for the matriarch of the family Elizabeth Crompton, who had died on the island in 1865 and is buried there in an unknown location. At the time, the only known records of people on St Helena in the 1860's were some dugong fisherman and Immigrants forced to quarantine there off ships, so the existence of a large family living on the island from around 1863 was both a shock and a mystery.

| 1865. | | DEATHS in the District of Brisbane | | | |
|-------|--|---|---|--|--|
| No. | DESCRIPTIONS. | | (1) Cause of Death. (2) Duration of last illness. (3) Medical Attendant by whom certified, and (4) Where he last saw deceased. | Name and Surname of Father and Mother, (maiden name) if known, with Name or Profession. | Signature, Description and Residence of Informant |
| 28/5 | When and where died. 24 February 1865 Island of Akle, Merita Bay | Name and Surname, Rank or Profession. Elizabeth Crompton | Sex and Age. Female 43 years | (1) <i>Pettiner</i> (2) (3) <i>W. Macmillan</i> <i>certified</i> (4) | Richard Gurney James Crome Catherine wife (Lavinia Dine) Island of Akle, Merita Bay |

Death certificates like that of Elizabeth Crompton, are the primary evidence needed to piece together previously unknown chapters in the history of a place. Elizabeth and the Crompton Family's existence on the island and the research we conducted afterwards led to new discoveries of the people and events that took place on St Helena Island in the 1860's, before the Prison was built.

The unravelling of their story as they engaged in lime burning added a new historical chapter to the island. It had always been assumed that lime burning started on St Helena with the establishment of the prison, but this was not to be. The entire Crompton family located themselves permanently on St Helena Island, which at the time would have been very remote. Here they gathered shells and coral which they burnt on the island in 1863 to 1865, bagging the resulting ash on site and selling it to Mr Campbell in Brisbane. The full 2-part story is a great read and can be accessed [here](#) and [here](#).

No permanent structure exists on St Helena Island from the Crompton family's lime burning exploits, or of Elizabeth's grave, but the prisoner-built lime kiln stands strong, gazing out at the ocean and reminding us of the story of lime on St Helena Island. Walkerville kilns and limestone bluffs continue to tower over visitors, protected within Cape Liptrap National Park. Their history has shaped and will continue to be an integral part of the story of this corner of the world too.



The stunning coastline of Walkerville in South Gippsland, Victoria, combines the beauty of both our natural and cultural histories. Photo: Belinda Daly