Deloraine
PROBATION STATION
1843 - 1847
"... the universal opinion expressed by all who have had the opportunity of judging, is that, with very few exceptions, the convict issues from the probation station a worse man than when he entered it."

- Lt Governor William Denison, July 1847

The probation system of convict discipline was peculiar to the British colony of Van Diemen’s Land where it was introduced, as an experiment, in 1839. Such was the experience of the system in the colony up to 1846 that it was thereafter greatly modified and gradually abandoned and never tried elsewhere.

The Deloraine Probation Station was part of a network of similar facilities built across Tasmania to house convicts engaged in public works. The probation system was designed to avoid the lottery style allocation of convicts to private landholders where their experience was totally dependent upon the nature of their masters. This system of indentured labour also smacked of slavery and was generally frowned upon by the political elite of the day.

Probation Stations were designed to accept convicts into the lowest grade (third-class) and offer them the chance to improve their status by working hard and behaving well. Once convicts had attained first-class they could hire out their labour for a fee set by the Government and work towards a ticket of leave.

Despite efforts to make the convict experience more consistent and foster reform through religious instruction and hard labour, the probation station system was equally prone to abuse and corruption and skilled convicts often found themselves moving more swiftly through the system towards a ticket of leave, irrespective of their moral character, than those with no skills to offer the growing labour market.

The system had high ideals but failed miserably because of the level of graft and corruption that became entrenched within the bureaucracy. Cooks, clerks and storemen were often recruited from the criminal classes and this led to regular rorting of the system as each person skimmed a little off the top of Government Issue to either fill their own bellies or to barter for favours. Good overseers were equally rare and many connived with convicts to cheat the Government and produce excess goods for sale on the growing black market.

The result of this corruption meant that the third-class men at the bottom of the food chain received the most meagre rations despite carrying out the heaviest physical work. This often led to disentragement and saw food develop into a major focus for conflict. One such incident occurred in October 1845 when there was a strike and a consequent mutiny at Deloraine. Convicts had had a good part of their rations stolen and were prevented from apprehending the thieves by their overseer. When the shortfall in rations was not made good the convicts went out on strike, refusing to work until rations were restored.

As a result of their strike the convicts were punished by having their rations halved; this action then led to a minor rebellion and finally a mass escape. The newspapers of the time made much of this assault on public sensibilities, casting the escapees in a dangerous light, and accusing them of butchering a live cow. Evidence would suggest that the beast in
question was a working bullock with a broken leg that had been put down prior to being butchered for fresh meat by the escapees. Fresh meat represented an inconceivable luxury to convicts who lived on salted pork or meat that was ‘green, slimy and crawling with flies’, as described in a convict memoir.

In the end the ‘rebellion’ was simply an expression of collective grievances. Most surrendered peacefully after their brief flight to freedom, although there were recorded instances of house breaking and theft. When it came to trial many were acquitted as it was generally felt that they had been provoked. A handful of ringleaders were either sent to Norfolk Island or Port Arthur or had the length of their sentences extended.

The mutiny of October 1845 probably helped to assign the Probation Station to the pages of history as eventually a decision was made to disband the system and bring convicts under a more centralised administration in Launceston. It was deemed to be more efficient to administer convicts from a central facility that required fewer staff to oversee the issue of provisions, offering less opportunity for graft and corruption which had occurred so easily in remote outstations.

The Probation System reflects a social experiment designed to address the inequity of the assignment system. It was based on sound principles aimed at encouraging reform by offering a level of education and rewards for good behaviour, whilst threatening dire consequences for those who remained recalcitrant. However, like so many well-meaning social programs, it failed because it was never adequately funded or staffed. It also did not take into account the desperate skills shortages in the new colony that saw convict artisans in high demand, irrespective of their moral character.

Designed to reward the good and punish the bad, the probation system was corrupted by the colony’s insatiable need for skilled labour. Convict craftsmen found themselves promoted in spite of their unruly behaviour whereas unskilled urchins from the slums, or uneducated farm boys, tended to languish in the lower grades, finding promotion more difficult to obtain.

WORKERS WANTED
no references required

Once they had reached the first-class and were able to hire themselves out for a fee, these unskilled convicts were forced to take menial and lowly paid work as shepherds and grooms. Consequently the notion of merit based advancement was seriously flawed from the start. The system did however attempt to impart a range of essential life-skills and convicts were able to attend classes aimed at giving them basic literacy and numeracy as well as fundamental religious education aimed at improving their sense of morality and spiritual wellbeing. Despite the obvious brutality of physical punishment, such as the lash, penal reformers were keen to provide genuine incentives and regarded religion as a fundamental tool in their arsenal. The use of solitary confinement as an alternative to wielding the ‘cat of nine tails’ whip was seen as a more humane option, although records would indicate that convicts were not always of the same opinion.

“Perfect silence is to be kept at the musters, which are to be in two ranks; each class by itself, divided into messes. Silence must also be strictly observed whilst the convicts are marching to and from their places of labour.”
DELORAINE PROBATION STATION
1843 - 1847

“Of the three messrooms one is so badly contrived that the rain cannot be kept out. They have wooden paved floors made of logs 8 or 12 inches in depth which make a very good floor. Of the Sleeping Wards, many of them have also wooden pavements but the sleeping accommodation is rather narrow. Those on the lower tier are too near the floor to admit cleansing and occupy the sides and backs of the larger huts. The ventilation and security are inferior.”

- extract from CJ La Trobe’s 1847 report on the Deloraine Probation Station

In its short life the Deloraine Probation Station was home to many interesting characters. It was described as a poorly constructed camp where good and evil mixed in equal measure. The convict barracks were built by local landholders who were keen to have access to convict labour. It is likely that they were constructed on timber base plates similar to the slab huts constructed by trappers and snarers of that era. Consequently there are no surviving foundations in the archaeological record. The one exception is the Superintendent’s house which was built of brick and mortar and survived well into the 20th century before being demolished.

Despite the absence of built structures, the site contains a number of important botanical markers, including a number of European trees. Botanical markers have become well recognised in the archaeological record and are often all that remain of a settlement whose buildings have been dismantled and recycled through time. Old house sites are frequently identified by the ubiquitous conifer windbreak; plum, laurel or apple trees and the yellow swathe of daffodils that bloom in the springtime.

The site of the Deloraine Probation Station contains similar elements with deciduous European trees planted as ‘symbols of Empire’, a practice that often identifies buildings of administrative significance such as court houses, schools and government offices. An existing laurel tree would have undoubtedly provided fruit for jam making for families occupying the Superintendent’s house, as laurel is one of the most frequently found fruit trees in 19th century gardens.

The Deloraine Probation Station was formed in 1843 and closed in 1847 when the men were transferred to the Launceston Hiring Depot. In 1846 the Officers were: George Courtenay (Superintendent); HC Adams (Catechist); T Butler (Visiting Religious Instructor); R Wigmore (Storekeeper). Courtenay assisted La Trobe in his investigations and was later Superintendent at Port Arthur (Jul 1848 - Oct 1853).
The storekeeper of the Probation Station was responsible for all stores, clothing and bedding. He was expected to give the strictest attention to economy in the distribution of the stores.

It was a requirement of the Regulations that no articles were to be issued without being properly marked, and that every article that could be repaired had to be.

‘All mess and barrack utensils, and bedding, are to bear a station number; the numbers will be from 1 to 400. The men’s clothing and shirts will bear a number corresponding with that on their respective probation records.’

Such strict numbering of all items and itemised recording went some way to discouraging theft:

‘The boots of the prisoners are marked with the month of issue as well as with the regular number, these are recorded in a book kept for the purpose which renders it very difficult for one prisoner to change the boots with another without detection.’

The Storekeeper was also to ensure that all unservicable stores, when condemned by the visiting magistrate and superintendent, were to be received into store, there to await the survey and disposal by the respective Officers of Ordnance.

Clothing and bedding was allowed on the following scale for each convict based at the probation station. No clothing or bedding was permitted on any station except what was allowed by the regulations, as set out in ‘Regulations of the First Stage of Convict Probation in Van Diemen’s Land - Convict Department, October 1843’.

Clothing
2 cloth jackets
2 pairs of cloth trousers
3 striped cotton shirts
4 pairs of shoes, or 2 pairs of ankle boots in lieu of 3 pairs of shoes
2 leather caps

Bedding
1 rug
1 blanket
1 palliasse (mattress)
(2 blankets were allowed in winter in the cold unsettled districts).

An Extraordinary Discovery

In the early 1960’s an extraordinary discovery was made at a cottage undergoing renovation in Granton, a suburb on the Derwent River in northern Hobart. A convict-era shirt, almost intact and in excellent condition, was found stuffed in the wall cavity of the cottage. At the same time a convict-era convict shoe was found under the floorboards.

Thousands of convicts were transported to Van Diemen’s Land and although a lack of government supplies meant it was a constant challenge to keep them clothed, these shirts were one of the most common items issued to convicts in Australia. What makes this shirt such an extraordinary discovery is that it is one of only three existing convict-era shirts discovered in Australia and is the most intact and well preserved example.

Convict men were also assigned specially designed trousers that buttoned up the inside of the leg. This enabled the pants to be removed over a pair of leg irons.

The shirt and shoe were purchased by the National Museum of Australia where they are now on exhibit with other items that present the history of Australia since European settlement.
In October 1845 the Deloraine Probation Station experienced a major incident when twenty-one probationers rebelled and made their escape. The trouble had begun when three probationers absconded from the Station, taking with them a large proportion of the rations designated for the third-class men. The Station Superintendent, believing the remaining prisoners to have in some way assisted these men to escape, refused to ‘make good the shortfall’. For their part, the accused men protested that they had in actual fact been prevented from apprehending the escapees by their overseer who had shouted, ‘let them go, they’ll soon be taken again’. Thus denied their full allowance, the men of the third-class gang went on strike, laying down their tools and refusing to work.

Now having to deal with a gang strike, the Station Superintendent, with the support of the visiting magistrate, punished all those on strike with an extension of their period of probation of between three and six months. Thus sentenced, the men were then placed on half rations. This was the last straw, the gang now determined to break free from the brutal and harsh rule and so en masse escaped from the Station.

The men are reported to have raided some settler properties, taking ‘money, tobacco, clothing, firearms, powder and shot’. The mutiny, what would be Tasmania’s largest Station outbreak, was reported in a letter to the Editor of the Launceston Examiner 4 October 1845 edition that, ‘probationers have absconded from Deloraine, who have armed themselves by robbing several houses, and are at this moment holding the neighbourhood in perfect terror’.

The twenty-one mutineers were eventually captured by the police and put on trial for the raiding of the settlers’ homes. The judge, in summing up, stated that there appeared to be ‘some ground of excuse’ for their actions. He also recommended that the operation of the Deloraine Probation Station ‘be made the subject of future enquiry’. Eight of the original twenty-one mutineers were acquitted. They were returned to the Probation Station and to hard labour on the roads. The remaining thirteen were convicted; they received the death sentence but this was commuted to life transportation to be served either at Norfolk Island or the brutal penal station of Port Arthur.

**COLONIAL BOLTERS**

Australia’s first bushrangers were escaped convicts called ‘bolters’. They fled into the bush and survived by stealing from settlers and travellers. Some of the bolters worked alone; others formed gangs. The largest gang operated in Tasmania between 1805 and 1814 and numbered more than one hundred bolters.

*The escape as recorded in The Cornwall Chronicle, Saturday 11 October, 1845.*
CONVICT PROFILE - John Donovan

John Donovan was just 17 years old when he was convicted of petty theft in Leeds, Yorkshire in 1843. It was not his first offence and in 1844 he found himself aboard HMS Anson bound for the penal colony of Van Diemen’s Land under sentence of seven years transportation. His convict record would suggest that he was more of a serial pest than a hardened criminal - at least by our modern day standards.

Donovan’s conduct record shows that he was a cheeky, rebellious young lad, barely 5 feet tall. His numerous misdemeanours included insolence, idleness, neglect of duty, destroying Government property and abusive language. He spent periods of time in solitary confinement and received fourteen days on bread and water for communicating with men of the first-class whilst at Deloraine. Such dialogue between the divisions was strictly prohibited in an attempt to prevent ‘contamination’ of those who were working their way up through the system. Similarly, he found himself in solitary confinement for abusing the barber who tried to cut his hair short - to the regulation length!

Donovan was also involved in the ‘Deloraine Mutiny’ where convicts escaped en masse in protest at their treatment after a strike was called over inadequate rations. He stood trial in Launceston with a number of other convicts and was amongst those found not guilty of any crimes during this escapade.

John Donovan was granted his freedom in 1850 at the expiration of his sentence. Records indicate he was still pushing his luck right up until the end of his incarceration and we are left to wonder what he actually learned from the whole experience. Whatever the affects, it would seem that, like the majority of ex-convicts, on release he quickly melted into the growing population, married and disappeared into the anonymity of an ordinary life. Quite possibly a far better prospect than he would have had in his native Yorkshire in the mid 1800’s.
John Ryan was transported from his homeland of County Tipperary, Ireland upon his being found guilty of stealing clothing. The sentence for the 23 year old was seven years hard labour, to be served in Van Diemen's Land, on the other side of the world.

It was a four month voyage from Dublin to Hobart aboard the ship Constant. By all accounts the sea voyage on these transport ships was a harrowing experience, suggesting a high degree of traumatisation long before the convict entered the harsh world of probation stations and penal settlements.

On arrival in Van Diemen's Land in August 1843, John was assigned to the Deloraine Probation Station. Records show that less than one year later, in February 1844, he absconded from the Station. His freedom was shortlived; John was discovered by a Police Constable as he was attempting to break in and rob a hut near Deloraine. To evade capture he made a run for it, but was fired upon by the Constable. It was a sound shot that struck its mark and John was killed. He was buried in a cemetery at Deloraine.

Food was a constant bone of contention within the probation system. Convict rations were set by the Government and would probably have been seen as generous by those enforced refugees who came from England’s urban slums. The distribution of the rations were however a major concern for convicts and administrators alike as they were handled by clerks and cooks from the convict population who were inclined to skim off a percentage for either personal consumption or profit. Consequently the third-class convicts, at the bottom end of the ration allocation, often received the leftovers, this despite being engaged in the heaviest physical labour.

Theft of food appears regularly in the records of convict discipline and was the underlying catalyst for the infamous ‘Deloraine Mutiny’.

Interestingly, Administrator La Trobe’s Report of 1847 concluded that the food on offer to convicts was of a high standard and in plentiful supply.

**Convict Daily Rations**

The following list details the scale of daily rations that were allocated to convicts working in probationary labour gangs; no other food or indulgence of any kind was allowed:

- 1.5 lbs flour
- 1.5 lbs of vegetables
- 1 lb of fresh meat, or 1 lb of salt beef or 10 ounces of salt pork
- 0.5 ounce of salt
- 0.5 ounce of soap

“the quality of the food of every description issued to the convict population throughout the colony was excellent - Better meat, better bread, no class of men, rich or poor, need ever desire”

**FOOD GLORIOUS FOOD**
The local Police Magistrate during the Deloraine Probation Station period was John Peyton Jones of Westbury. He was responsible for administering colonial justice to wayward convicts and overseers alike and had a colourful history himself.

Born in County Sligo, Ireland, Captain John Peyton Jones arrived in Van Diemen’s Land in 1829 with the 63rd Regiment. When stationed with the military guard at Eaglehawk Neck in 1830-32, he devised the scheme of placing a chain line of savage dogs across the neck of the narrow isthmus to prevent prisoners escaping from Port Arthur to the north. This action secured him legendary status within the convict era.

Governor Franklin appointed Jones as Police Magistrate at Westbury in 1841 and he went on to play an important part in the township’s early history. He was prominent in local organisations such as the Working Men’s Club, Public Library, Show Society and St Andrew’s Church and was elected the first Warden of the Westbury Municipal Council in 1863.

John Peyton Jones is buried in the Westbury Anglican Cemetery. His life is celebrated through a public artwork in the Westbury Silhouette Trail.

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