

Wadjemup Timeline

A brief chronology of the history incarceration on Wadjemup.

**Compiled by the Department of Local Government, Sport
and Cultural Industries Aboriginal History WA unit.¹**

Disclaimer: Please be aware the following document contains information from primary sources that reflect the racial attitudes from the time when they were created, including language that is considered offensive today. The Department does not endorse this language and apologises for any distress caused.

The Department acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Wadjemup, the Whadjuk Noongar people and their Elders past and present. We pay our respect to the many Aboriginal people from across the state whose ancestors were incarcerated on the Island, and to those who were laid to rest so far from their homelands. We acknowledge the ongoing sadness, pain and devastation that the history of incarceration has caused for families and communities and recognise the strength and resilience of their descendants.

¹ Some entries from P. Joske, C. Jeffery, L. Hoffman. *Rottnest Island, A Documentary History*, UWAP, 1995.



+30,000 years ago – A fertile extension of the mainland occupied by the Whadjuk Noongar people of south-west of Western Australia.



The rising sea level covers the lowland to the immediate west of Walyalup (Fremantle) resulting in the creation of an island.



Despite this separation from the mainland, Wadjemup continues to remain extremely significant to Whadjuk cultural beliefs throughout the generations and is known today as the resting place of the spirits.

1619

Sighted by Dutchman Frederick De Houtman, commander of the exploratory vessels *Dordrecht* and *Amsterdam*.

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1658

Samuel Volkerson, skipper of the Dutch vessel *Waeckende Boey* visits the island on three occasions in search of survivors from a shipwreck.

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1696

Willem de Vlamingh, skipper of *Geelvinck*, lands and names the island 't *Eylandt 't Rottenest* ('Rats' Nest Island').

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1801

Crew members from French frigate *Naturaliste* under the command of Captain Hamelin explore the Island over a two-week period.



1802

The Crew of the *HMS Investigator* under the command of Captain Matthew Flinders R.N. collect samples of flora and fauna during an inspection of the island.



1822

Phillip Parker King, Captain of the *Bathurst*, and his botanist Allan Cunningham visit the island during a circumnavigation of the continent and depart with an unfavourable impression.

1826

Troops from the 39th Regiment under the command of Major Edmund Lockyer, along with 23 convicts, establish a settlement at Albany.



1827

Captain James Stirling despatched from N.S.W. to survey the Swan River and Cockburn Sound visits Wadjemup. Stirling would become the first Governor and Commander in Chief of the Swan River Colony two years later.



1829

Western Australia annexed by Britain. First British colonists arrive in June.



1831

First town and pastoral lots taken up; farming activities commence on the Island.



1830

Survey of the Island undertaken by Benjamin Smyth with the view of establishing a township to be known as Kingstown.

1833

The Noongar name 'Wadjemup' is acknowledged in the *Perth Gazette* having been provided by Robert Menli Lyon following discussion with Yagan, a revered Noongar leader, who was serving a term of imprisonment on Carnac Island at the time he was interviewed.



1838

An item in the *Perth Gazette* refers to a plan by John Hutt, the Governor of WA, to convert Wadjemup into 'a place of security for the confinement of the native inhabitants as may be guilty of any offences.' His stated intentions were to provide a humane alternative solution to mainland incarceration and for the facility to be regarded as a training establishment. However, these intentions were interpreted differently by those responsible for implementation.

Lawrence Welch appointed Superintendent of the Government Establishment, Rottnest. First 10 Aboriginal prisoners arrive under escort to erect dwellings, and harvest salt, and are chained to a tree as no prison building exists. First prison completed by the end of the year.

1839

Welch leaves the island and Henry Vincent is appointed as the new Superintendent.

By the end of the year a house, store and salt house is constructed with prison labour.



1840

Charles Symmons appointed first 'Protector of Aborigines.'



1843

Francis Armstrong, 'Interpreter of Aborigines,' endeavours to establish a native mission on Wadjemup. The project collapses within a very short period of time with the participants returning to the mainland.



1842

Superintendent Vincent acquitted on a charge of cruelty to prisoners.



1841

Vincent is commended for his successes in the construction of dwellings including a house for the Superintendent, and for the production of tons of salt, the reaping of wheat and the formation of gardens for vegetable production. All of which is accomplished using forced prison labour.



1846

Vincent charged again with cruelty to prisoners.



1847

House built for newly appointed 'Moral Agent' and Storekeeper, Francis Armstrong.



Act to Constitute the Island of Rottnest as a Legal Prison passes in Parliament.

1850

A further five prisoners escape by boat including one from King George Sound, two from Gingin, and one from the Victoria Plains.

1855

Wadjemup proclaimed a penal establishment once more following the temporary closure of the prison. Henry Vincent is appointed as Superintendent on a permanent basis.

1857

Vincent directs the construction of various farm and school buildings.

1858

Aboriginal prison population 36.

1848

Aboriginal prison population 44.

1849

With the construction of buildings on the island completed all the prisoners are transferred back to the mainland in September with a number returning within weeks to assist with the harvesting of crops.

On 20 November, eight escaped in a boat belonging to the Pilot Establishment and succeeded in reaching the mainland.

1856

The 'Great Wadjemup Fire' damages most buildings with a warder later charged with arson.

1862

Construction of a new prison begins.

Sixteen Aboriginal prisoners die from measles, being half the total number of deaths recorded for the entire year.

Additional complaints raised regarding the behaviour of Henry Vincent.

1864

Construction of the Quod is completed using forced prison labour. The Quod would become the main prison building during the penal era, until its closure in 1912.

1868

Aboriginal prison population 68.

1875

Public concern raised about conditions on the island in the *Herald* newspaper under the heading '*Rottnest: Native Paradise or Black Man's Grave?*'

1878

Aboriginal prison population 80.

1865

William Vincent, son of Henry Vincent, convicted of ill treatment of an Aboriginal prisoner.

1872

Well known English novelist and civil servant Anthony Trollope visits and later reports on the staging of a corroboree involving 18 participants.

1879

First hanging of an Aboriginal prisoner, Tampin (no. 867), for the murder of John Moir, a settler at Fanny Cove near Albany.

1867

Henry Vincent retires following investigation of charges of cruelty against Aboriginal prisoners.

Aboriginal prison population 65.

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1880

Construction of Boys' Reformatory begins.

1884

Aboriginal prison population 167.

Superintendent advocates for the creation of a new cemetery close to the existing one.

1885

The execution of two Aboriginal prisoners takes place on Wadjemup, reportedly in the presence of 170 Aboriginal prisoners.

1883

A further three Aboriginal prisoners executed for murder, Wangabiddie and Nannacrow for the deaths of Charles Redfern and Charles Brackle in the Gascoyne respectively, and Guerilla, for the killing of Anthony Cornish in the Kimberley.

Governor Broome appoints a Commission to investigate the conditions and conduct of the Prison, with the unsatisfactorily small size of the cells identified as a main concern in the report findings. A further response to the report results in the closure of the existing cemetery and the creation of a new burial ground.

The total number of prisoners affected by influenza throughout the year, including those discharged, amounts to 269.

1886

Aboriginal Protection Act passed in Parliament. Aboriginal prisoner population 116, 87 of whom are incarcerated for killing livestock.

1888

The fifth and final execution of an Aboriginal prisoner on the island, Carlabangunburra, for the murder of a man named Indyco at the Hamersley Range.

Aboriginal prison population 60.

1892

Influenza epidemic without fatalities.

1893

A visitor to the island witnesses a corroboree with 180 participants taking part.

1895

Prison population falls to 40, the lowest number for some years and significantly less than that required to ensure that it remains economically viable.

1887

Influenza epidemic affects around 50 prisoners and results in one death.

1889

Two boys, Paddy Maloney (778) and Bagpipe (779), aged 10 and 11 respectively, charged with 'hut robbing' at Esperance Bay and sentenced to the Boys' Reformatory for six months with hard labour. They remain in detention for almost one month prior to being discharged to Bishop Salvado at the New Norcia Mission. Correspondence associated with the case confirms the fact that another young boy had served time at the Reformatory previously.

1896

A question regarding the removal of prisoners from the island as a precursor to the creation of a tourist destination raised in Parliament.

1897

25 of the 26 deaths on the island are attributed to influenza, with 40 affected at one point during the year.

1898

Influenza epidemic results in the death of 30 Aboriginal prisoners, 17 in August alone.

Frederick Pearse appointed as last Superintendent of the prison.

1898

Inquest into the death of Niger (no. 100) concludes that the cells on the island "do not afford sufficient accommodation for three adult prisoners" and that "reformation in the management is very desirable".

1898

Royal Commission into Prisons announced.

1898

The Inspector of Charitable Institutions compiles a detailed report on the operations of the Boys' Reformatory, describing conditions, numbers, conduct, discipline, training, education and health matters.

1898

The last death and burial of a prisoner on Wadjemup takes place with the death of Nardarook (207), who had been incarcerated for the spearing of cattle.

Tadpole, a 15 year old boy from the Williams area, sentenced to 12 months detention in the Reformatory for larceny released after serving two weeks by an ordered issue by Dr. Hope, the visiting Medical Officer.

1898

Article in the *Northern Public Opinion and Mining and Pastoral News* commences with the statement "A native who leaves the Nor-West to take up his compulsory residence at Rottnest for a period of years has very little chance of returning to his birthplace", revealing the names, sentences and origins of the 22 Aboriginal men who came from districts north of Geraldton who died during 1897.

1901

Incarceration of Walganda, who was also known as Fanny (no. 229), from the Wiluna area. She was the only known Aboriginal woman to be imprisoned on Wadjemup.

1902

Good-conduct long-term non-Aboriginal prisoners from Fremantle Prison sent to work on improvements.

1902

Salt Works closes as a result of the dwindling number of prisoners on the island to undertake forced labour. A new prison would later be established at this site in 1912.

1900

Aboriginal prison population 50.

Closure of the Boys' Reformatory and transfer of young males to the Salvation Army Industrial School at Collie.

1902

The Colonial Secretary recommends the closure of the prison and removal of the Aboriginal prisoners to the north of the State. A subsequent inspection by a Parliament party supports the idea "once harvesting of the crops has taken place".

1902

Lists compiled by the Superintendent in September specify the particulars of the 20 Aboriginal prisoners who remain incarcerated on the island along with an additional 15 who were transferred to the mainland to work for the Police and Postal Services whilst undergoing their sentence.

1899

Royal Commission into Prisons released. Key findings included 'unfit' cell sizes, dirty walls, inadequate ventilation and the recommendation that Aboriginal people who commit an offence be placed in "remunerative open air work within the latitude in which they belong" rather than being sent to Wadjemup. The report further stated that "it is difficult to imagine any mode of treatment more unsuitable in all its conditions than incarceration on Rottnest Island".

1903

Amendment to close Wadjemup as a prison for Aboriginal people passes Parliament.

1904

Average number of prisoners during the year is 14. The highest number recorded at any one time is 25, with 7 by the end of December.

1904

Wadjemup 'officially closed' as a prison and proclaimed a Penal Outstation annex of Fremantle.

1907

Declared a public park in perpetuity. Members of both Houses of Parliament along with people from the Fremantle Harbour Trust visit to inspect the progress of work being undertaken by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal prisoners in preparation for the 'opening up' of the Island as a 'popular' summer resort.

- A comprehensive survey undertaken by AJ Lewis of the Lands Department identifies the existence of a previously unacknowledged cemetery adjoining the non-Aboriginal cemetery.

1907

New prison regulations preclude the payment of gratuities to Aboriginal prisoners upon discharge for work undertaken whilst incarcerated.

1905

German born physician, anatomist and anthropologist Dr Hermann Klaatsh conducts anatomical research and photographs prisoners.

1906

Noted ethnographer Daisy Bates makes her first visit to the Island collecting information and compiling genealogies.

1909

The Premier, Newton Moore announces the proposed closure of the annex pending the completion of improvements to the buildings to allow for public accommodation.

1910

The Comptroller of Prisons, Queensland, Charles Edward do Fonblanque Pennefather appointed to enquire into the administration of Fremantle Prison. During the course of his investigations he visits the island where he finds "about 35" non-Aboriginal prisoners and "about the same number" of non-Aboriginal prisoners.

1908

19 of the 21 Aboriginal prisoners on the island suffer from influenza.

1910

Prisoner population at 56 - 20 Aboriginal men and 36 good conduct non-Aboriginal men.

1910

The process of converting the Quod into a place to accommodate tourists begins with the removal of the prisoners to a temporary camp situated at 'The Neck', 8 km's west of the main settlement.

The Colonial Secretary recommends the establishment of a new Aboriginal prison.

Prisoners temporarily re-located into two dormitories, one of which would later become the site of the Wadjemup Museum.

1912

An Aboriginal life-saving brigade established and trained in the use of rocket propelled equipment. The team remained in existence for several years, one member replacing another as their sentence expired.

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- Daisy Bates returns for a second time to collect additional cultural and genealogical information.
- Aboriginal prisoners relocated to temporary “prison of small dimensions” within the settlement area.
- A new prison, otherwise known as the Salt House Prison, is completed along with a cookhouse, warehouse, woodshed and temporary warder’s accommodation.
- Establishment of a new camping ground adjacent to the settlement where the remains of Aboriginal prisoners were previously buried. The new site is described as ‘well shaded’ and near to the natural bathing pool and the newly erected amenities.

1916

Sydney Edwin Smith of the Survey Department completes a plan for the establishment of a new prison contained within 120 acres (48 hectares) of land to the immediate south of Lake Baghdad.

- Twenty-one huts previously used by the internees are hauled to the Salt House Prison pending their placement at the new site.



1915

Almost 1100 German, Serbian and Croatian internees arrive, some opting to undertake the arduous tasks such as carting materials for which they were paid two shillings per day. Aboriginal prisoners assigned to the same tasks were unpaid.

Principal warden again recommends the removal of prisoners from the island 'during the tourist season' with the retention of the Aboriginal prisoners to undertake routine tasks.

1917

By mid-February nine huts are hauled from the Salt House prison to the proposed new prison site at Lake Baghdad, where a stone kitchen is constructed and wells are sunk. Work on the new prison ceases the following month, however, and the Salt House is retained as the main prison.

1920

The nine huts at Lake Baghdad are renovated to become a Reformatory for low-risk non-Aboriginal prisoners, with the first four arriving that year.

1918

Albert Jackson (9642) is charged with the murder of a fellow prisoner Wooby alias Jimmy Dibbs (6978) and is escorted to the mainland where he escapes from custody, is recaptured, tried and sentenced to death with the recommendation of mercy. He gains further notoriety for endeavouring to escape on three additional occasions prior to passing away in 1919.

1916

- Rottnest declared an A-Class reserve for tourism.
- A Board of Control appointed to manage the Island.
- Prison population 40; consisting of 20 Aboriginal men and 20 non-Aboriginal men.

1919

- A new plan to establish a Reformatory Prison adjacent to the existing site at Lake Baghdad is prepared by James Stoddard, a surveyor with the Public Works Department. The site is officially proclaimed a Prison Reserve, however, the Reformatory is never built.

- Petition presented to the State Parliament pointing out the inhumanity of bringing Aboriginal prisoners down from the north-west chained by the neck and confined to limited deck space.
- Aboriginal prisoners commended for the production of 'a very excellent sample of wheat.'

1922

The decline in the number of prisoners sent to the Reformatory leads to the closure of the facility.



1922

Cabinet approves the closure of Wadjemup as an extension of Fremantle Prison.

- The remaining nine long-term Aboriginal Prisoners are transferred to the Broome Prison. Their removal aligns to the growing number of tourist visitors.
- Rottnest Island Board of Control negotiates for the return of prisoners to undertake infrastructure and domestic tasks following the closure of the tourist season..

1924

Questions raised in Legislative Assembly regarding the use of prison labour by 'non-government' residents.



1927

Reference in the *Western Mail* to the existence of an Aboriginal burial ground containing the remains of 300 prisoners in the area set aside for camping.

1936

Land at Bickley acquired by the Commonwealth for defence purposes.

1930

Article in the *Mirror* entitled "Murderers at Large At Rottnest" provides a brief insight into the lives of two prisoners, Lumbia (no. 13083) and Malanga @ Bungarra (no. 12032) and conditions on the island during the penultimate year of the prison.

1931

The last remaining Aboriginal prisoner, Maitland Narrier, is escorted back to Fremantle Prison to complete the remainder of his sentence.

1937

The entire island re-gazetted as a temporary Military Manoeuvre Area.

1938

Kingstown Army Barracks completed.

1940

Defence Department assumes control with the island becoming a restricted area. Buildings within the settlement are converted for military purposes and tourism halted. Permanent residents permitted to remain whilst civilian women and children are evacuated.

1942

Full strength of 2,500 military personnel stationed on the island.

1945

Following the declaration of peace ending WWII, the island re-opens for tourism.

1946

Construction of tourist facilities and amenities recommences.

1953

Further reference is made to the existence of an Aboriginal cemetery "enclosed by a low-line stone wall" in a book by Eleanor Smith entitled *"Isle of Girls"*.

1956

The Rottnest Island Board of Control is reconstituted as the Rottnest Island Board.

1958

State Cabinet approves a capital grant of £95,000 to effect infrastructure upgrades and re-forestation activities.

1959

The long-abandoned Salt Works demolished.

1977

Report entitled *"Rottnest Island: a national estate survey of it's history, architecture and environment"* by R.J. Ferguson released, providing, in part, an overview of the history of the incarceration of Aboriginal prisoners on the island from 1838 through to 1922. The report is published as a book in 1985.

1962

A contracting team engaged in drainage work uncover a number of skeletal remains in between the settlement and the golf course. The remains are described as being buried in a sitting position in rows of trenches about 60cm apart.

1970

The existence of a burial ground situated to the 'immediate north of the Quod' is acknowledged in the Manager's report to the Rottnest Island Board. The discovery is reported to the Commissioner of Aborigines.

1976

Official opening of the Rottnest Island Museum in the same building that was previously used as a temporary dormitory for the prisoners, and a salt store.

1984

A *"Rottnest Island Master Plan"* produced for the Rottnest Island Board advocates establishing a 'Historic Precinct' encompassing the original structures associated with the early Thompson Bay settlement and penal colony making no reference to the existence of the Aboriginal burial ground.

1986

Further evidence received confirms the existence of the burial ground after additional graves are uncovered by a work team.

1988

Proposal to redevelop the Quod met with protests from over 200 Aboriginal people.

- Public concerns raised about the neglect of the burial ground.

1985

Rottnest Island Management Plan Report produced for the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Rottnest Island Board. Reference is made to a cemetery containing approximately sixty bodies as being a major site of importance relating to Aboriginal presence on the island and recommends: (a) acknowledgement of the area in consultation with the WA Museum and local Aboriginal Community (b) no further disturbances except to maintain existing services, and (c) the preparation of a history for educational purposes.

1988

The Rottnest Island Authority assumes the administration for the running of the island from the Rottnest Island Authority Board.

1989

Work ceases on the upgrading of the Rottnest Lodge due to the existence of the Aboriginal burial site in the area.

- Cultural items, including a glass spearhead and a message stick uncovered during maintenance work on the Quod.
- A number of prominent Aboriginal people seek to have the area declared a sacred site. The application is rejected by the Supreme Court.

1990

Curtin University engaged by Aboriginal Sites Department to assist in re-defining the extent of the burial site.

1992

The Aboriginal burial site is re-fenced to provide greater protection.

1991

Specialist advisory committees formed to look into aspects of the island including historic buildings and sites.

Minutes of the meetings of the Rottnest Island Authority reveal that attempts were made throughout the year to agree upon the extent of the Aboriginal Burial Ground as well as the management of the site.

1993

Premier Richard Court addresses a State-wide Aboriginal representative group during the Year of Indigenous Peoples and acknowledges Wadjemup as the largest Aboriginal deaths in custody burial site in Australia.

1993

Ground penetrating radar survey raises the possibility that the island contains more Aboriginal graves than previously thought.

1993

Rottnest Island Strategic Marketing Plan published noting the "need to expand and diversify the visitor experience offering tours based on action, heritage, Aboriginal heritage, view point and conservation programs".

1995

"Chronological history of Rottnest Island" published by the Government of Western Australia.

1997

The highly acclaimed book by Neville Green and Susan Moon, *Far from Home, Aboriginal Prisoners on Rottnest Island 1838-1931*, is published.



2006

First Aboriginal person, Karen Jacobs, appointed to the Rottnest Island Authority Board.



2009

First Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) adopted by the Rottnest Island Authority.



1998

Two hundred Aboriginal people representing different language groups from across the State gather on the Island and proceed to the burial ground where they offer their respect. A spokesman for those assembled requests that the area be fenced, a plaque erected, and Aboriginal people employed to supervise the proposed work.



2007

Designated camping area relocated away from the now acknowledged Aboriginal burial ground.



2014

Short film "*Wadjemup: Black Prison White Playground*" produced by Aboriginal film maker Glen Stasiuk details both the history of incarceration and more recent developments.

2018

The Quod closes as tourist accommodation.

2017

Cabinet approves the establishment of the Wadjemup Aboriginal Reference Group (WARG) to provide advice to the Rottnest Island Authority Board on a future strategy for the aboriginal burial ground, and possible future use of the Quod.

2020

Consultation commences to memorialise the Aboriginal history of Wadjemup.

Opening of the new Wadjemup Museum, located in the Old Mill and Hay Store in the Settlement, which was originally built by Aboriginal prisoners in 1857.

