



Fremantle Prison

Video Transcript

CHRIS TAYLOR:

The wild west, Perth, where mavericks carve out a place in the sun – a frontier town built on mining and minerals. But today's millionaires aren't the first Western Australians to carve their futures from the earth. The first time that happened was almost 160 years ago, just a little way down the road from here. That National Treasure is perched high on a hill overlooking Fremantle.

This is Fremantle Prison, built in the 1850s and still going strong right up until 1991. This National Heritage listed building is Australia's best preserved convict built prison. In 1829 Australia's newest colony at Swan River was hot, dry and isolated.

For two decades the free settlers struggled to make a go of it. The white population was just 5,000 and half of them were children. The colony desperately needed cheap labour so just as transportation was being phased out around the rest of Australia, the battlers left in Swan River were screaming out for convicts.

When the first 75 convicts arrived in 1850 there was no prison for them, so they were set to work building one. They may have built it but they obviously didn't have any say in the design. This is one of the original cells complete with a bucket for a toilet. Imagine doing your ones and twos in a cell that was 2.1 by 1.2. Now even though the cells eventually doubled in size these buckets remained in place until the very day the prison closed. No wonder there was a riot in 1988.

Conditions had improved little in over 130 years. Anger finally exploded. Prison guards were taken hostage.

(Archival) GOVERNMENT SPOKESMAN v/o:

Five officers were forcibly removed to the exercise yard and held as hostages at knife point.

CHRIS TAYLOR:

Now if there had been a riot 100 years earlier the ringleaders would've ended up here, strapped to the flogging post. Funnily enough flogging wasn't just unpopular with the prisoners here. On one occasion back in 1853 authorities couldn't find anyone willing to wield the whip, which must have made one convict pretty happy. Mind you the last flogging that took place here was in 1943.

The gallows lasted much longer. In 1964 serial killer Eric Cook took the one minute walk from the condemned cell to this spot here. He was the last man hanged in Western Australia. He was then buried in the same grave as Martha Rendell who is the only woman ever to be hanged here back in 1909.

Prison legend has it that her ghostly image appears on one of the windows in the chapel, watching over the prison. Although you can see it from the outside, you can't see it from the inside. Any prisoner worth his salt dreams of escaping by digging a tunnel. Fremantle Prison has its very own.

The prison is built on a huge limestone rock. And where there's limestone, there's water. For many years these tunnels took clean water from the underground aquifers to supply Fremantle. They stretch for about a kilometre, all dug by prisoners, by hand.

Singer Bon Scott's brief stay here as a teenager may have inspired AC/DC's hit song, 'Jail Break'.

He was one of many artistic inmates.

Perhaps the most unusual was convict 3176, the forger James Walsh. All the images you can see on the wall of his cell here were drawn from memory in around 1856. They were discovered nearly 100 years when a cleaner accidentally knocked some whitewash off the wall. You can see here that he's written 'blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly'.

Wise words but not enough to prevent him from being sent back down three years later – for forgery.

Fremantle Prison is our best preserved convict-built prison. It's a link with the dying days of transportation and that makes it a National Treasure.