

Cockatoo Island and Newington Nature Reserve/Newington Armoury

April 8th 2024

Heritage Month

Every year the National Trust¹ celebrates heritage by setting aside a month within which a series of events are conducted. The NPA SSB (Gary Schoer and Brian Everingham) did a number that were registered through the National Trust in association with the tram museum at Loftus. We were not getting enough traction so we have pulled out of that and, in lieu of such an event, I have decided to run several NPA Activities around that theme.

What is Heritage?

- property that is or may be inherited; an inheritance
- valued objects and qualities such as historic buildings and cultural traditions that have been passed down from previous generations:
- denoting or relating to things of special architectural, historical, or natural value that are preserved for the nation:

Yes, the definitions don't cover it! UNESCO defines world heritage as "the designation for places on Earth that are of outstanding universal value". Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Culture is defined as a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of a society or a social group.

In all my years of looking at plans of management, either in Regional Advisory Committees or the NPWS Advisory Council, I have struggled with the word, especially as I am a trained historian, and the issues I have, in summary, are:

- There is a bias towards objects that distorts
- There is a tendency to privilege a particular group and/or period when interpreting "heritage"
- The dichotomy of natural and cultural heritage is problematic, especially when noting indigenous understanding of Country

Cockatoo Island and its "heritage"

Cockatoo Island is actually listed through the UNESCO World Heritage List for its convict penal buildings. Officially the listing is called the Australian Convict Sites World Heritage Property. That listing covers ten different sites². It was established on 31 July 2010 and includes:

- ◆ Kingston and Arthur's Vale Historic Area, Norfolk Island (1788–1814 and 1824–1855)
- ◆ Old Government House and Domain, Parramatta Park, New South Wales (1788–1856)
- ◆ Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney, New South Wales (1819–1848)
- ◆ Brickendon—Woolmers Estates, Longford, Tasmania (1820–1850s)
- ◆ Darlington Probation Station, Maria Island National Park, Tasmania (1825–1832 and 1842–1850)

¹ [Welcome to the Australian Heritage Festival in New South Wales – National Trust](#)

² [Australian Convict Sites](#)

- ◆ Old Great North Road, Wiseman's Ferry, New South Wales (1828–1835)
- ◆ Cascades Female Factory, South Hobart, Tasmania (1828–1856)
- ◆ Port Arthur Historic Site, Port Arthur, Tasmania (1830–1877)
- ◆ Coal Mines Historic Site, Norfolk Bay, Tasmania (1833–1848)
- ◆ Cockatoo Island Convict Site, Sydney, New South Wales (1839–1869)
- ◆ Fremantle Prison, Fremantle, Western Australia (1852–1886)

Sharp eyes will note that there are three sites within Sydney!!!! We might take tours to the others later!

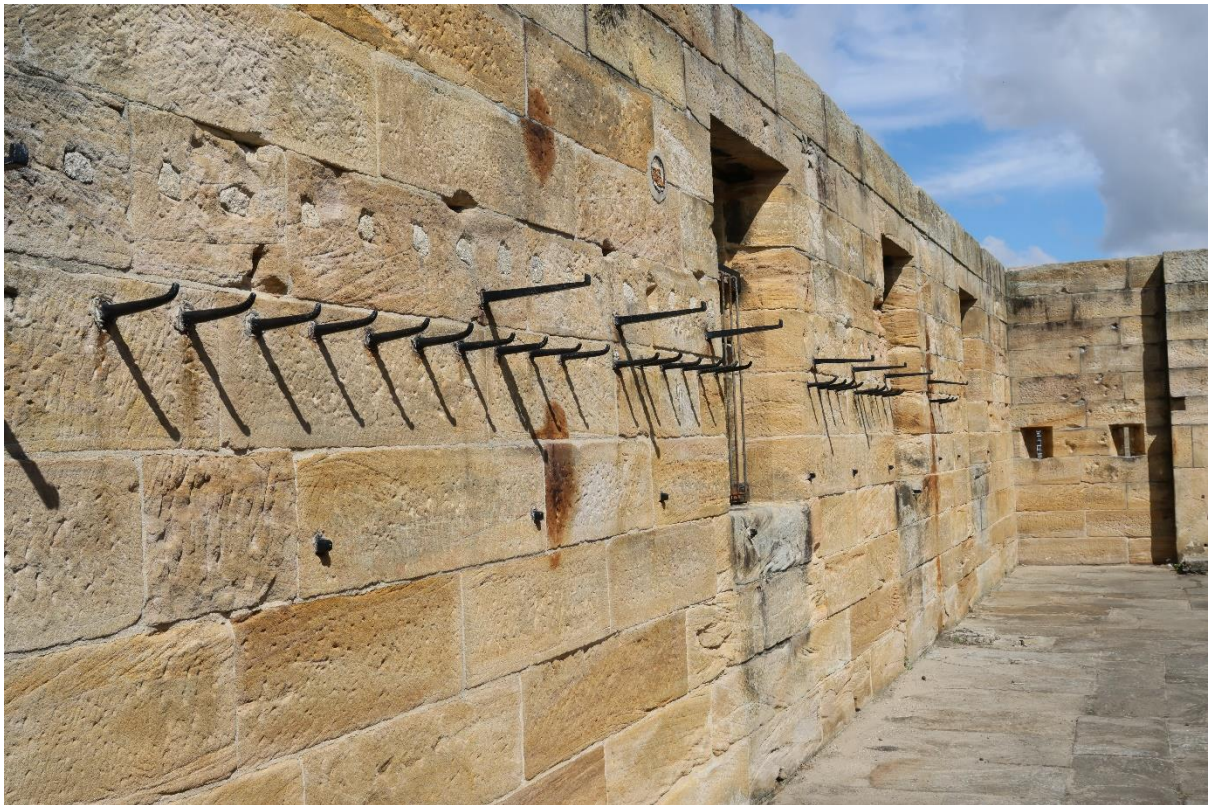
But in regards to this site there is some information online!³ We planned to begin our walk in this precinct. That was before caffeine addition took over!

What might not be noticed is that these convict buildings had a use after the convicts left:

From 1871 to 1888 the prison barracks became an industrial school for girls and a separate reformatory for girls under 16 convicted of a crime. In 1871 the wooden sailing ship, the NSS Vernon, moored at Cockatoo Island, training delinquent, homeless or orphaned boys in seamanship.



³ [Convict era \(1839 to 1869\) | Cockatoo Island](#)





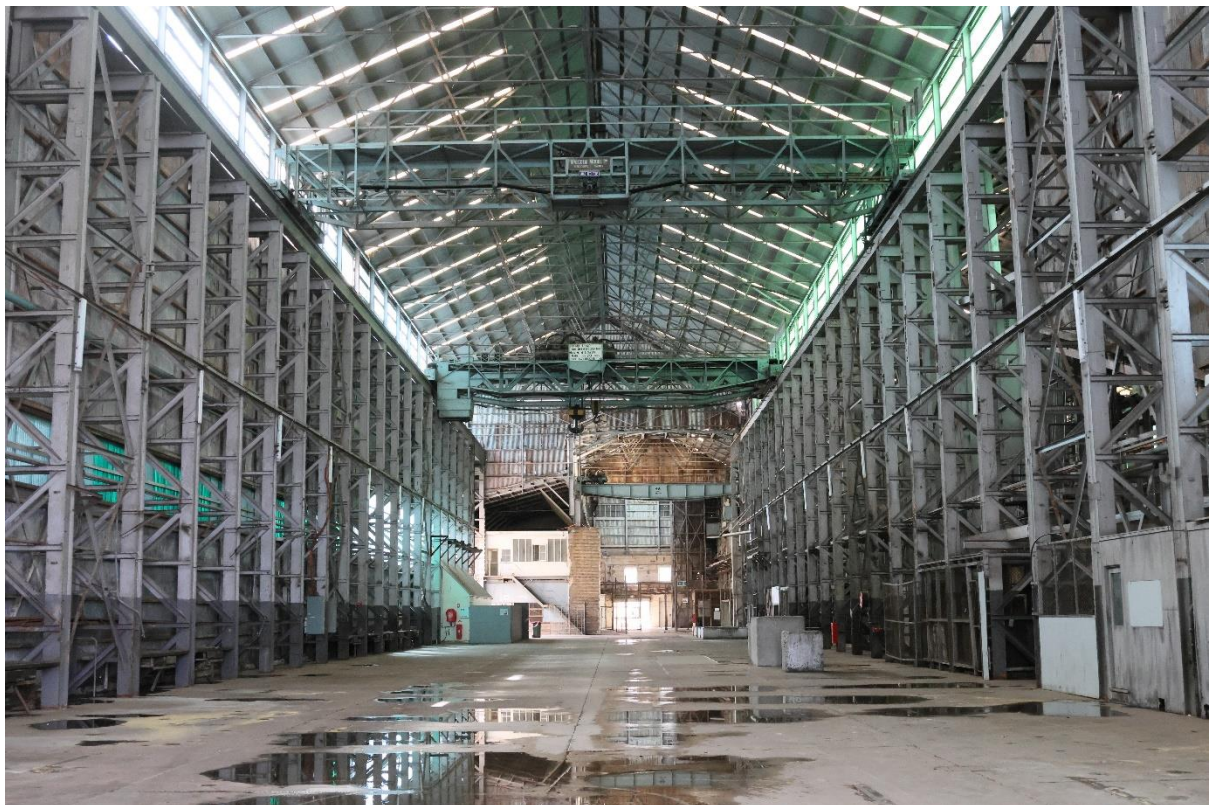
The officers section

A little lower down the pecking order is the National Heritage List and it, too, covers Cockatoo Island.⁴ This listing notes the convict story but also includes the magnificent role the island also played in shipbuilding. It is an amazing site for industrial archaeology. It takes some time to see and enjoy that.⁵



⁴ [National Heritage Places - Cockatoo Island - DCCEEW](#)

⁵ [Australia's National Heritage - Cockatoo Island \(dcceew.gov.au\)](#)



The Turbine Hall



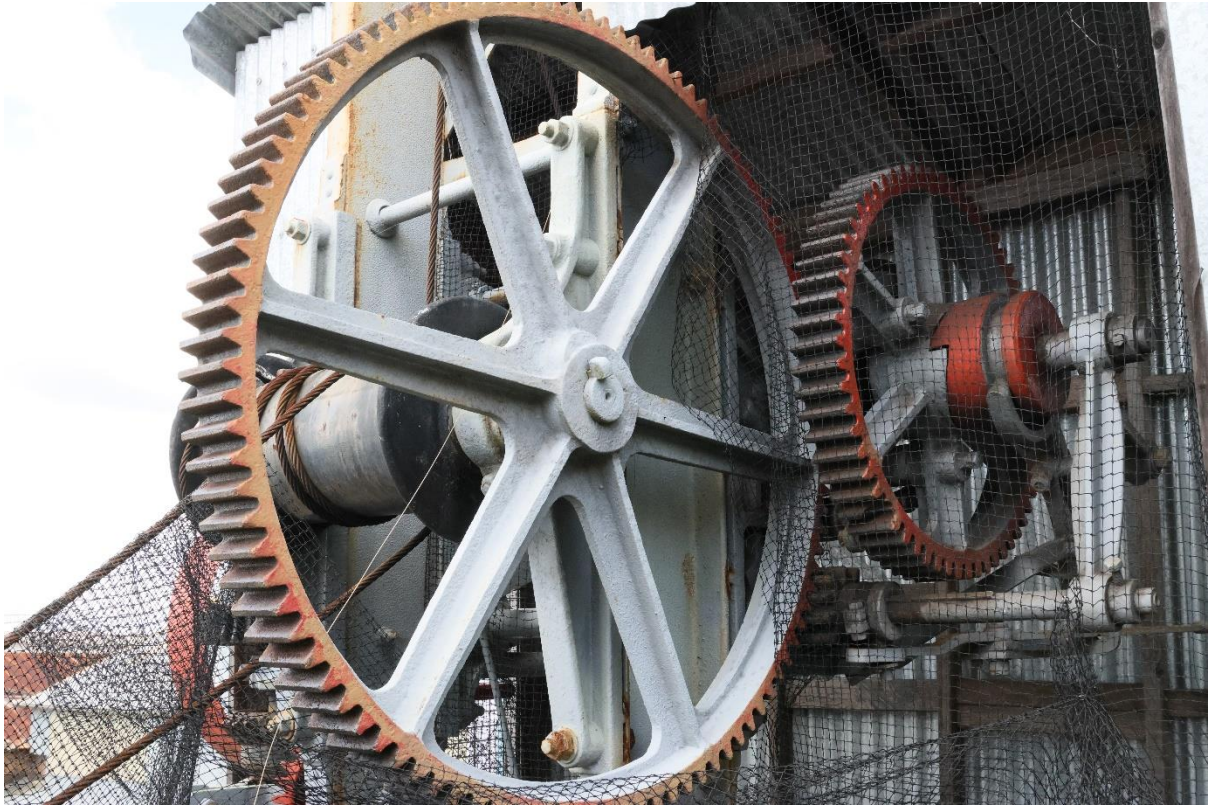






Duplex homes for the higher staff





And some extra convict sites – the holes

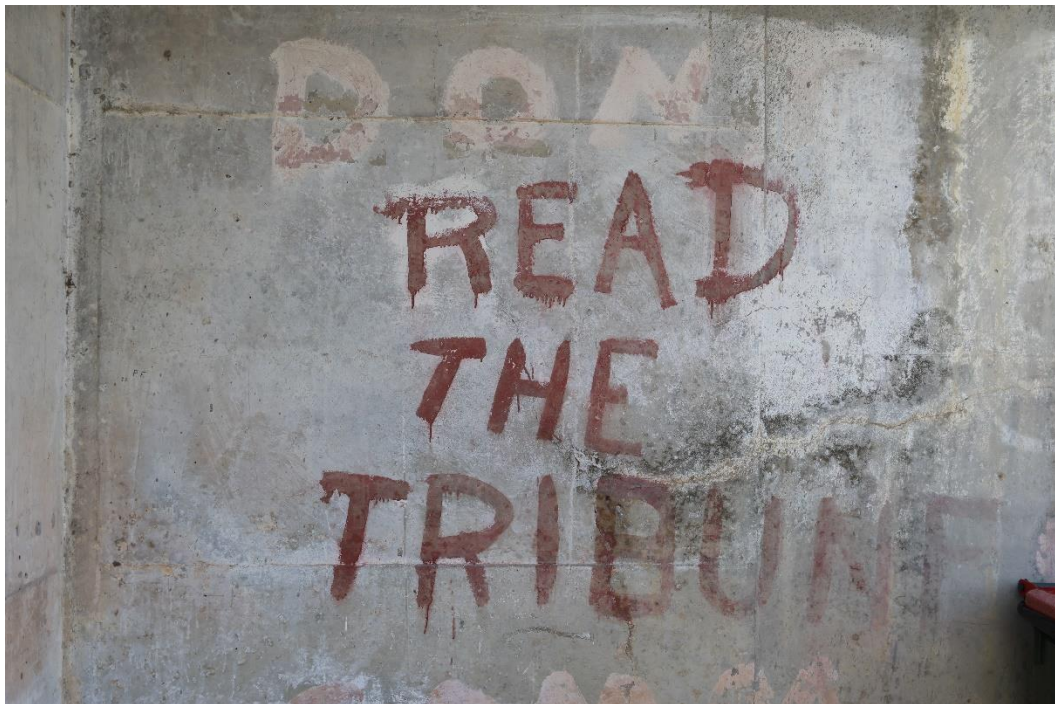


And the isolation cells





Time to depart



Note that Cockatoo Island had a history prior to 1788 and the local name for the island is Wareamah. The island connects to the waterways and homelands of the Wallumedegal, Wangal, Cammeraygal and Gadigal peoples. During the 60,000 years leading to European settlement, the island was a meeting place for these groups. Their connection to the island continued, sadly, during the convict era:

First Nations peoples were a small but notable segment of the prisoner population and were involved in general prison activities, including the excavation and construction of Fitzroy Dock.

Tragically, by 1856, 17 First Nations prisoners had died in incarceration. The authorities concluded that confinement in an overcrowded setting, as well as low immunity to diseases circulating in the gaol, were the cause.⁶

A short ferry ride took us up to Sydney Olympic Park and a looped walk took us via Newington Nature Reserve to the Newington Armoury.



Sueda



Tawny Frogmouth

⁶ [First Nations history of Wareamah | Cockatoo Island](#)

Here one can read about some of the First Nation peoples who spent time on the island. One was Frederick Ward, a serial horse thief, and his wife, Worimi woman Mary Ann Bugg.



More cranes: these to shift the armaments onto the rail system

Defence infrastructure in the 19th century was largely located in the inner harbour of Sydney Harbour with Powder Magazines at Goat Island and Spectacle Island. In the 1860s it became apparent that Goat Island was reaching capacity and the use of Spectacle Island as a powder magazine had begun by 1865. The Sydney Morning Herald in October 1875 reported the recommendations of a board appointed by the Government of the Colony of New South Wales into the removal of the Goat Island magazine. The second recommendation was "That a separate and

distinct magazine for merchant's gunpowder, capable of storing about 300 tons, be established on the right bank of the Parramatta River...". In May 1876, the Herald reported that the Government had set aside 3,700 pounds to purchase land on the Parramatta River at Newington. In 1880 both Goat and Spectacle Islands had reached capacity and another site was required to store explosives which was far enough removed from the urban population.

It was not until 1882, after Newington College had left Newington House for Stanmore, New South Wales, that land at Newington was acquired. Newington was chosen for its relative isolation and in 1882 the Government Gazette of 22 August described the resumption of land for "erection of a magazine for the storage of gunpowder and other explosives". Most of the 248 acres resumed at this time was described as mud flats, swamp and mangroves or salt marsh. Its isolated location away from urban areas made it suitable for the storage of explosives. This area was enlarged in 1884 with an extra area of 109 hectares being made available for the magazine. Further increases were made in 1941 (38 hectares), 1946 (86 hectares), 1949 (20 hectares) and 1952 (6 hectares).⁷

The depot was finally closed from 1994! Although, note, that the Navy was still using the site for the transfer of armaments up to December 1999 (for use in East Timor).



⁷ [Newington Armory - Wikipedia](#)



Blast-proof structures

