

15<sup>th</sup> November, 2010

We had been looking forward to this outing for many months and were pleased to welcome folk from other Chapters who joined us at Circular Quay. The day before our

visit the temperature in Sydney rose to 38° so we guessed we could have either a cold southerly wind, or rain, or both to contend with. True to form the clouds rolled in and by 11am it began to rain, but fortunately with no wind, so we weren't faced with the added problem of being blown off the island into the harbour! Our guide, National Park Ranger, David, imparted so much info on the Island and its history it's hard to know what to include.

Originally called Me-mel ('The Eye' or 'Place from which you can see far') the island was formed 6,000 years ago when the Parramatta River flooded at the end of the last Ice Age. Bennelong and his wife were often seen on the island and Bennelong claimed it previously belonged to his father. Goat Island was named by the English, not because they found goats there, but because of its shape.



Goat Island isn't far off shore at all !

In 1825 Governor Darling had converted a wrecked ship, the *Phoenix*, into a floating jail and when Governor Richard Bourke initiated works on Goat Island in 1833, the rotting prison hulk was moored off Goat Island to house the prisoners. Convicts worked in chain gangs cutting sandstone from the quarry. This lovely sandstone was used in erecting substantial buildings in the growing colony and on the island itself.



Rowing the 200 plus convicts back and forth to the hulk each day was very time consuming so, when the hulk was condemned in 1837, all prisoners were transferred onto the island into portable wooden cabins on wheels. These first 'mobile homes' were 12ft x 10ft and up to 24 convicts were locked inside from sunset to sunrise and slept on 4 benches.

A wooden toilet opposite the door and between the 2 rows of double-decker bunks was, as our guide explained, obviously and hopefully only for emergency No.1's!

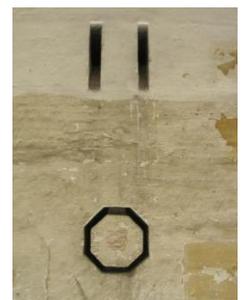


British Soldiers were stationed on the Island from 1833 to 1870, first as convict guards and then later to protect the powder magazine complex. Only 20 convicts ever escaped from the island and as all prisoners had their heads shaved they became very conspicuous and most were quickly recaptured.

In 1838 convicts began construction of a large magazine depot capable of holding 3,000 barrels of gunpowder, complete with a cooperage, sentry wall, guard's barracks and kitchen. It took 4 years to complete. As ships visiting the harbour often caught fire they were required to surrender their store of gun powder to the powder magazine on entry. A fee was charged for their gun powder to be returned and as some couldn't pay they were forced to leave it behind. Over time the number of barrels in stock increased to as many as 7,000 barrels. The magazine had walls two to three meters thick and its vents were constructed in a zigzag pattern to stop bullets or sparks entering and causing an almighty explosion.



Powder Magazine Wall  
2 to 3 meters thick



Zigzag wall vents



Guards were stationed all along the sentry wall and to help pass the long days some carved their name and number, or even a design, into the sandstone. ?Australia's first colonial graffiti? As the Colony in Sydney grew all explosives were removed from the island by 1900.



Also in 1838 a Water Police Unit comprising of one conductor and a convict boat crew was established on the tip of the island. One of their duties was to re-capture escaping convicts - it took awhile for authorities to realise that the small number ever caught was mostly due to having a convict boat crew who always gave firm assurances they were really rowing as hard as they could!

An interesting fact: This water police station was used in the TV series "Water Rats".

In 1901 the eastern side of the island was given to the Sydney Harbour Trust to establish a depot for its working boat fleet. In 1936 the Maritime Services Board replaced the Trust and constructed two large slipways, a workshop and installed a large hammer head crane.

I think most of us were amazed by the number of well constructed buildings still on the island. As well as the lovely old sandstone buildings a grand residence for the Harbour Master had been built in the early 1900's on the highest part of the island. There were also cottages for married members of the harbour's fire boat crew, barracks for unmarried members and other cottages for workers. Harbour Masters continued living there until 1967.



The Barracks - note the rare rounded sandstone pillars made from one piece of sandstone and shaped by hand



Harbour Masters Residence

At one point up to 200 residents and workers lived on the island. They were provided with a swimming enclosure, tennis court and social hall. Activities were all scaled back with the demise of the MSB in the 1980's. Goat Island became part of Sydney Harbour National Park in 1995 and a ship repair facility is still in operation. The Trust is open to suggestions on its web site as to how this facility should be developed in the future.

As we headed back to our Ferry (feeling more than a little damp) we passed by the remains of the original sandstone wharf built by convicts over a two year period in the 1830's.



I hope you all enjoyed discovering Goat Island, despite the inclement weather. If you weren't able to be there I hope you find this article interesting and enlightening.

Do you think the shape of the Island looks like a goat?

(NB: English goats had long hair and the Island has probably changed shape over the years!)

