

# **The Convict Trail: a community project on the Tasman Peninsula**

© Rosemary Hollow

The Convict Trail is located on the Tasman Peninsula and includes Port Arthur Historic Site. Prior to the dreadful massacre in April 1996 Port Arthur Historic Site had consistently had the highest number of tourists of any tourist destination in Tasmania.<sup>1</sup> However after April 1996 there was a dramatic drop in tourist numbers to the Peninsula. It was not only the historic site at Port Arthur that depended on tourists for survival; there were also many businesses and individuals on the Peninsula who depended on tourists, to support their employment at the Site, or their accommodation and other tourist-related businesses.

One of the positive outcomes and part of the recovery process for the Peninsula was the formation of the Port Arthur and Tasman Region Visitor Association. This association included representatives of Port Arthur Historic Site, the Tasman Council, local tourist-related businesses, and the Parks and Wildlife Service, who are responsible for managing a number of significant historic sites on the Peninsula including the Coal Mines and Eaglehawk Neck. The Association's agenda was not only to attract tourists back to the Peninsula but also to consider how to encourage tourists to extend their stay. Prior to 1996 the majority of tourists came to the Peninsula for a day visit only. If tourists could be encouraged to stay overnight it would provide additional income for the businesses on the Peninsula, most of which had a drastically reduced income in 1996.

The Tasman Peninsula is not short of historic sites.<sup>2</sup> Port Arthur was established as a penal settlement in 1830, and within five years a number of outstations were established around the peninsula as sites for farming, timber getting, coal mining, and a military station. The remains at these sites varied, from reasonably intact buildings at three of the Probation Stations, which are all now privately owned, to few remains of wharves and jetties at other sites. The challenge, of course, was to link all these sites and develop a tourist attraction within all the usual constraints of time and funding. In regard to funding, the Visitor Association was fortunate that as part of the post-1996 support to the Peninsula community funding was received for interpretation works from the State Government, and from the Federal Government through a Regional Tourism Grant from the Department of Industry, Science and Resources.

Deciding on the sites was not difficult. Two of the sites managed by the Parks and Wildlife Service were already significant historic sites: Eaglehawk Neck, the site of the Dogline that was established to prevent convicts escaping from the Peninsula, and the Coal Mines, the site of Australia's first working coalmine. The other sites readily came to mind. Norfolk Bay, the site of Tasmania's and perhaps Australia's only human-powered tramway; the sites of the significant visible remains of Probation Stations at Koonya, Premaydena and Saltwater River, and the township of Nubeena, in the convict era an important port and link in the semaphore system established for communication around the Peninsula and between Port Arthur and Hobart. Interpretive signs were the obvious medium, but there would need to be more to

maintain tourists interests. We wanted to encourage them to do more than just stop the car, read a sign and move on. We were looking for a way of not only educating tourists about life on the Peninsula during the convict era from 1830 to 1877, but also of providing opportunities for tourists to further explore the area. And so the idea of The Convict Trail was born.

Eaglehawk Neck is the first site you come to on the Trail driving from Hobart. This is a narrow strip of land which links the Tasman Peninsula with the rest of Tasmania. In 1832 a military station had been established at the Neck to watch for escaped convicts, and shortly after a 'dogline' was established as part of the security. It was described in 1852 as follows:

Suddenly, as you open onto the Neck, you ears are assailed by the fierce barking of 12 or 14 huge dogs, chained across the [sand] bar, and presenting a most terrific barrier to further advance. Each of the dogs is a different breed, but all are ferocious-looking brutes, and they are so ranged as to complete the cordon across the Neck; barrels inverted, form their kennels, and lamps are fixed on posts in front of their line...<sup>3</sup>

In 1992 a Conservation Plan for the Eaglehawk Neck Military Station was developed by Godden Mackay, with significant input from Martin Davies, the then Parks and Wildlife Service Heritage Archaeologist.<sup>4</sup> Some of the recommendations of the plan had been implemented with the installation of interpretation in the Officers Quarters at Eaglehawk Neck. The plan also recommended that the site of the original dogline be physically cleared, and marked and interpreted in some way. With the funding received for the Convict Trail, it was a great opportunity to develop this plan further. A walking track was proposed to follow the original track from the Officers' Quarters to the dogline, and a sculpture of a dog, barrel and lamp post as a means of marking and interpreting the dogline.

The bronze dog sculpture is the work of two of Tasmania's most talented craftspeople. Ruth Waterhouse, whose silver jewellery designs of plants and animals are marketed beyond Tasmania, and sculptor Cutis Hore. The Committee was assisted in commissioning the sculpture by Dick Bett, an art gallery owner in Hobart. Dick had spent time on the Peninsula organising the Tasmanian Sculpture by the Sea project in 1997, and was very enthusiastic in supporting the project. Curtis and Ruth undertook substantial research to ensure that not only was the dog design based on a breed likely to be on the original dogline, but that the designs of the lamp and barrel were also based on early sketches of those used on the dogline.

The walking track and sculpture were the first components of the Convict Trail to be completed. Rather than wait for the rest of the signs and elements to be installed, the sculpture was unveiled in September 1999 by the author Margaret Scott who lives on the Peninsula. The aim of the project was to rekindle tourists interest in the Peninsula and encourage them to spend more time there. This first part of the project achieved this aim with more tourists and bus groups stopping and spending time at Eaglehawk Neck. It was a good move to have this part of the 'Trail' opened first as it stimulated not only local but tourist interest in the rest of the Trail.

In placing the interpretive signs for the remainder of the Trail we decided we wanted more than just a sign on a frame. The signs in some way had to get people's attention and be easy to see as they drove along the road. So with Dick Bett and Julie Hawkins our graphic designer a sign frame was developed using the Broad Arrow symbol that was stamped on convict-made goods. This symbol was also used in the logo Julie developed for the Trail which has been used in publications and promotions about the Trail. There are still a number of original white mileage posts along the road to Port Arthur, with the distance in miles still evident. As this was a trail people would be driving around it was decided to develop simple signs based on the mileage posts as indicators along the Trail. These would be placed 500m before and after each sign. Both these 'mileage markers' and the sign frames were painted yellow, to provide a link, even if tenuous, with the yellow of the convict clothing.

Tourism Tasmania were involved in early discussions about the Trail and indicated that the most successful 'Trails' were those that included a range of stopping-off locations and activities. So at each site there is the opportunity for tourists to explore the area a little further. At Taranna the sign is located adjacent to one of the local jetties, and close to the site of the original 1830s jetty. It is directly opposite bed and breakfast accommodation known as the Norfolk Bay Convict Station, now owned and managed by Dorothy and Mike Evans. As the then Interpretation Manager at Port Arthur Historic Site Dorothy was one of the original instigators of the project.

At Kooyna the sign is located on private property, and includes a short walk along a track for a view of Cascades, the most intact Probation Station on the Peninsula. This property has been in the Clark family for three generations and like Norfolk Bay a number of the buildings have been refurbished for what is known in Tasmania as colonial accommodation. There is also a small museum containing artefacts found on the site. Don Clark the owner of the property was very enthusiastic about the project, and undertook some of the required work including tree trimming and fencing at his own expense. He also suggested an appropriate site for the sign, and was willing for it to be located in one of his paddocks at no expense to the project team. The work on track construction, sign installation and parking bays was undertaken jointly by the Tasman Council and the Parks and Wildlife Service.

The works at the next two sites were also undertaken jointly by the Parks and Wildlife Service and the Tasman Council, with assistance from the Port Arthur Historic Site works crew. At Premaydena the sign overlooks Impression Bay, where at low tide the wooden remains of the original rail jetty can be seen. The Parks and Wildlife Service removed some introduced pine trees so the jetty remains could be clearly seen, and the Council constructed appropriate parking bays.

At Saltwater River there are also a number of original Probation Station buildings remaining. However unlike the Cascades site where all the buildings are owned by the one family these buildings are owned by a number of different private owners and physically less accessible than the buildings at Cascades. The solution was to locate the sign on a narrow strip of coastal reserve where most of the remaining buildings could be viewed without intruding on the owners' privacy. We did contact the owners whose properties were adjacent to the site for the sign, and again they were co-operative, one of them being particularly pleased as he'd been trying to get Council help to remove a large pine overhanging a road verge that was losing branches. Once

this project was underway he got the help from Council he needed! The strip of coastal land where the sign, parking area and picnic tables were located was on land managed by the Parks and Wildlife Service, again the work undertaken was done by the Service in co-operation with the Tasman Council.

Coal Mines Historic Site is probably the antithesis of Port Arthur. The only facilities for tourists are picnic tables and toilets. There are no guided tours, no bus groups and limited signage. Managed by the Parks and Wildlife Service, it has for years been the hidden and sometimes forgotten treasure of the Peninsula. There is often the chance to explore the site with no other tourists around; the downside of this was that interpretive signs installed were soon vandalised. In 1996 a management plan for the site was released, and this again was a plan that had been largely developed by Martin Davies. With the inclusion of the site in the World Heritage Convict Sites serial listing the Parks and Wildlife Service commenced planning for the works outlined in the management plan, which included rerouting the road away from the buildings, improving parking and basic facilities and interpretive signage. These works are now underway, and a team has been appointed to develop interpretation for the site. It was an important site to include in the Convict Trail, and the sign developed for the site was located at the entrance to the site so when the site and roadworks are completed the Parks and Wildlife service could replace it in a suitable location.

Nubeena is the main township on the Peninsula, and although in the 1830s there were Probation and Semaphore Stations in the area there are no remains present. It was important to include a sign at Nubeena as the main shops and facilities for the Peninsula are in Nubeena. One of the issues behind the project was not only to encourage tourists back to the Peninsula, but also to encourage them to stay and support the local businesses that had suffered a downturn in 1996. Locating one of the Trail signs in Nubeena provided an opportunity for local residents and business to become involved with the Trail. The Council nominated a suitable site by the jetty. The focus for this sign became sea transport, the main mode of transport for both people and goods during the convict era, and the semaphore established on the Peninsula.

And of course the last but not least site on the Trail is Port Arthur Historic Site. There are no additional signs as yet, but the Site is included on the map and information about the Trail. Brochures about the Trail are in the Tourist Centre, and some of the guides cover it in their commentary on the guided tours. It is an important link, and we hope by exploring the Trail it will enhance tourists experience of Port Arthur.

To sum up, the Convict Trail was developed to attract tourists back to a region after a terrible tragedy. It brought together State and Local Government and private tour operators who though in close geographic proximity had never before worked together on a joint project. The close co-operation between all those concerned was precipitated by the preceding events. However the outcome and success of the project was a result of the ongoing enthusiasm and interest in the project by the local tour operators and community as well as the government agencies. The most recent visitor survey by Tourism Tasmania has shown that Port Arthur and the Tasman Region is once again the most popular area visited in Tasmania outside the main towns of Hobart, Launceston and Devonport.<sup>5</sup>

The Visitor Association formed to oversee this project has now evolved into the Port Arthur Region Marketing Board, with continued support from Port Arthur Historic Site, the Tasman Council, the Parks and Wildlife Service and local tour operators. This model for joint promotion of an area is not a new one for heritage sites. However the success of this project may serve as a reminder to managers of heritage sites that even if their sites are well known and established, there may be opportunities around them for involvement with smaller and less well known sites. This may result not only in the ongoing protection and interpretation of these sites, but extend the interest of tourists to their area, and as we are all trying to do, build up an awareness and appreciation of the history and heritage of our areas.

---

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Tourism Tasmania, *Tasmania Visitor Survey 1998/1999*, Hobart: Tourism Tasmania 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Truscott, M., *Survey of historical sites on Tasman Peninsula*, for Port Arthur Conservation Project, Hobart: NPWS 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Stoney 1856, cited in Parks and Wildlife Service, *Eaglehawk Neck Historic Site*, Hobart: PWS n.d.

<sup>4</sup> Godden Mackay, 'Eaglehawk Neck Military Station Conservation Plan' draft report for discussion, prepared for the Department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Tourism Tasmania, *Tasmania Visitor Survey 1999/2000*, Hobart: Tourism Tasmania 1999.