

FACT SHEET

The strange history of Port Arthur's elk

Port Arthur's agricultural heritage generally takes a back seat to its history of crime and punishment. But in the early 1870s Port Arthur was a productive agricultural settlement, with crops and livestock. That livestock included, for a few months in 1871, an elk!

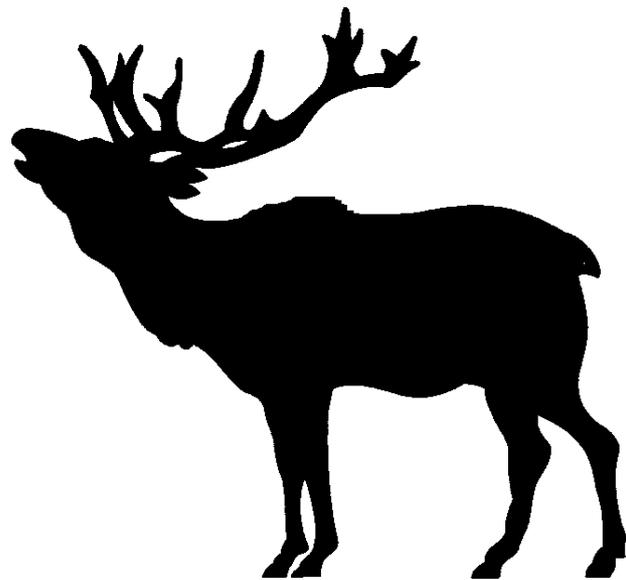
One part of the site which often goes unnoticed is Government Farm. The farm first appeared in official documentation on a plan of the settlement sent to London in January of 1854. The map showed a farmyard and a piggery.

By late 1859 dairy cattle were housed at the farm, their milk being supplied to patients in the hospital. During the next ten years, farming operations grew to include a machine to thresh grain more effectively and a new dairy was built, all of this done in the hope of making Port Arthur a self-supporting settlement. By the close of 1869 in addition to the dairy, the farm was reported as having cowsheds, piggeries, stores for root crops, fowl houses and stables. It appears that coinciding with the retirement of the Farm Overseer in 1871, whose house still stands today, the farming operations began to wind down. Although there were still sheep and cows on-site in 1876 it appears that the farm was abandoned.

The story of the elk - one of the largest species of deer in the world, native to North America and North East Asia - started when the Tasmanian Acclimatisation Society formed in 1862. Introduction, or acclimatisation, of exotic animals and birds occurred from early settlement for economic, sporting and nostalgic motives.

Lieutenant Legge, an ex-pat Tasmanian in Her Majesty's Service based on the island of Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka, shipped three elk to Tasmania. A pair was located at Richmond Park the property of Legislative Councillor John Lord; the remaining buck was sent to Slopen Island off the Tasman Peninsula.

Reported in the Mercury Newspaper Friday June 2nd, 1871:



The Long Lone Monarch. - Lieutenant Legge's elk of Slopen Island has changed his abode by swimming the channel with antlers up, and landing on the opposite main.

That location was in fact the Coal Mines, which at the time was leased to Messrs Brown and Hurst. They were instructed that 'the stranger from Ceylon' be tenderly cared for 'on the fresh pastures of his own choice'. The article in the Mercury then went on to suggest that Mr A.H. Boyd, then Commandant of Port Arthur, once the elk came 'under his eye' would 'no doubt issue all thoughtful orders... especially as that gentleman is a naturalist - and it is hoped that all who have the opportunity will aid in preserving this solitary specimen of a kind, so grand, until by the renewed efforts of Mr Legge a mate may be provided to share the wilderness of waste'.

The Mercury, Thursday 22 June 1871 -

The Wandering Elk.- It would seem that this solitary stranger of ours possesses no ordinary amount of curiosity, for by advices from headquarters at Port Arthur, we learn that after a short sojourn at Mr. Hurst's establishment at the Coal

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Mines, where by the by he had many a parlour entertainment, and was fed with bread from the children's hands, he has since visited the distant and lofty semaphore stations throughout the Peninsula, and having travelled the 121,500 acres from end to end, arrived safely on the 16th instant at head-quarters, where he left his card for the Commandant. That gentleman reports his elkship's arrival to Mr. Graves in so pleasing a manner that we copy it:-

"I am glad to inform you that the noble elk is safe and sound. A few days ago he visited Mount Communication, whence he was reported as having dined with the man in charge. He next presented himself at Wedge Bay, where, I regret to say, he was not so politely received, but locked up ignominiously in a stable by a terrified constable, and there detained in durance vile until I had the honour of ordering his release. He remained at Wedge Bay for a few days afterwards, and made great friends with the family, but he has just now put in his appearance here, right in front of my office window, surrounded by no end of children."

We hope soon to report the arrival of a partner for this splendid specimen of the deer kind, and seeing that Tasman's Peninsula already abounds - and is, indeed, in many places fairly overrun - with fallow deer, kangaroo, and wallaby, that one day not far distant we shall be able to open to our fellow-colonists one of the grandest hunting grounds on this side of the globe.

It turns out that despite the Commandant's respect for the "noble elk" in his media correspondence, the animal had soon outstayed his welcome at Port Arthur. On the 26th of July, 1871 Commandant Boyd wrote to the Colonial Secretary reporting that the "*elk belonging to the Acclimatisation Society has been doing great damage to many of the gardens at the settlement*". With his letter he enclosed two statements belonging to Warder Bartholemew McNamara and his son who were both injured in separate altercations with the roaming elk.

McNamara's statement from July 25th, 1871 states:

"between 4 & 5 o'clock yesterday afternoon I was sitting at my tea when my wife hearing a noise went to see what it was and immediately returned telling

me that the elk was at the gate. I went out of the room and saw it standing in the centre of the shed in the front of my quarter. On going towards it I threw up my hands saying "Hist you brute" with the object of frightening it away, when it struck me in the chest with its head, the force of the blow caused me to fall on my back, it then horned and threw me about; when I received the first wound I caught hold of the elk's horns and kept my hold whilst it dragged me out into the road. At this time my daughter threw off her shawl to come to my assistance. This act attracted the elk's attention from me and it immediately attacked her - knocking her down.

Constable Sullivan & Watchman Molyneaux were present when the elk dragged me into the road. The screams of my wife & daughter brought the Station Officer and a number of men to the spot and they drove the elk off.

Dr. McCarthy dressed my wounds, one of which is severe, in the chest, and the others in the cheek and back, three in all."

Boyd closed his communiqué with the request that the Colonial Secretary "*be kind enough to give instructions for the animals removal from the Tasman's Peninsula*" highlighting that if this did not occur "*most serious consequences*" would be the result. It was at this point that the elk was reported as being secured at the settlement farm.

Over a month passed and on September 9th 1871 the Commandant wrote again to the Colonial Secretary as the elk had again been wreaking havoc across the settlement. This time breaking a grindstone support frame, turning over the farm ploughs and leaping into the garden of Reverend Fitzgerald. Once in the priest's garden the elk proceeded to trod on a number of recently sown plots and eat a "*great quantity*" of vegetables before he "*antlered*" the wheelbarrow into the creek. The Reverend made representation to the Commandant in hope that he would use his authority "*to prevent the recurrence of a similar intrusion from so unwelcome a stranger*".

Records suggest that nearly two months passed before the elk was taken to the property of James Lord near Hobart on October 24th, 1871. What happened to the elk after that date is unknown.