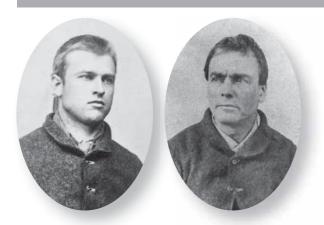
Leonard Hand, Port Arthur, 1874 National Library of Australia

Richard Pinches Port Arthur, 1874 Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery







Resisting the system . . .

But even under such intense control and deprivation, a few men found ways to assert themselves. In chapel, men would insert their own words to 'talk' to their fellows under the cover of hymn singing. Big Mark Jeffrey trashed his cell repeatedly in protest at his treatment. Richard Pinches and George Nutt escaped. Poor young Leonard Hand went slowly insane. And William Carter hanged himself in his cell.

The Separate Prison today

After the settlement closed the Separate Prison was sold and alterations began to convert it into a hotel and private residence. A fire in the 1890s halted these building works and it remained as a ruin until 2008, when an extensive program of conservation and interpretation works began.

'A' Wing and the Chapel have been refurbished and furnished to recreate something of their original appearance. Evocative sounds bring these spaces alive. You can hear a 'service' in the Chapel every ten minutes, featuring a soundscape artwork called 'Rewards of Silence' by Sonia Leber and David Chesworth. 'B' Wing will be left as a ruin, a reminder of the building's evolution. And 'C' wing will use 19th century portraits, text and other images to explore how the idea of the prison developed, and to explain what life was like here for both prisoners and staff. Outside, the perimeter walls have been reconstructed to recapture the prison's originally closed and secretive appearance, designed to strike fear into the hearts of those inside and outside.

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FACT SHEET

Port Arthur's Separate Prison



View from the Central Hall, looking up the Chapel stairs. On the table is a facsimile of a $warder's\ journal,\ where\ every\ daily\ event\ in\ the\ Prison\ was\ meticulously\ recorded.$

A Model Prison?

The Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania, USA, opened in 1829, was the first prison using the 'separate system'. The idea had originated with Englishman John Howard but it first appeared in bricks and mortar in America and then travelled to Van Diemen's Land via England. In this new kind of prison, solitary confinement replaced physical punishment. In isolation from others, prisoners would be forced to look inwards and repent their crimes.

Thick walls and doors ensured complete separation and silence between prisoners. English reformers adopted it as the 'model' for Pentonville in London. Built 1840–42 Pentonville was designed as a machine to subdue the spirit of men. The regime was based on silence, isolation, work and religious instruction. The use of soundproof materials and ventilation systems ensured absolute separation and silence. Men spent 23 hours per day in their cell; they only emerged for exercise, school and chapel. Even in the Chapel, with its separate cubicles, each man was strictly isolated from his fellows. Each cell had gas lighting, and a toilet and water tap.

As time went on, however, Chaplains and Medical Officers expressed concern at the unusually high number of cases of 'madness' among the prisoners. These rates were many times higher than those found at prisons run along different lines. But John Hampton, the new Comptroller of Convicts in Van Diemen's Land, was unmoved by such concerns. He was a fervent promoter of the system, and in this he was supported by Port Arthur's newly appointed Commandant, James Boyd, who had formerly been the Principal Warder at Pentonville.

Port Arthur's Separate Prison

Port Arthur's Separate Prison was closely modelled on Pentonville and hence was known as the Model Prison. It was built in 1849–50 with three wings of cells and a fourth wing containing a chapel. Every man who came to Port Arthur had to spend a certain amount of time here when he first arrived, based on his sentence. If sentenced to Life, he might spend 12 months in solitary confinement. Men who reoffended while at Port Arthur

might also be sent there for punishment. Men who offended while in the Separate Prison could be sent to 'the dumb cell' or punishment cell. This cell lay behind four thick doors and was completely light and sound proof. Here men might languish for up to 30 days, although after four days they had to be taken out each day for one hour of exercise.

The regime was designed to achieve the most intense social isolation and control. A warder sat at a desk in the central hall, keeping an eye on all the cell doors and the corridors. Warders patrolled the corridors in felt slippers, using sign language to ensure that the prisoner heard no sound. Each man was kept in solitary confinement in his cell for 23 hours each day; he wore a mask when outside his cell to prevent communication. At first he was only allowed to read the Bible but later other 'improving' books were allowed. He took exercise alone in a small yard and was fed through a hatch in his cell door. His only human contact was with warders, and with the chaplain and the medical officer who both visited regularly. Dozens of rules and rigid daily routines reinforced the inmate's sense of powerlessness; they were designed to train him in the virtues of order and discipline.

A refurnished cell in 'A' Wing, showing the way in which men had to arrange the items with which they were issued.

