THE PENITENTIARY building was originally constructed as a flour mill and granary in 1845 in an effort towards a self-sustainable settlement. Grain was ground by either a water-powered mill or, when the water flow was inadequate, by convicts walking on a treadmill – one of the harshest punishments at Port Arthur.

While the building was beautifully designed and one of the largest in the colony, the venture ultimately ended due to an insufficient water supply and competing priorities for space and industry. The Mill lay empty until the need to house more convicts became pressing, and it was converted into the Penitentiary between 1854 and 1857. It was then used to house prisoners until the settlement closed in 1877. The building was devastated by fire in 1897 leaving only the mosaic walls and barred windows behind.

The Penitentiary, Convict Church and Separate Prison were the first buildings to be gazetted as part of the Scenic Reserve of Port Arthur in 1914, the Government recognising their importance to Tasmania’s convict history. Since then considerable work has been carried out on the ruin to ensure that future generations will be able to visit this magnificent building.

**THE PENITENTIARY**

Superintendent Charles La Trobe reported on his visit in May 1847: ‘Thirty six prisoners are on the treadmill at a time, the wheel upon which these men are worked makes one revolution in a minute – about eighteen bushels are ground in an hour’. Assistant Commissary General to Colonial Secretary, 15 October 1840

As early as 1839 proposals were put forward for a mill and granary to be erected at Port Arthur to reduce the risk of theft and to supply the settlement.

Over the years, the mill was adapted to suit the changing needs of the settlement. The building was used as a flour mill, granary, and later as a hospital and military barracks.

The Penitentiary, Convict Church and Separate Prison were gazetted as part of the scenic reserve in 1914.

**THE BUILDING**

The building in question will be of great public utility, and confine economy with the advantage to the establishment of having three floors of the best quality, and free from adulterations’

**THE MACHINERY**

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Assistant Commissary General to Colonial Secretary, 15 October 1840

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**FLOR MILL AND GRANARY**

The treadwheel inside the mill building was to act not only as a punishment regime, but also as a supplementary power source for a 358 diameter waterwheel supplied by water from two reservoirs located on the hills behind the mill site (the first behind the site of the Hospital and the second over a kilometre south of the settlement). The waterwheel divided the treadmill ward and the Granary and evidence of its location can be seen in the remaining masonry walls just east of the tower and abatements yard door.

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**PLAN FOR THE NEW PENITENTIARY**

Even before the Mill was completed, officials went on the hunt for a new location to house the growing prisoner population. In 1846, Commandant Chompy, who at the time was Acting Comptroller General, identified that: ‘New buildings for the reception of the convicts is absolutely necessary’. With a number of locations proposed by the staff, it didn’t take long for the Mill (which was struggling operationally) to be suggested for conversion, with the idea first put forward in August 1848. Debate about the usefulness of the Mill continued for some time, as did discussion about what form the conversion would take, until in 1852 the need for more space became pressing with the transfer of Norfolk Island’s convicts to the Tasman Peninsula. The conversion of the building began in 1854 and was completed in early 1857. The building was used to house the convict population for the next 20 years until the settlement closed in 1877.

Fires gutted the building in the 1890s, destroying the timber floors, janitor and shingle roof, shuttering the glass windows and damaging much of the framework. It also ended any plans to reuse the building as part of the new township, which had become a busy tourism destination following the closure of the penal settlement.
The Penitentiary in Detail

1 Main Entrance

The interior better represents a spacious than a house of punishment for convicts – passing through the corridor we arrive at a very lofty and handsomely furnished vestibule.

– The Mercury, 24-25 March 1870

This large foyer was the main entrance to the Penitentiary. The north-east corner of the large space was occupied by an office for the Station Officer or Night Duty Officers.

2 Separate Cells (Ground and First Floors)

Each cell contains a bed … of sacking slip furnished with straps and hooks, which are essential to rings in the wall.

– The Mercury, 24-25 March 1870

The ground and first floors of the building housed 136 separate cells, with corridors and galleries running around the outside of each block. The ground floor housed the men in heavy irons, the first floor, those in lighter irons. Aside from a shag hammock-style bed, a pair of blankets and a wooden railing, each cell contained a steel, a small log of water, a tin drinking cup, and often a bible. Light from kerosene lamps in the corridor came through a fluted glass window. Prisoners could communicate with the officers via a handle inside their cell door.

3 Ablutions Yard

In the rear of the penitentiary is the day or smoking room, provided with two fine places to smoke the room and comfort the inmates in cold weather. Further on are lavatories, fitted up with every convenience – brush soap, vats are supplied – while beyond the arc are 11 baths, each separated and curtained off, provided and supplied with hot and cold water taps, which can be used at discretion.

– The Mercury, 24-25 March 1870

The rear exterior space (ablutions and exercise yard) contained shelter sheds, fireplaces, wash basins, urinals and water closets (toilet). The plans suggest that the area went through at least two different phases of layout, and the building in the middle was used in the early phase to house privies and wash troughs. During the later phase, shown on the plan here, this space was known as the day room and was used as a recreation space by the convicts.

4 Constables’ and Watchmen’s Quarters

None of the officers reside within the penitentiary, but a sufficient force is always upon duty day and night; and the Cold Guard which consists of twelve well trained constables round about the Constables’ quarters, is close at hand. The quarters of the unreserved police are also in immediate proximity to the building.

– Commandant James Boyd, 1 February 1869

This area was designated to house the Watchmen and the Constables, with their own kitchen, washroom and privies. The Senior Constable had his own office at the rear of the yard with a window between him and the Constables that allowed communication. This little window is still visible from inside the Constables’ Quarters.

5 Chapel Second Floor

As we entered from the staircase the voices of these men were heard singing … ‘Hark, they whisper, Angels say’. The effect was startling and pleasing, although it was essential that it seemed like a mockery to play such sublime language in the mouths of such men.

– Joint Parliamentary Committee, 23 August 1860

About one quarter of all prisoners at Port Arthur were Catholic and prior to 1843 all prisoners attended combined services. The first Roman Catholic Chapel was appointed in 1843 after a group of Catholics refused to attend these services as the context was contrary to their beliefs. Between 1843 and when this chapel was built in the Penitentiary in 1857, Catholic services were held in the school room of the first Prisoners’ Barracks. Services were held in the Penitentiary for 20 years and as with the large church, served both the convict and free population. The latter entered via a door at the rear, off a ramp from Champ Street.

6 Dining Hall and Reading Room

Over the cells is a spacious dining hall … the ceiling is painted white and contains a large chandelier. The dining hall was used as a schoolroom. The library had also located on this floor and Commandant Boyd reported that it contained ‘13,253 volumes of general knowledge. The reading room was also used as a reading room for officers who were able to borrow the books, as were civilians and prisoners. Boyd reported that in the evenings, books on general knowledge were… read aloud in the dormitory by men appointed for the purpose … for the benefit of those who did not attend school.

– Commandant Adolarius Humphrey Boyd, 17 October 1872

7 Dormitory

The dormitory is fitted with 340 separate sleeping spaces in two tiers, and is well lighted and ventilated.

– Commandant James Boyd, 10 August 1867

The dormitory was located on the uppermost floor of the building. The men were accommodated in basic bunk-style beds that lined the front and rear walls of the large room. Each bunk was separated with timber battens. Unlike the prisoners housed in the lower two floors, prisoners in the dormitory had access to direct natural light from roof skylights, however this privilege in the latter years of the settlement was blaming for the deteriorating health of a number of the men. The prior presence of both classes of disease (i.e. contagious and of the respiratory system) must be attributed in part to the excessive moist atmosphere of Port Arthur, and in part also to the very bad condition of the roof of the penitentiary.

– Commandant Adolarius Humphrey Boyd, 26 February 1873

8 Bakehouse, Kitchen and Laundry

Every inmate to ensure good cooking is provided … there are cupboards … and large digerators for the preparation of excellent soup, stoves are also provided for baking bread for a large number of persons, in fact the whole establishment is thoroughly and scrupulously clean.

– The Mercury, 24-25 March 1870

The building attached to the west of the Penitentiary housed the bakehouse, kitchen, baking room and laundromas, as well as stores and general storerooms. A hoist was used to deliver meals from the kitchen to the dining hall on the second floor.

9 Muster Yard

Immediately in front of the building is the large Muster Yard. This area was originally surrounded by a low wall into which a water fountain was set. This served as a drinking fountain for convicts working in the area. The yard was used to muster convicts in the morning before heading, off to work. The daily head count gave guards a chance to check if anyone had absconded!