

Landmarks: People and Places across Australia, a gallery bringing together over 1500 objects, explores the history of Australia since European settlement.

OBJECT BIOGRAPHY

Bridgewater convict-era shirt

In the early 1960s, an extraordinary discovery was made at a cottage undergoing renovation in Granton, a suburb on the Derwent River in northern Hobart. Inside the wall of the cottage was a shirt that was almost intact and in excellent condition, dating to around 1830. At the same time, a convict-era punishment shoe was found under the floorboards. These objects, along with others found in the grounds of the cottage, were purchased by the National Museum of Australia in 2005 and are featured in *Landmarks: People and Places across Australia*, a gallery bringing together over 1500 objects, exploring the history of Australia since European settlement.

In 1829, Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur decided to use convict labour to build a causeway across the Derwent River at Bridgewater – the first river crossing to be constructed on the road to the Tasmanian Midlands and beyond. The Bridgewater Road Station was established on the western side of the river, with barrack accommodation for convicts and soldiers, a hospital, bakehouse, chapel, and Commandant's cottage. Around 200 convicts at a time worked at Bridgewater. These were men who had reoffended following arrival in Van Diemen's Land and were sent to work on the chain-gang for additional punishment. The irons they worked in could only be removed by a blacksmith and weighed up to 14 pounds (6.3 kilograms). The weight and length of the chains could be altered by overseers to inflict additional misery, while the chains themselves deterred escape attempts by making it difficult for the convicts to run or ride a horse. Convict men wore specially designed trousers that buttoned up the inside of the leg, resulting in them being reduced to an infant-like situation, and adding extra humiliation to their situation.



Inside the wall of the cottage was a shirt that was almost intact and in excellent condition, dating to around 1830. Photo: Jason McCarthy, National Museum of Australia.

The Bridgewater Road Station backs onto limestone cliffs, from which the stone for the causeway and the road station buildings was cut. The convicts working at Bridgewater cut the stone by hand with pick axes, shaped it when necessary, and hauled it to the water's edge where it was added to the foundations of the causeway. However, the river was deep at that point – an irate letter to the editor of the *Colonial Times* on 25 October 1836 stated that at Bridgewater “...there was plenty of mud with no bottom, except at fifteen fathom [27.5 metres] deep.” As a result, the convicts suffered the additional punishment of watching their hours of toil disappear into the mud, leaving each day's construction no further along than the previous. The work broke the convicts' bodies as well as their spirits – the punishment shoe found at the Commandant's cottage had the sides cut away, which would allow the wearer's leg irons to rub and cut against his ankle. The harsh Tasmanian winters labouring in open quarries and around the Derwent River sustained by fairly basic rations doubtless had an irreversible impact on many serving on the chain-gang.

One of the few contemporary records of life for the Bridgewater convicts comes from Colonial Auditor, GTWB Boyes, who visited the site in 1831. He described the site, the work the convicts undertook, and the additional modes of punishment used to subdue the men. Boyes wrote of the punishment cells at the site, which measured seven feet long, and two and a half feet in breadth and depth. “...a more speedy means of diminishing the bulk of human expansion could hardly be devised than the treatment at this penal station”, he wrote. In 1836, the hopelessness of the project was recognised and it was abandoned, unfinished. For many years, a punt was used to bridge the gap between the causeway and the opposite shore. This caused great public outcry, due to the enormous cost of the project over the estimates for construction of a simple bridge.

This shirt dates to around 1830, when the Commandant's cottage was being built – by the same convicts and using stone from the same quarry as the causeway project. Despite being one of the most common items issued to convicts in Australia, it is one of only three convict-era shirts discovered in Australia, and is the most intact and well-preserved. The large amounts of starch still on the shirt add to the other evidence indicating that the shirt was new and unworn when it was placed in the wall cavity during construction of the cottage.

However, why was the shirt placed in the wall cavity to begin with? It must be said, it is an unusual thing to have done in a place so far removed from home, and where supplies were fairly limited and the punishment for losing items of government-issue clothing was severe. The answer is not what might be expected. The shirt appears to have been – in conjunction with the hiding of a shoe under the floorboards – part of a folk magic ritual. The belief was that placing items of clothing within the fabric of the building would protect the house from evil spirits and witches. Rituals like this date back to 15th century Britain.

Concealed shoes have been found with some degree of frequency in Australia, but the discovery of a shirt is rare, even in Britain. To find a shirt in near perfect condition after 130 years in a wall cavity? That is nothing short of miraculous.

Object biography prepared by Kirsti Graham, Curator, National Museum of Australia.

Landmarks: People and Places across Australia is the National Museum's newest and most ambitious gallery to date, bringing together over 1500 objects to create a history of Australia since European settlement.

For more information about the exhibition visit
<http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/landmarks>