

A History of Port Macquarie Gaol to 1920

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Table of Contents

1.0 History of Port Macquarie Gaol.....	4
1.1 Building Port Macquarie Gaol.....	4
1.2 Official Gaol.....	4
1.3 Police Gaol.....	9
1.4 Disused Gaol.....	11
2.0 Chronology of Port Macquarie Gaol.....	15
2.1 Building Port Macquarie Gaol.....	15
2.2 Official Gaol.....	15
2.3 Police Gaol.....	17
2.4 Disused Gaol.....	18
Bibliography	19

Abbreviations

- Bk Book
- ML Mitchell Library
- No Number
- SRNSW State Records, New South Wales

1.0 History of Port Macquarie Gaol

1.1 Building Port Macquarie Gaol

Once Port Macquarie was established as a settlement to provide secondary punishment for convicts who had re-offended in the colony of New South Wales, an infrastructure to enable the settlement to operate was created. An early gaol was built which was shown on a map of 1824.¹

The original gaol was poorly built and it became apparent that there was a need for a new gaol. According to a number of published sources, this new gaol was built between 1837 and 1840 east of the military barracks at the top of Clarence Street facing east towards the Flagstaff. It was built of brick and was lined with hardwood.² However, when it was completed, it was immediately obsolescent since transportation had ended in 1840. Thus, it was used only intermittently for some years.³

However, since the gaol was imperially funded, it was not listed as a public work in the NSW Blue Books from 1835 to 1846. The Royal Engineers, who were usually responsible for the erection of such work, had spent £202/10/- on “Various buildings” in Port Macquarie in 1839, but this does not appear to correlate to the erection of the gaol.⁴ Even the letters sent by the Colonial Engineer made no mention made of the building of Port Macquarie gaol between 1838 and 1842.⁵ Jim Kerr, in his magisterial survey of convict incarceration, noted that the design of the gaol and its derivation were obscure, but was related to the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline model designs of 1826. Yet even his assiduous efforts did not locate data about its design and construction.⁶

To further complicate the matter, Darcy’s plan of Port Macquarie which has been attributed a completion date of 4 January 1831 shows this gaol on Lord Street situated within Gaol Reserve. Whilst it could be argued that this was a proposed gaol, it has the same layout and internal buildings as the later Port Macquarie Gaol possessed.⁷

1.2 Official Gaol

In any case, it was extant by the 1840s, but does not appear to have been used a great deal. On 14 June 1847, the Royal Engineers listed all of the buildings at Port Macquarie, which were being handed over to the Colonial Government. The gaol was not listed as either a convict or a military building, and did not appear on any of the subsequent returns of 1850 and 1851. However, in May 1854, the return listed the gaol, which was “used as a Lock up” and was described as being “in good repair – an excellent

¹ *History of Port Macquarie*, p. 20

² Frank Rogers, (ed). *Port Macquarie - A History to 1850*, Hastings District Historical Soc, Port Macquarie, 1982, p 121

³ Frank Rogers, (ed). *Port Macquarie - A History to 1850*, Hastings District Historical Soc, Port Macquarie, 1982, p 121

⁴ Col Sec, Blue Books, 1835-46, SRNSW 4/266A – 4/277

⁵ Colonial Engineer, Copies of Letters Sent, 1836-42, SRNSW 4/457

⁶ J S Kerr, *Design for Convicts - An account of design for convict establishments in the Australian colonies during the transportation era*, Library of Australian History, Sydney, 1984, pp. 100-1

⁷ Plan of Port Macquarie showing new arrangements of streets, (M. 706), Darcy, 4 Jan 1831, SR Map 3673

Building”. This does not appear to be another building, which was used as police cells and was listed in earlier returns.¹

In 27 May 1848, the Public Works Department called for tenders to repair damage to the gaol caused by lightning.²

On 12 July 1859, a Proclamation was issued under the Public Gaols Act declaring various institutions as prisons under the Act. Amongst those declared was Port Macquarie.³ Nonetheless, this meant that it had come into operation as a police gaol, i. e. a small gaol or lock-up manned on behalf of the police rather than by the Prisons Department.

In 1861, the Colonial Architect was delegated to report on the suitability of public buildings at Port Macquarie for conversion into a juvenile reformatory. However, there was nothing on the file to show which buildings were being assessed.⁴

Port Macquarie Gaol was listed in 1862 as a police gaol.⁵ In 1863, Port Macquarie was not listed in the official Blue Book but it is likely to have been one of 16 “country gaols”, i e lock-ups.⁶

Nevertheless, the prison population of the colony was growing and the existence of the gaol as a resource for utilisation was apparent. Amalgamation of the various police forces in 1862 and the reforms, which accompanied the changes, brought a greater number of desperate men, notably bushrangers into NSW prisons.⁷ The gaols could not always cope with the demand for accommodation of the new inmates. On 10 December 1863, the Colonial Secretary informed Public Works that R Forster, MP, had asked a question about the condition and availability of government buildings in Port Macquarie and their ability to house inmates.⁸ Forster was not unfamiliar with the locality or with prisons. His father had been the governor of Goulburn Gaol, and in private life, Forster was a solicitor. He represented the constituency of New England.⁹ Whether this was the catalyst which caused a review of Port Macquarie Gaol is uncertain. In any case, it was soon being readied for the reception of prisoners.

The Sheriff of NSW reported on 21 August 1865 on the necessary alterations needed to bring Port Macquarie Gaol into operation after being disused for some time. To enable work to commence immediately, he had already engaged a local builder and promised to pass all relevant papers to the Colonial Architect who would supervise the works. Further work needed on the gaol apart from that already commissioned included galvanised ridge capping and iron on the roofs, padlocks, iron check gates and six kerosene lamps set in ironwork at an estimated cost of £132/10/0. In addition, plastering of the eaves, shingling of part of the roofs and fencing around the gaol exterior was also recommended at a cost of £170. According to minuting on the letter, this additional work

¹ At 57/4208, Lands and Public Works, Letters Received, 1857, SRNSW 5/3581

² Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol 1848, SRNSW 2/643B

³ NSWGG, 12 July 1859, p 1545

⁴ Col Sec, Special Bundles, Conversion of Public Buildings at Port Macquarie into a Juvenile Reformatory, 1861-4, SRNSW 4/988.2

⁵ NSW, *Blue Book*, 1862, p 22

⁶ NSW, *Blue Book*, 1863, p 26

⁷ J Ramsland, *With Just But Relentless Discipline: A Social History of Corrective Services in New South Wales*, Kangaroo, Kenthurst, 1996, pp 33-4

⁸ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol 1848, SRNSW 2/643B

⁹ C N Connolly, *Biographical Register of the New South Wales Parliament 1856-1901*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1983, p 112

was also to be undertaken to prepare the gaol for use.¹ James Butler, builder of Horton Street, Port Macquarie, was the man who had been engaged to complete the work, and he commenced almost immediately.

It was not until 11 September 1865, that the Colonial Secretary officially informed the Public Works Department that in order to relieve pressure on Darlinghurst and other prisons, Port Macquarie Gaol was being brought into operation before the onset of the hot weather. A sum had been voted to carry out the repairs already underway.²

Emanuel Fleur was appointed as foreman of works at the Gaol by Public Works, On 28 August 1865, he reported that work was progressing rapidly since the contractor, James Butler, had ten men on the job and already had material available. Works being undertaken mainly involved the replacement of timber joinery, framing and flooring, as well as re-roofing. Fleur also emphasized the need to re-whitewash many of the walls since they had not been used for a long time and were in a filthy state.³

James Butler did not complete a formal tender for the work he had hurriedly been engaged to undertake until 29 August 1865. The tender was for works to make the gaol operational at a cost of £260/12/6. His work did not include the shingling of roofs and repairs to the gaol officer's rooms.⁴

As the work was proceeding, the new gaol was staffed and prisoners even commenced arriving before all work was finished. A Gaoler, Joseph Gates, and a Matron were officially appointed to Port Macquarie Gaol on 6 September 1865.⁵ On 8 September 1865, the Gaol was officially gazetted as a gaol.⁶

There is a surviving undated plan of Port Macquarie Gaol, which shows the main yards and buildings.⁷ It may have been created to allow the work of 1865-66 to proceed. Whether it is an earlier plan is uncertain, but it does show the names and number of yards, cells and buildings. It does show some of the work, completed in 1865-66, notably, the dispensary on the south-western wall. However, in this case, the plan appears to have been altered in this part. To complicate matters, the dispensary is labelled as "surgery" on the plan. What can be said about the plan is that it appears to show the Gaol as originally built in its most complete state, before buildings were removed or fell into decay.

Work proceeded on the gaol. On 16 September 1865, a sketch plan of fencing to be erected around gaol was prepared in order to brief the contractor.⁸ By 18 September 1865, James Butler had added windows to four cells and had shingled the WC. The Gaoler, Joseph Gates requested bars over drains leading out of the gaol, on 27 September 1865 in order to prevent escapes through them. This communication was minuted that the work was to be done.⁹

James Butler had completed the work he had been engaged to do by 29 September 1865. Work still to be completed were the erection of iron check doors, which were then en route from Sydney; the repair of lead flashing in three chimneys at the front of the

¹ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

² Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

³ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

⁴ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

⁵ NSW, *Blue Book*, 1866, p 28

⁶ *NSWGG*, 8 Sept 1865, p 2007

⁷ Anon, Plan of H M Gaol, Port Macquarie, n. d. ML V1B/Pr Mac/4

⁸ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

⁹ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

gaol, which would be completed once the shingling of the roofs was complete. Works completed by that time included making the cells secure with ironwork, as well as the replacement of joinery around doors and windows, plus the renewal of timber in floors, ceilings and linings.¹

The additional work needed was put out to tender. On 9 October 1865, Emanuel Fleur reported that only a single tender had been received for the additional works, from the only contractor capable of doing the work, i. e. James Butler, who was already at work on the site. The tender was £20 over Fleur's estimate but he recommended acceptance. The work envisaged included repairs to the main building, the wing building and to outbuildings. The buildings outside the wall were very dilapidated and scarcely worth repair so Fleur suggested that one might be demolished to provide the bricks, which they could not obtain locally from lack of a brick kiln. This would allow him to complete the other work.²

The PWD file contained an unsigned note dated about 25 October 1865 concerning the chevaux de fries (open iron grilles) around the gates in yards 3, 4, 5, and 6, and details about how they would be attached. The note also pointed out that the lower parts of some cell windows had been bricked up and the upper part covered with perforated iron plates to allow some light into cells as a way of preventing inmates grabbing hold of the window grilles to climb walls during escape attempts. The windows in question appear to have been on the cells at the ends of the block.³

Anxiety about escapes was vindicated. On 27 October 1865, Emanuel Fleur reported that six inmates had escaped by cutting through the floorboards in "No 9 room". In order to prevent further escapes through the floors, he suggested that other floorboards be laid diagonally across the existing floor and that these boards then be nailed to those underneath to create a secure floor. He reported that the timber laid as flooring had shrunk and prisoners could use the trestles of their tables as levers to pry the boards loose. He sought authority for the work suggested to prevent further escapes.⁴

He may have been given authority for this work. On 17 November 1865, it was reported that a second floor had been laid in rooms 9, 11, 20 at the Gaol and two rooms - 10 and 14 were to be completed on 21 November.⁵

An estimate was prepared on 1 November 1865 for the erection of a kitchen for the gaoler.⁶ This kitchen was completed by 1 January 1866.⁷ James Butler completed four sentry boxes in December 1865.⁸

The Gaol well became an issue due to the need for an adequate water supply. On 15 December 1865, the Gaoler, Joseph Gates wrote that the well could not give any more water since the work to clean and deepen it had reached solid rock. Gates wanted to dig a large tank "in the large yard near the entrance [sic] gates with conducting pipes to the other yards of the gaol" using inmates when their work had eased off. This note was minuted on 28 December that the work could be investigated with reserve labour.⁹

¹ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

² Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

³ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

⁴ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

⁵ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

⁶ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

⁷ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

⁸ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

⁹ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

It had been proposed to fortify the Chief Warder's quarters, which were located within the gaol walls, as a way of protecting him from prisoners. However, Fleur reported on 29 January 1866 that since the most dangerous prisoners were no longer at the Gaol, he had not put bars over the gaoler's windows at the Gaoler's request. Fleur also felt that there was no need to pack concrete in the wall foundations since the walls were already very secure. Prisoners could not easily break through them. The floors of the rooms were the weakest part according to him and if they were strengthened by the use of additional boards as he had already suggested making a double-boarded floor, this problem would be solved.¹

Fleur noted on 8 February 1866 that works were needed to repair the gaol drains otherwise they would undermine the walls in wet weather. The repair of outside walls was difficult since there was no local kiln. He suggested taking down part of the wall to use those bricks to effect repairs.² On 14 February 1866, Fleur made various suggestions about the need for a new room for the Chief Warder and improved ventilation for the Chief Warder's and Guard rooms.³

A plan was drawn on 5 March 1866 of the proposed dispensary, which was to be added along the south-west wall.⁴ This dispensary was shown on the undated plan mentioned earlier, but appears to have been added to it later. An estimate of the cost of erecting a dispensary in the Hospital yard of the gaol was made the same day, and totalled £46/18/8.⁵

William Coles, the senior clerk of works for the Public Works Department visited Port Macquarie and the gaol on 26 March 1866. He supported Fleur's suggestion that concreting of the gaol walls was not needed. The quarters of the Warder and some other rooms needed better ventilation so he suggested that ventilators should be cut near the floor on rooms 10, 11, 18, 19 and 20, and that their ceilings be perforated. An additional window was needed in the hospital as well as a pipe through the kitchen roof to carry off steam. An additional window was needed in the office. Two windows were needed at the end of ranges No 10 and 11 so warders could inspect those rooms from outside. He thought that the wall between cells 4 and 5 should be removed to enable No 4 to be used for inmates. Number 4 cell was very dark and not available for use as a cell. Eaves gutters were needed to prevent damage to the walls by damp and to carry off water to fill up a well, which Coles suggested could be sunk by inmates. An additional room for the Chief Warder as requested in February 1866 was also very necessary and he supported that it be built for £60. A dispensary was also needed at a cost of £50.⁶ Despite Coles' support of Fleur, most of these suggestions were not immediately acted upon.

Works on the gaol were almost complete on 16 May 1866. Only No 18 and 19 male and female hospitals were not ready.⁷ William Coles reported on the gaol again on 10 September 1866. He repeated almost all of his recommendations of 26 March 1866, which had obviously not been implemented. The additional room for the gaoler, which was one of the recommendations, was to be built above the entrance gateway at a cost of £60. The dispensary was to be built of weatherboards and was to be situated in the hospital yard at a cost of £50.⁸ Action appeared to be imminent. On 23 November 1866,

¹ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

² Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

³ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

⁴ Tracing from general plan showing position of proposed dispensary, 5 March SR Plan 2019, 2020

⁵ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

⁶ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

⁷ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

⁸ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

Fleur was instructed to prepare specifications for all of these works.¹ However, the extant Public Works files do not show if this work was undertaken.

Other minor works were undertaken in the next decade. In 1872, alterations to the Chief Warder's quarters were proposed as was the strengthening of windows.² Staff reductions were proposed in 1873.³ Further work was carried out on the windows of the Chief Warder's quarters.⁴ To cope with the anticipated staff reductions, some alterations were proposed about October 1874.⁵ By late 1876, further staff reductions were being discussed.⁶ From correspondence of about this time, it appears that the gaol also had gardens.⁷ In 1878, timber to carry out repairs was being discussed.⁸

Within the next decade, Port Macquarie Gaol became less suitable for the needs of the colony. Renovation of Port Macquarie Gaol appears to have been a stopgap measure to cope with overcrowded gaols in the 1860s. On 5 November 1874, Harold Maclean, Comptroller of Prisons, reported that the Clarence and Richmond River Steam Navigation Co had stopped serving Port Macquarie. Hence, it was difficult to land invalids consigned to Port Macquarie Gaol. In addition, it was difficult to obtain proper food supplies suitable for invalids, there were poor medical back-up services, and the area was isolated and expensive. He recommended that the Gaol be reduced to a Police Gaol.⁹ Catching wind of this possibility, the community at Port Macquarie expressed its opposition to the proposal. A petition from Port Macquarie inhabitants opposing the dis-establishment of Port Macquarie Gaol was prepared on 17 December 1874.¹⁰ Although it was to be some time before the recommended downgrading was implemented, the opposition of residents was to no avail.

1.3 Police Gaol

Maclean was ready to implement the decision to reduce Port Macquarie to a Police gaol but he needed official sanction to do so. On 16 February 1877, he requested a decision from the Colonial Secretary whether he should continue sending invalids to Port Macquarie Gaol. The number there had been reduced to 15.¹¹ The expected opening of the new gaol at Young would take some of the pressure off other gaols as well as absorb part of the staff and budget assigned to Port Macquarie.

Harold Maclean noted on 25 August 1877 that Young Gaol was almost complete. He wanted to close Port Macquarie Gaol to release staff. His letter was minuted on 12th "Inform of intended discontinuance of Gaol & that their services will not be required

¹ Colonial Architect, Correspondence, Port Macquarie Gaol, 1865-6, SRNSW 2/8153

² No 285; 604, Prisons, Index to Letters, 1872, SRNSW 5/1979

³ No 584, Prisons, Index to Letters, 1873, SRNSW 5/1980

⁴ No 2079, Prisons, Index to Letters, 1873, SRNSW 5/1980

⁵ No 1923, Prisons, Index to Letters, 1874, SRNSW 5/1981

⁶ No 2797 Prisons, Index to Letters, 1876, SRNSW 5/1982

⁷ No 2903 Prisons, Index to Letters, 1876, SRNSW 5/1982

⁸ No 3034 Prisons, Index to Letters, 1878, SRNSW 5/1983

⁹ Col Sec, Special Bundles, Gaols at Young and Port Macquarie 1874-8, and Estimates 1879, SRNSW 5/7029.5

¹⁰ Col Sec, Special Bundles, Gaols at Young and Port Macquarie 1874-8, and Estimates 1879, SRNSW 5/7029.5

¹¹ Col Sec, Special Bundles, Gaols at Young and Port Macquarie 1874-8, and Estimates 1879, SRNSW 5/7029.5

after the end of next month”.¹ On 31 December 1877, Port Macquarie Gaol had accommodation for 11 separate and 122 associated inmates but its numbers were being reduced.²

Port Macquarie Gaol was closed as an official prison on 31 March 1878. It became a police gaol from 1 April 1878.³ On 10 July 1878, Harold Maclean reported with regard to the budget estimates for 1879 that the new gaol at Young was open. Thus, both Braidwood and Port Macquarie Gaols would now be omitted from the estimates for his department.⁴

As a police gaol, Port Macquarie Gaol held fewer inmates and was a much more modest operation. The letterbook maintained by the Chief Gaoler at Port Macquarie from 1878 until its closure in 1905 is still extant. The low-key nature of the gaol is clearly apparent in this. The earliest letter in this extant gaol letterbook is one dated 22 April requesting postage stamps for official correspondence.⁵ As a gaol, Port Macquarie was listed in December 1878 with the same accommodation it had a year earlier.⁶ However, unlike the major gaols, which tended to increase their accommodation, Port Macquarie declined in the number of available cells as the buildings fell into disuse and disrepair.

Even ordinary maintenance took a low priority. In September 1881, a storm had passed over Port Macquarie. The gaol lay in its path, and the wind stripped over fifty shingles from the gaol roof plus the ridge capping. The Gaoler requested permission in October 1881 to use inmates to complete repairs. But, in July 1882, he reported that since his request had been refused the roof was in poor repair and he again requested permission to effect repairs.⁷

The absence of a kiln operating locally, which had bedevilled repairs in 1865-66, was still an impediment to work on the gaol. On 1 October 1882, the Gaoler reported that bricks had been taken from old buildings in the “Government Paddock” to repair the Gaol.⁸

Most of the land on which the Gaol lay was to be given to the local Agricultural Society for a showground. A plan of the site of the Hastings Agricultural Society showground was completed on 28 November 1882. It showed the gaol site, but only the line of the paling fence was shown.⁹ The Society did not gain control of the gaol site. On 25 June 1883, the site of the gaol was dedicated as a Reserve from sale for Gaol purposes, Reserve No 204, Parish Macquarie, Town of Port Macquarie, comprising 3 acres and 8 perches.¹⁰

Extant photographs dated as being taken in the 1880s show the gaol exterior plus some unidentified internal buildings.¹¹ At that stage there appears no obvious decay. Yet, in December 1886, Port Macquarie Gaol only had accommodation for 10 separate and 60 associated inmates, a reduction by almost half of the space it had eight years before

¹ CSIL 77/7028, Col Sec, Special Bundles, Gaols at Young and Port Macquarie 1874-8, and Estimates 1879, SRNSW 5/7029.5

² NSW - Prisons Dept, *Annual Report*, 1877, p 3

³ NSW, *Blue Book*, 1878, p 28

⁴ CSIL 78/5961 in Col Sec, Letters Received, Estimates, 1878, SRNSW 1/2430

⁵ Port Macquarie Gaol, Letters Sent and Received, 1878-1905, SRNSW 5/1568, p 2

⁶ NSW - Prisons Dept, *Annual Report*, 1878, p 3

⁷ Port Macquarie Gaol, Letters Sent and Received, 1878-1905, SRNSW 5/1568, p 28-30

⁸ Port Macquarie Gaol, Letters Sent and Received, 1878-1905, SRNSW 5/1568, p 68

⁹ M.38.706, DLWC plan

¹⁰ NSWGG, 25 June 1883, p 3440

¹¹ ML, SPF

when it was first declared a Police gaol.¹ In December 1888, Port Macquarie only had accommodation for 10 separate and 30 associated inmates, a further halving of the accommodation in the space of two years and the reduction to a quarter of the space which had been available ten years before when it became a police gaol.²

Dwelling space for staff was also provided in most gaols, but at Port Macquarie, this was no longer adequate. On 6 October 1885, Warder Richard Barkley informed head office that the rooms in the gaol were too small for warders with large families and he asked for assistance with rent so he could find something in town.³ It was reported on 5 June 1887, that Warder Deane had been living in the old Barracks near the Gaol. This became a problem since there were moves afoot to dispose of or demolish the old Barracks building.⁴

A verandah was being added to the Acting [ie Chief Gaoler's] residence in 1891. James Condon who had been engaged to erect these verandahs at the front of the Acting Gaoler's quarters complained on 27 July 1891 that he did not have specifications. He was to be informed that these had been sent to the Gaol on 10 December 1890.⁵ No plans or other details of this work have come to light.

After a rapid decline in the number of cells available at Port Macquarie the number stabilised but remained at a low figure. In December 1891, Port Macquarie had accommodation for 10 separate and 20 associated inmates.⁶ In December 1894, it had accommodation for 9 separate and 27 associated inmates.⁷ On 4 March 1895, the Acting Gaoler reported that there were 9 cells available for prisoners, with another 5 in No 7 yard and 2 in No 5 yard if needed. The current cells held 22 male and 4 female inmates. The other seven were solitary cells. Another 4 cells were insecure.⁸ But, in December 1896, Port Macquarie had only 8 male and 1 female cells.⁹ In December 1899, there were only 4 male cells at Port Macquarie. This was noted as being "Decreased consequent upon removal to new gaol".¹⁰ In 1900, Port Macquarie had 3 male and 1 female cells.¹¹

The number of cells stayed at this low level until 1905, when Port Macquarie still had 3 male and 1 female cells. However, the gaol at Port Macquarie was disestablished in 1905 and closed down.¹²

1.4 Disused Gaol

The gaol had attracted attention over the years as a relic of the convict era. Some of the early novels about convict life in New South Wales had been set in Port Macquarie, so the gaol as a tangible link to those days acquired a certain attraction. On 26 October 1898, the Chief Gaoler at Port Macquarie informed head office that Harold Kirton,

¹ NSW - Prisons Dept, *Annual Report*, 1886, p 3

² NSW - Prisons Dept, *Annual Report*, 1888, p 3

³ Port Macquarie Gaol, Letters Sent and Received, 1878-1905, SRNSW 5/1568, p 82

⁴ Port Macquarie Gaol, Letters Sent and Received, 1878-1905, SRNSW 5/1568, p 118

⁵ Port Macquarie Gaol, Letters Sent and Received, 1878-1905, SRNSW 5/1568, p 203-4

⁶ NSW - Prisons Dept, *Annual Report*, 1891, p 4

⁷ NSW - Prisons Dept, *Annual Report*, 1894, p 4

⁸ Port Macquarie Gaol, Letters Sent and Received, 1878-1905, SRNSW 5/1568, p 224

⁹ NSW - Prisons Dept, *Annual Report*, 1896, p 38

¹⁰ NSW - Prisons Dept, *Annual Report*, 1899, p 49

¹¹ NSW - Prisons Dept, *Annual Report*, 1900, p 46

¹² NSW - Prisons Dept, *Annual Report*, 1905, p 42

photographer had requested permission to take a series of internal and external views of the Gaol for historical and newspaper purposes. This request was refused by head office.¹

Other enthusiasts were attracted to the gaol. One of them was William Dixson, a noted collector of Australiana. In one of his notebooks there is an undated description of Port Macquarie Gaol, which he had obviously walked over and measured.

His notes described the Gaol thus:

The main points were that the buildings were about 20 feet high and had only a single floor. All windows except the internal ones were either 12 feet or 14 feet above ground level.

The entrance was a double wooden gate with a sliding trapdoor on the left (or southern side). Over the gateway was a window with an iron grille allowing a view of the upper floor. The inner gate at the rear along the front wall had a large double iron grille gate with grilles on each side. The upper floor was enclosed by a grille.

On each side of the gateway were rooms for warders, with a door opening into them. The room to the right [north side] had a fireplace opposite the door and in the inner rooms was a staircase leading to the room over the gateway. This room was the only part of the upper floor, which remained. [This appears to be the additional room built for the Chief Gaoler in 1866]

The warders' rooms opposite [south side] had a fireplace. On each side of the fireplace was a square window about 4 feet above the floor with an iron grille built in and metal covered hinged wooden shutters. There was also a window out into the courtyard.

Beyond this room was a large room 50 x 17 which occupied the rest of the front yard, on the south side of the main gate. It was a sleeping room with a door in the middle and opened into the yard. There were windows on either side of the door. Just inside the door was a strong wooden grill with a door possibly to regulate entrants into the room. The floor was about 2 feet above the ground.

Beyond this room to the right were the galleys. The furthest had an oven and large fireplace. Further on was a small storeroom.

Against the north wall were 10 very small cells about 12 x 4. Plated doors opened onto a long narrow passage running the whole length of the cells. Over each door was a small window 12 inches square with strong iron bars to ventilate the cells. These were the only openings so the cells were very dark.

At the end of this building were the foundations of what were once cells and there was a similar building on the other side of the yard.

In the centre of the yard was a two storey building where the warders lived. When Dixson saw it, not even the foundations were visible. This building was seen above the rest of the gaol and could be seen from outside.

At the back of this abutting on the back wall was a two-storey building for women. The outer walls of this were still extant but judging from the foundations, according to Dixson, it was divided into three parts. In the larger part, there appeared to be three small rooms.

In the angles in the main wall near the back were watch towers each divided into two

¹ Port Macquarie Gaol, Letters Sent and Received, 1878-1905, SRNSW 5/1568, p 238

with small barred windows in each division about 8 feet from the ground and nothing above. It was as high as the outer wall. The north tower still stood but the southern one had gone.

In the north-east corner, were foundations in the shape of a section of a circle. Close to this was a well, which was very deep.

In the southern part of the yard were two underground tanks and another one in the north-western corner.

Projecting from the women's building into the yard were some foundations, which looked as if the top had been wider than the lower part. [Did he mean brick or other building marks on the side wall?]

The whole building was on what was then the racecourse and stables had been built all round the side and the back.¹

To confirm Dixson's observation, there is an undated photo of the back of the gaol i e , its west side, with stables and other buildings attached to it.² A similar photograph of the gaol from the rear is shown in Jim Kerr's book.³ Dixson's description of the cell corridor correlates with an undated photograph of the interior of the main cell block corridor.⁴

Artist Lionel Lindsay, who sketched the gaol in 1916 and produced some watercolours as well, provides further detail of the gaol. They showed the main cell dormitory, details of the main gate and gaol exterior and the well in No 7 yard near the main dormitory.⁵ A photograph of about 1918 of the exterior of the cell block also confirmed these details.⁶

After the gaol was closed, the site was available for other uses. In 1907, the Port Macquarie Gaol was handed over to the Pastoral and Agricultural Association to complete the land for its showground.⁷ On 11 March 1908, Reserves No 45520 & 45521, were declared for an addition to the showground, of about three acres, in Lord, William and Clarence Streets, Port Macquarie. This was the old gaol site.⁸

The gaol was to be demolished but Port Macquarie still appears to have had a shortage of bricks. On 26 March 1908, the Council Clerk, Port Macquarie enquired about a share of old gaol to be demolished for use for kerbing purposes.⁹

The gaol was demolished and the land became part of the showground but the site was soon subdivided for housing and sold. The correspondence about the gaol site and the disposal of the buildings and the later uses of the site were followed in an effort to track down the papers and other documentation about the site. This trace went from 1907 onwards through the letter registers of the Chief Secretary's Department and the Miscellaneous, Alienation, Sales, and Parks Branches of the Lands Department until

¹ W Dixson, Notebook on Port Macquarie Gaol, DL Add MSS 495B

² ML, SPF

³ Plate 12, J S Kerr, *Design for Convicts - An account of design for convict establishments in the Australian colonies during the transportation era*, Library of Australian History, Sydney, 1984

⁴ ML, SPF

⁵ Lionel Lindsay, Sketchbook: pencil sketches of Port Macquarie, 1916, DL PX 68; Portfolio: watercolour sketches, 1916, DL PXX 44

⁶ ML, SPF

⁷ 07/21994, Col Sec, Register

⁸ NSWGG, 11 March 1908, p 1559

⁹ 08/24118, Col Sec, Register

1951, when a gap in the surviving letter registers prevented any further searching. At some future stage, other researchers may yet find these papers.

Documentation about the site shows that in the July 1914 Port Survey for Port Macquarie the gaol was still shown as extant. The June 1919 Port Survey also showed the gaol as still extant. This was last one to do so.

A plan of Allotments 1 to 5 of Section 63 was drawn on 14 January 1919 prior to the sale of this part of the gaol site. The plan showed the location of the underground tank shown in lot 4 and of the well in lot 5.¹ Thereafter the land passed into private hands.

¹ M.55.706, DLWC plan