

THE OLD BARRACKS
Extracts from "The West Australian"
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by J. S. Battye

When Western Australia was compelled, through stress of circumstances and in face of possible failure, to become a convict settlement, the promise was given (and kept) that for every felon transported, one free person should be sent to the colony at the expense of the British Government. The local Government also required that in addition to the soldiers sent out in charge of the convicts, continued military protection should be afforded to the settler.

In order to meet both phases in as economical a manner as possible, the home authorities arranged that with every convict ship there should be sent a guard consisting of time-expired soldiers. These were to be accompanied, when married, by their wives and families, and upon arrival of the vessel to be open to engagement as labourers, but might be called upon, at any time, to assist in case of an outbreak amongst the convicts. They were also promised, if they made good, a lease of ten acres of ground upon a nominal lease of seven years, with the inducement that if they improved the property within that time they would receive the free title of it. They were to have the assistance of convict labour to develop it and a grant of ten pounds towards initial expenses.

In 1862 the British Government decided that the regular troops of the line should be removed from Western Australia and protection placed entirely in the hands of the pensioner guards

In order that this new idea might be carried out satisfactorily, the Governor, the Commandant and the prison officials determined that the guard should be housed in permanent pensioner barracks on a large scale, which should be erected in Perth. It was essential that there should be a sufficiently large area close to the inhabited part of Perth to provide for the necessary buildings, as well as for a barrack yard, parade ground, hospital, magazine and other accommodation. An establishment of that kind could not be poked away in the bush or even placed in a remote quarter of the town, as the services of the guard might be required at any moment, and they must be stationed where they could be easily reached. Ultimately, the sites under consideration were narrowed down to two, one the area below the boy's school, now part of the Technical College ground, and the other at the head of St. George's Terrace, on the rising ground towards Mount Eliza. This latter site was chosen partly because of its commanding position and partly because it was all, at the time, vacant land.

Plans and estimates of the buildings were rapidly prepared and sent to England for approval in September 1862. These were referred to the War Office which suggested that the buildings should be erected at Fremantle, which was the headquarters of the convict department, but the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Duke of Newcastle was of the opinion that the question of site should be left to the colonial authorities who were in a better position to judge the local requirements. He therefore agreed to the plans and the cost, 6,710 pounds, which was to be paid for in equal shares from the Imperial and local funds. The Barracks were to provide for the accommodation of fifty married men and twenty single men, the total number of rooms being 120.

The whole contract was let on June 12 1863 to a partnership consisting of Alexander Halliday and James Brittain, Halliday being responsible for the woodwork and Brittain for the brickwork. James Brittain arrived on the "Sir Walter Raleigh" in May 1852 and started business at once as a builder and contractor. His name is also identified with the old Bank of New South Wales, the Cloisters Bishop's House, the Deanery and a portion of the public office. He also carried on an extensive brickmaking business in East Perth, on the site of which is now Queen's Gardens. Alexander Halliday was a carpenter and joiner who had been resident in Perth for many years and who is said to have made a curious mistake in estimating his portion of the contract – a mistake which very seriously affected his financial position. The Barracks consists of two wings. Halliday estimated the cost of one wing, intending to double it, but forgot to do so and an unsympathetic Government held him to his contract.

The buildings were actually started about August 1863, but through various delays were not completed until April 1866, possibly owing to the slowness with which the bricks were supplied by the convicts. The Pensioner Force was disbanded in 1878, but the old pensioners and their families were allowed to continue residing in the two wings of the buildings, but the centre portion was used from 1878 onwards by the High School. In 1884 the High School was removed to what had been the Pensioner and military hospital which stood just across the road from the Barracks and continued to occupy that building until new premises on Observatory Hill were erected in 1914.

Gradually the old Pensioners died out and ultimately it was decided to adapt the whole building for the use of the Public Works Department. The few old remaining Pensioners and their wives, as well as the widows of those who had died were provided for elsewhere. The building as erected in 1866 was added to in 1873 by the construction of a fives court which was not roofed in and was popularly called the skittle alley.

Update 2005

The original Barracks were demolished in the 1960's with only the Archway remaining as a lonely sentinel. It has recently been reported there is a move to have the Archway removed to provide an uninterrupted vista from east to west up St. Georges Terrace.

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