



REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES - ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in September, 1991 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE

Convict Fence is situated in the Canning River between Salter Point and Shelley Bridge and has a landmark quality. (Criterion 1.3)

Convict Fence in its current derelict state, forms a part of a vista, valued by the residents of the surrounding area. (Criterion 1.3)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

Convict Fence is significant for its reminder of the river transport system in the 19th century and the importance of the timber industry within the State.

The construction of *Convict Fence* is closely associated with the convict period of Western Australian history, and with the development of a timber industry along the upper reaches of the Canning River. (Criterion 2.2)

The construction of *Convict Fence*, and its subsequent use is associated with convict supervisor Henry Passmore, and timber miller Ben Mason, both prominent figures in this period of Western Australian history. (Criterion 2.3)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

More information needs to be investigated regarding the significance of the navigation channel that was excavated in the shallow parts of the river and into the way in which the fence was constructed. (Criterion 3.1)

Information regarding the fence and its relationship to the river may be of scientific value. Suggestions have been made in previous studies that the fence may provide a shelter for infant fish, and through its alteration of the current along this section of the river, may have further environmental and ecological impact on the flora and fauna of the river system. (Criteria 3.1 and 3.2)

The *Convict Fence*, represents an unusual technological solution to a problem faced by early users of the river transportation system. (Criterion 3.3)

11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

Convict Fence has social significance in regard to Western Australian use of convict labour. (Criterion 4.1)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

Convict Fence demonstrates a rare and uncommon aspect of the cultural heritage of Western Australia. (Criterion 5.1)

It is a prominent uncommon structure of landscape. The line of the fence posts appear in the middle of the river. (Criterion 5.2)

Convict Fence is a distinctive item associated with a use of the river no longer practised. (Criterion 5.2)

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Convict Fence demonstrates and identifies a characteristic of usage of the river that is not now in practice.

Convict Fence demonstrates the position identifying the Navigation Channel. (Criterion 6.1)

Convict Fence is a reminder of the practice of river transport that is no longer used. (Criterion 6.2)

12. 3 CONDITION

Convict Fence is in an extremely vulnerable condition, despite the significant role of the Public Works Department in upgrading this structure in recent years. A single line of timber posts is not an easy item to maintain.

The original intention of *Convict Fence* is no longer required.

The compatibility of *Convict Fence* with the use of the river partly serves as a marker to the shallow and deeper area of the water.

The long term viability of *Convict Fence* is dependent upon public maintenance of the structure.

There is the ability of various authorities who have an interest in the river to restore or retain *Convict Fence* in its present or improved state.

The restoration process is an ongoing one.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

Although individual items within the current fence line have been altered over time, the integrity of the line of the remaining fence position since 1866 seems to be very good. Nothing remains of the Casuarina walling, but the spacing of the remaining posts gives a good indication of the way in which the fence was structured.

The fence no longer serves the purpose for which it was built.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

Convict Fence is in its original position. The fence posts themselves are likely to have been replacements of the original fence posts.

The structure was repaired in 1869 and 1887-88, not using convict labour. In 1892-97 the structure was substantially upgraded by the Public Works Department incorporating elements of the earlier structure and using prison labour.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary evidence has been compiled by Lise Summers, Historian. The physical evidence has been compiled by J C Keen, Architect.

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Convict Fence is located in the Canning River, between Salter Point and Shelley Bridge. It was originally constructed in 1866, during the convict era of Western Australian history (1850 - 1868). The remnants of the fence are clearly visible from Centenary Avenue and Shelley Bridge, as well as from Riverton Drive in Shelley and Rossmoyne, and from the river edge near Clontarf and Watersford. A substantial portion of the fence is visible to the residents of Salter Point. It provides a visible demarcation down one side of the river, but its purpose and history is often unknown to passers by.

Convicts were transported to Western Australia, between 1850 and 1868, in a bid to try and obtain much needed funds and resources from the Home Government. Transportation had virtually ceased in the other convict based Colonies by the time Western Australia commenced its great experiment and there was some pressure from outside the Colony for it to limit the experience.

Convicts were drawn from a variety of areas and experiences. They were, on arrival in the Swan River Colony, assigned a variety of tasks, most of which were construction or labouring based. One area where cheap labour was seen as vital to the growth of an industry was the newly established timber industry, based along the Canning River.

During the convict period, it was the practice for teams of men to be sent out from the central Convict Establishment in work gangs and to subsidiary sites. One such site was known as 'Fig Trees'.¹ Located on the southern bank of the Canning River, opposite Salter Point, a number of convicts were employed in the timber industry under the supervision of Henry Passmore, who arrived in the colony in 1865.² Convicts transported the timber down the river on barges, but it was soon found that the shallow draft afforded by the river reduced the amount of timber which could be loaded. A channel was dredged, around 1866, and it is suggested that the convicts created a "fence" of sharpened jarrah poles to assist in retaining the edge of the channel within the river.³

In their comprehensive study of the Convict Fence, Hutchison and Davidson examine the history of the fence, and in particular the various claims made for the construction of the fence and channel.⁴ In their analysis they discount the stories that the convicts were required to build the fence and dredge the channel by hand as punishment, but do record that it is known that convicts, standing waist deep in the water used shovels to keep the channel free of

¹ Carden, F.G. *Along the Canning: A History of the City of Canning Western Australia, Covering its progress from Roads Board to Shire, to Town, to City* City of Canning, 2nd edition, 1991, pp.22-23.

² McQueen, Jeanette 'Pioneers of the Canning District' thesis prepared for Graylands Teachers' College 1963, p.13.

³ Detail from 'Municipal Heritage Inventory', City of Canning.

⁴ Hutchison, D. and Davidson, D. 'The Convict Built "Fence" in the Canning River' *Records of the Western Australian Museum* Vol. 8 (1), 1979.

mud, throwing the mud over the fence. A dredge, the *Black Swan*, was introduced for this work in 1892. Its subsequent wreck still lies against the fence near Salter Point.

The timber which was to be transported down the river, and for which an open channel was so important, was generally taken from the upstream timber concessions, in particular the ones belonging to Ben Mason, after whom Masons Landing was named. Owing to the continued difficulties experienced by the Colonial Government in opening the mouth of the Swan River, at Fremantle, it proved almost impossible to ship the timber for export, and the majority of it was used in the Colony.

Although the channel was probably built originally with convict labour in 1866, it became necessary to maintain and repair it on a regular basis. Tenders for maintenance of the Canning River Channel Improvements were called in 1868, 1869 and 1874.⁵ Further repairs were undertaken in 1887-1888 and again by the Public Works Department in 1892-1897.⁶ It was during this latter period that the dredge *Black Swan*, using prison labour, opened out a channel for over 2 kilometres to a depth of 1.2 metres at low water. The channel was wattled and staked throughout the greater part of its length to assist against filling up. It allowed the largest, locally employed barges, when laden, to pass up the Canning River as far as was required to satisfy the needs of any industries established on the banks.⁷

Hutchison and Davidson present a good case for the original design and inspiration for the fence to be attributed, not to some anonymous convict or pensioner guard, but to Ben Mason and his partners. They record several of Mason's letters to the Colonial Secretary's Office, detailing the maintenance work required on the fence to prevent the deposit of silt in the channel, but were unfortunately unable to locate a hinted letter which would positively allow the design to be credited to Mason.⁸

Convict Fence is now a picturesque part of the Canning River, and forms part of the landscape for Shelley, Waterford and Salter Point residents. It provides a resting place for birds such as pelicans and cormorants. It is largely derelict.

13. 2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

In the Canning River, between Salter Point and Shelley Bridge, a line of jarrah poles protruding above the water level indicates the position and line of *Convict Fence*. It was designed to prevent the dredged channel on its northern side from silting up.

The poles were originally made of jarrah, sharpened and thrust as a stake into the muddy bottom of the river. Casuarina boughs and logs cut from vegetation along the riverbanks were interwoven through the poles to create a fence.⁹

⁵ Western Australian Government *Government Gazettes* 1868, 1869 & 1874.

⁶ Carden - op. cit., pp.22-23.

⁷ J.S.H. LePage *Building A State: The Story of the Public Works Department of Western Australia 1829-1985* Water Authority of Western Australia, Leederville, 1986, pp.211-212.

⁸ Hutchison and Davidson - op. cit.

⁹ *ibid*, p.149.

13.3 REFERENCES

Hutchison, D and Davidson, D - 'The Convict Built "Fence" in the Canning River', *Records of the Western Australian Museum*, Vol 8 (1), 1979.