

Extract from *Shoemaking and reform agendas at Port Arthur penal station* by Claire Martin. Thesis (B.A. Hons.)--School of History and Classics, University of Tasmania, 2006. Reproduced with permission of Claire Martin.

Chapter IV: Shoemaking at Port Arthur

Convict shoemaking was introduced to Van Diemen's Land following complaints about the quality of shoes sent from England. In 1826 Lieutenant-Governor Arthur complained to the Home Government that 'the supply of shoes sent annually to the colony are of a quality so very inferior as to render the purchase of them a complete waste of public money'. This led the Colonial Office to consider the 'expediency of employing the Convicts in Van Diemen's Land in manufacturing their own shoes.'¹ In 1830, Arthur requested that sufficient leather to make 5,000 pairs of shoes be forwarded to the colony's penal settlements, as by this time both Macquarie Harbour and Maria Island had well established shoemaking industries.²

Shoes were an essential item of equipment. Without them the Convict Department would have literally ground to a halt. It is perhaps not surprising then, that shoemaking was one of the earliest trades to be established at Port Arthur. The first shoemaker arrived with the founding party in 1830 and the first shoemakers' workshops were built in 1831.³ The following year, a number of convict shoemakers employed in chain gangs in Hobart Town and Bridgewater were sent to Port Arthur, as the Inspector of Roads had complained to the Colonial Secretary that they were profiteering from their trade. Part of the problem was that overseers were employing shoemakers to work privately, pocketing some of the resultant profits in return.⁴ The Inspector of Roads recommended convict shoemakers

¹ Commentary, note 325, page 323, *Historical Records of Australia*, Resumed Series III, Despatches and Papers Relating to the History of Tasmania, Volume IX, Tasmania, January-December 1830, p. 859.

² Lieutenant-Governor Arthur to Acting Commissary General Moodie, 1 December 1829, *Historical Records of Australia*, Resumed Series III, Despatches and Papers Relating to the History of Tasmania, Volume IX, Tasmania, January-December, 1830, p. 323; Lieutenant-Governor Arthur to Under Secretary Hay, 19 October 1830, AOT/CO280/25/245, p. 358. For convict shoemaking at Maria Island and Macquarie Harbour see, T. Lempriere, *The Penal Settlements of Early Van Diemen's Land* (Hobart, 1839; this edition Hobart, 1954), pp. 28-9, 42, 57.

³ Lieutenant-Governor to Colonial Secretary, 7 September 1830, AOT/CSO1/483/10748, p. 99; Commandant's Regulations, 23 August 1831, AOT/CSO1/551/12027.

⁴ Inspector of Roads to Colonial Secretary, 7 July 1832, AOT/CSO1/477/10639.

sentenced to chain gangs be immediately sent to Port Arthur where strict management would keep them from profiting while ensuring they continued their work for the Government.⁵ The first orders for the settlement's shoemakers was to supply boots for the public works convicts, and sufficient leather, pre-cut, was forwarded to the settlement.⁶

There are two things that are interesting about this. First, it shows the considerable colonial demand for the services of shoemakers, and second that opportunities existed for convicts to dabble in the black market. Removing government shoemaking to a penal station was one way of controlling the trade and putting a decided stop to trafficking. Even here, however, it was important to remain vigilant. Shoemaking at Port Arthur was restricted to supplying shoes for convicts, the military, and their families. No shoes were to leave the settlement except those destined for the public stores. The military and civil officers had to pay for the services of the shoemakers, and fixed prices were set for making and repairing men's, women's, and children's boots and shoes.⁷ In part, these measures were designed to prevent convicts from earning money, and to take the greatest possible advantage of convict labour. Shoes also had a value as a desirable item amongst would-be absconders. A second pair of boots was always a welcome addition to an escape kit.

The shoemakers at Port Arthur made shoes and boots, and it is important to distinguish between the two. A shoe is a type of footwear that covers the foot, and commonly ends at or below the ankle. A boot, on the other hand, extends above the ankle — different styles dictating the amount of leg covered. Initially, the Convict Department favoured issuing public works convicts with shoes rather than boots; however, boots were strictly favoured after the 1840s.

In the early 1830s, leather was seldom cut at the settlement unless it had been supplied from Hobart Town, and most shoes were made from ready-cut English

⁵ Inspector of Roads to Colonial Secretary, 7 July 1832, AOT/CSO1/477/10639.

⁶ Memorandum, 6 October 1832, AOT/CSO1/477/10639.

⁷ Memorandum, 7 October 1832, AOT/CSO1/632/14299; Colonial Secretary, 24 January 1833, Tas Papers 196, Reel CY 3137, Mitchell Library.

leather.⁸ This suggests the emphasis was placed on maximising output and not on skill training. James Sly was appointed as overseer and chief leather cutter to the shoemakers' establishment in 1833 and put in charge of forty men. While Sly was under the impression that he was to teach shoemaking and that his wife would instruct girls in shoe binding, his expectations were not exactly realised.⁹ Most of the materials arrived ready-cut, and convicts simply had to put the pieces of shoe together. In other words, the settlement sought to maximise output at the expense of training master shoemakers, and in this respect shoemaking at Port Arthur resembled the cheaper end of the British trade. Indeed the role played by Mrs Sly suggests that some were employed in processes that mirrored the basket work of women and children. Under Sly's superintendence most of the convict shoemakers were able to turn out four pairs per week.¹⁰

Requisitions for supplies and orders to increase the shoemakers' establishment at the settlement confirm the exploitative nature of convict labour at early Port Arthur, and the little regard given to training convicts in preparation for post-penal employment. In 1833 Commandant Booth suggested that left over kip hides from the workshops be manufactured into children's shoes for the Orphan School in Hobart Town. Footwear was in constant demand at the Orphan School, work that could be undertaken at the settlement without interference to the day-to-day running of the workshops.¹¹ There was money to be lost in wasting leather that was too small to make into convict shoes, so the settlement took advantage of the opportunity to procure as much profit as possible. To accommodate the growing establishment, plans were made to construct new weatherboard workshops, with a platform at the end that allowed the overseer to watch the convicts at all times.¹² To ensure the establishment remained productive and convicts kept hard at work, a second overseer, John Bush, was appointed.¹³ Rather than resembling the organisation of the bespoke industry with its emphasis on masters and apprentices

⁸ James Sly to Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, September 1833, AOT/CSO1/654/14672.

⁹ James Sly to Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, September 1833, AOT/CSO1/654/14672.

¹⁰ James Sly to Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, September 1833, AOT/CSO1/654/14672.

¹¹ Commandant to Colonial Secretary, 9 November 1833, AOT/CSO1/678/15003, pp. 118-119.

¹² Lieutenant-Governor Arthur to Colonial Secretary, 5 May 1834, AOT/CSO1/716/15655, p. 186.

¹³ Chief Police Magistrate to Colonial Secretary, 28 May 1834, AOT/CSO1/726/15791, pp. 42-3;

Memorandum to Colonial Secretary, June 1834, AOT/CSO1/726/15791, p. 44.

working in close proximity, this organisation was reminiscent of cheap factory output.

Despite these measures, it is clear Port Arthur could not keep up with the rising demand of the Convict Department. Even if every shoemaker was able to produce four pairs of shoes a week and worked a 52-week year, the total output of the establishment would have amounted to no more than 6,240 pairs. This was less than one third of the Public Works demand for footwear, assuming each convict was entitled to a fresh pair every four months.¹⁴

The Port Arthur manufactory was also plagued by the poor quality of the leather supplied. In August 1834, the overseer of the shoemakers', Samuel Burrows (who succeeded Sly in late 1833) and Bush complained to Booth that leather manufactured in the colony for use at the settlement was of extremely poor quality.¹⁵ The kip hides were often so thick they could not be used except as middle soles. Offal leather was usually used for these and so the replacement with thick kip hides not only made for poor quality footwear, but also resulted in unused supplies of offal. The leather used for soles was even poorer, it not making ten pairs of soles when it should furnish twenty. Convict labour was also wasted, as inferior shoes meant they did not last long and the shoemakers would only later have to repair them or make new ones.¹⁶ If the same quality kip continued to arrive, this problem would result in a considerable loss to the Government. Despite these complaints, Port Arthur managed to export 400 pairs of men's and women's boots and shoes that year, after supplying the not inconsiderable needs of the settlement.¹⁷ No consideration, as yet, was given to the prospect that superior leather could be produced from kangaroo skins and it was not until years later that a tannery was established at Port Arthur to take advantage of local convict skills.

¹⁴ Public Works demand calculated using Statistics of Tasmania 1804-1854 (Hobart, 1856) – (1804-1823), pp. 9-11 – (1824-1838), Enclosure No. 17 – (1838-41), Enclosure 23, p. 10 and AJCP, HO/10/47-50, AOT — convict musters for the years 1830, 1832, 1833, and 1835.

¹⁵ Samuel Burrows and John Bush to Commandant Booth, 14 August 1834, AOT/CSO1/678/15003, pp. 128-29;

¹⁶ Samuel Burrows and John Bush to Commandant Booth, 14 August 1834, AOT/CSO1/678/15003, pp. 128-29;

¹⁷ I. Brand, *Port Arthur 1830-1877* (Launceston, 1990?), p. 24.

The poor standard of shoes issued to convicts in road parties was a complaint common to many convict narratives. Daniel Heustis, a political prisoner transported to Van Diemen's Land for his involvement in the Upper Canada revolt, often complained about the footwear he received.

We had a pair of slop-made shoes once in four months, but no stockings. The shoes were often worn out in less than two months, and then we had to go with bare feet, it being of no use to "ask for more," after the manner of *Oliver Twist*.¹⁸

Heustis recorded that many public works prisoners were forced to work without shoes, and 'blood marked their footsteps'.¹⁹ Robert Marsh, another political prisoner transported to Van Diemen's Land as a result of the Upper Canada Rebellion, also attested to the practice of forcing prisoners to work without shoes.

Two or three were put in [sentenced to solitary confinement] for refusing to work without shoes in the frost and on the flint-stone road – kept in until almost starved – taken out and obliged to work, being promised shoes in a few days, finally when the time comes to deal them out, which was twice a year, some with their feet so cut with stone, so swollen and sore cannot [sic] wear their shoes; but there is no excuse when you complain of sore feet, "well you have got shoes now, before you could not work you said you had none—now you have got them you must work, no excuse now, only feet a little sore, that's nothing, go on with your work" &c.²⁰

The inadequacy of footwear supplied from the Convict Department meant that whenever the opportunity arose, some convicts took to stealing other prisoners' shoes. Marsh remembered how he and his fellow prisoners would sometimes leave their shoes inside their sleeping quarters when the weather was agreeable, only to find they were not there upon their return from work.²¹

In order to increase the supply of shoes, requests were made in 1835 to have English leather sent to Port Arthur to be made up by the convicts, as it was 'more

¹⁸ D. Heustis, *Narrative of the Adventures and Sufferings of Captain Daniel D. Heustis and his Companions in Canada and Van Diemen's Land, during long captivity with travels in California and Voyages at Sea* (Boston, 1847) Chapter IX, p. 101.

¹⁹ Heustis, *Narrative of the Adventure and Suffering of Captain Daniel D. Heustis*, Chapter X, p. 109.

²⁰ R. Marsh, *Seven Years of my Life, or Narrative of a Patriot Exile* (Buffalo, 1847), Chapter V, pp. 91-2.

²¹ Marsh, *Seven Years of my Life*, Chapter V, pp. 88-9.

advantageous and the quality of the shoes better, than those sent from England.’²² Plans for the shoemakers’ workshops in 1836 indicate that such requests were approved. The workshops had been expanded to sixty-five feet by twenty-eight feet, with two rooms attached for leather cutting.²³ There was also growing evidence of an increasing emphasis on skill training, as in 1839, Booth requested that half the amount of leather sent to Port Arthur be shipped as hides so convicts could be taught to cut leather – ‘one of the principle branches of shoemaking.’²⁴ At the same time, Booth recommended sole leather be purchased in the colony, as there was no advantage to importing ready-cut leather for boots and shoes when it could be supplied locally and was of the same quality.²⁵ That local sole leather was considered to be every bit as good as English supplies suggests that colonial tanning and currying had significantly improved since 1834.

By the 1840s the Convict Department had fully accepted that English shoes and leather were not suited to the Van Diemen’s Land climate or the nature of convict labour, and that Port Arthur footwear was of a much superior quality. On several occasions, Booth had enquired about the possibility of issuing convicts with boots instead of shoes.²⁶ They were much more suited to colonial conditions and convict labour than shoes, which were commonly reported to ‘run over at the heel in about a month after the issue.’²⁷ There was relatively little difference in the leather required to make boots although they took longer to manufacture and required more skill. That boots lasted longer meant they would only have to be issued once every six months as opposed to once every four months for shoes.²⁸ Convicts could be issued with two pairs of boots at two repairs per year, instead of three pairs of shoes with three repairs. The saving to the Colonial Treasury of an extra issue of footwear was calculated at about seven shillings and six pence per man per year.²⁹ A Board was established to assess the usefulness of this measure,

²² Lieutenant-Governor Arthur’s Report from the Treasury, 3 March 1835, Vol. 2, No 22, and, 19 June 1835, No. 51, AOT/CO714/149/1048.

²³ I. Brand, *Brand Papers*, Tasman Peninsular, Introduction, Cumulative Table of Contents and Index, p. 221; Lieutenant-Governor to Colonial Secretary, 5 May 1834, AOT/CSO1/716/15655, pp. 177-192.

²⁴ Commandant to Colonial Secretary, 31 March 1839, AOT/CSO5/185/4458, pp. 194-6.

²⁵ Commandant to Colonial Secretary, 3 May 1839, AOT/CSO5/185/4458, pp. 201-2.

²⁶ Commandant to Colonial Secretary, 31 March 1839, AOT/CSO5/185/4458, pp. 194-6; Commandant to Colonial Secretary, 15 February 1840, AOT/CSO5/217/5497, pp. 217-8.

²⁷ Burrows to Commandant, 13 February 1840, AOT/CSO5/217/5497, pp. 210-11.

²⁸ Commandant to Colonial Secretary, 31 March 1839, AOT/CSO5/185/4458, pp. 194-6.

²⁹ Burrows to Commandant, 13 February 1840, AOT/CSO5/217/5497, pp. 210-11.

and it concluded that it would be much cheaper to issue ‘ankle boots’ instead of shoes.³⁰ As the Ordnance Storekeeper and Principal Superintendent wrote to the Colonial Secretary:

The peculiar nature of the work at Port Arthur and many of the public works render the use of ankle boots, absolutely necessary as the shoes being liable to go down at the upper leather of the heel the wearer, in carrying timber or any heavy burden is extremely liable to fall.³¹

The cost of buying shoes in England, put at five shillings and six and a half pence per pair, led the Comptroller-General to request that materials no longer be sent from the British Isles, except hemp for sewing.³² As colonial leather could now be purchased at much cheaper prices, the Colonial Government came to realise that it would in fact be much cheaper to concentrate all shoemaking at Port Arthur. The product was stronger, and if shoes could be made for the female convicts and children at the Orphan School, this would also increase the saving to the government.³³ The small steps taken in the mid 1830s to train convicts in cutting leather had proved a success, and it was proposed that the shoemakers’ establishment at Port Arthur be so increased as to take over the manufacture of all boots and shoes for the Convict Department. To ‘further decrease expenditure, and turn the labour of the convicts at Port Arthur to a profitable account’, a tannery was established at the settlement.³⁴

Convicts utilised local supplies of bark (as tanning agents), and later, kangaroo hides, to provide leather for the workshops.³⁵ The establishment of a tannery would

³⁰ Burrows to Commandant, 13 February 1840, AOT/CSO5/217/5497, pp. 210-11.

³¹ Ordnance Storekeeper and Principal Superintendent to Colonial Secretary, 14 April 1840, AOT/CSO5/217/5497, pp. 212-4; Overseer of Shoemakers to Commandant Booth, 18 August 1840, AOT/CSO5/217/5497, pp. 221-2.

³² Comptroller-General to Lieutenant-Governor, 1 August 1846, AOT/CO280/195/544, pp. 505-513.

³³ Comptroller-General to Lieutenant-Governor, 1 August 1846, AOT/CO280/195/544, pp. 505-513; *British Parliamentary Papers*, ‘Transportation’, Vol. 7, 1843-1847, 1 August 1846, Comptroller General to Lieutenant-Governor, pp. 119-20.

³⁴ Comptroller-General to Lieutenant-Governor, 1 August 1846, AOT/CO280/195/544, pp. 505-513; *British Parliamentary Papers*, ‘Transportation’, Vol. 7, 1843-1847, 1 August 1846, Comptroller General to Lieutenant-Governor, pp. 119-20.

³⁵ Comptroller-General to Lieutenant-Governor, 1 August 1846, AOT/CO280/195/544, pp. 505-513; *British Parliamentary Papers*, ‘Transportation’, Vol. 7, 1843-1847, 1 August 1846, Comptroller General to Lieutenant-Governor, pp. 119-20; A second tannery was established at Port Arthur in 1866-7, and it is assumed that this was just a re-location of the one erected in the 1840s. Convicts used

have in itself increased the shoemaking establishment at Port Arthur, as a tannery needed tanners and curriers to make leather as well as leather cutters.

Another factor that undoubtedly weighed on the decision to concentrate shoemaking at the settlement was the cessation of transportation to New South Wales in 1840 and the replacement of the assignment system with the probation system in the same year. Van Diemen's Land received all transported convicts after 1840, and the extra demand this placed on the Convict Department imposed great strain on existing resources. The situation was not made any easier by the fact that all convicts sentenced to the colony now had to pass through a probationary period of public works labour. Private masters were previously accountable for providing their servants with food, clothing and shelter. The Convict Department, however, was responsible for all convicts in public works, and, as an increasing number of convicts entered the probation system, this greatly inflated demand for government footwear.

By 1846, there were fifty shoemakers constantly at work at Port Arthur. Thirteen were employed in making and repairing the shoes for the convicts at the settlement, eight worked for the officers whose payments were put into the Commissariat chest, and the rest of the convicts made an average of three pairs of boots per week.³⁶ By 1847 the establishment had increased to fifty-eight convict shoemakers, half of who were learners. Surveillance in the establishment was increasingly tightened, so that rather than simply attaching the various parts of the shoe and passing it onto the next worker, convicts now had their work examined after each stage of production.³⁷ The leather was inspected once it had been cut, and again after the shoe was assembled. If it passed inspection the convict continued his work, if not, it was given back to him to be re-made. Such was the competence of Port Arthur shoemakers that arrangements were made for the completion of two hundred and fifty pairs of boots per week between the months of April and November 1847. This assumed then, that each shoemaker could make

kangaroo skins and other hides to turn into leather for the workshops. I. Brand, *Penal Peninsular: Port Arthur and its outstations 1827-1898* (Launceston, 1989), p. 176.

³⁶ Comptroller-General to Lieutenant-Governor, 1 August 1846, AOT/CO280/195/544, pp. 505-513.

³⁷ Administer to Secretary of State, 31 May 1846, AOT/GO33/60, pp. 1619-20; H. P. Fry, *A System of Penal Discipline with a Report on the Treatment of Prisoners in Great Britain and Van Diemen's Land* (London, 1850), p. 171.

just over four pairs of boots per week, including learners. Output was so proficient that 3,000 boots ‘of a superior quality’ had already been sent to Hobart Town.³⁸

By the late 1840s shoemaking at Port Arthur had completed a transition from a ‘putting-out’ system that favoured the exploitation of convicts in order to supply cheap shoes in bulk to the Convict Department, to a vertically integrated industry. The increase in the number of tasks completed on-site meant that Port Arthur increasingly became a station that trained master shoemakers. The emphasis, while still undoubtedly on the supply of boots and shoes for the Convict Department, had changed to providing convicts with the necessary skills to produce quality footwear. In this respect, the ‘reformatory’ aspect of convict labour had come into play. That is, Port Arthur increasingly invested in training, as opposed to basket workers, where ‘reform’ could be measured purely in terms of the degree to which convict labour could be rendered exploitable.

Shoemaking at Port Arthur came to emulate the establishment introduced at its sister-station Point Puer in the late 1830s. Unlike Port Arthur, shoemaking was introduced into Point Puer as a ‘reformatory’ industry that put explicit emphasis on skilling.³⁹ In fact, many of the settlement’s first inmates went on to become colonial shoemakers, a testament to the success of skills training.⁴⁰ The Point Puer shoemakers were just as proficient as Port Arthur shoemakers and often rivalled them in the amount of footwear they produced.⁴¹

That the conversion to a training institution provided convicts with invaluable skills that could be put to good use is again evident in some convict narratives. William Thompson was transported to Van Diemen’s Land in 1841 and began a two-year sentence at Port Arthur. Although initially deployed to the Coal Mines, he was moved to the shoemakers’ establishment after twelve months.⁴² Thompson was employed to repair shoes, and afterwards made boots for the officers. He was at this

³⁸ Administer to Secretary of State, 31 May 1846, AOT/GO33/60, pp. 1619-20; Fry, *A System of Penal Discipline*, p. 171.

³⁹ Lempriere, *The Penal Settlements*, pp. 85-6.

⁴⁰ P. MacFie and N. Hargraves, ‘The Empire’s First Stolen Generation: The First Intake at Point Puer 1834-1839’, *Tasmanian Historical Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1999), pp. 144-6.

⁴¹ Brand, *Penal Peninsular*, p. 33.

⁴² W. Thompson Narrative, Unpublished, Beattie Collection, Tasmaniana Library. Transcribed 1900, J. W. Beattie.

for two months, and during his time in the workshops he used his skills to line his pockets. He took to repairing shoes for the overseers in exchange for tobacco. He described this as tasks undertaken “on the cross”, and to avoid detection he concealed his work in secret compartments within the workshop.⁴³ He also stole from government stores, taking ‘ammunition boots’ and selling them to anyone that wanted them, including soldiers. To do this, he had to take them apart and completely re-make them, so that they could not be recognised as government property. He recorded that he grew quite prosperous as a result of this.⁴⁴ Thompson was transferred to Brown’s River Probation Station where he continued to work as a government shoemaker, while profiting on the side. When he was eventually discovered he was removed from employment in the workshop, but the Superintendent had remarked that the boots he had altered were ‘a very nice pair.’⁴⁵

The black market activities of Thompson showcase the types of skills convicts acquired at Port Arthur from the 1840s on as the settlement concentrated on training *shoemakers* as opposed to *shoe-workers*. The experience of William Thompson reiterates the demand placed on the services of shoemakers and the ample opportunities for them to partake in private work. It also identifies a problem the Convict Department created in relying on convicts to supply the colony with shoes. Skilled work was far more difficult to supervise than basket work and the flip side of the increasing emphasis on skill training may have been a growth in black market activity.⁴⁶ The Convict Department was not alone in facing problems such as this. Workers in the shipwright and tailoring industries in England also appropriated materials in perk, believing they were entitled to such allowances. These were commonly known as ‘perquisites’.⁴⁷ Where the Convict Department solved one problem (the loss to the Colonial Treasury of importing poor quality footwear), it created another.

⁴³ W. Thompson Narrative, Unpublished, Beattie Collection, Tasmaniana Library. Transcribed 1900, J. W. Beattie.

⁴⁴ W. Thompson Narrative, Unpublished, Beattie Collection, Tasmaniana Library. Transcribed 1900, J. W. Beattie.

⁴⁵ W. Thompson Narrative, Unpublished, Beattie Collection, Tasmaniana Library. Transcribed 1900, J. W. Beattie.

⁴⁶ See also the story of Edward Brown, an apprentice letterpress printer sent to Port Arthur in 1830 and employed in the shoemakers’ workshops. H. Maxwell-Stewart and S. Hood, *Pack of Thieves? 52 Port Arthur Lives* (Port Arthur, 2001), pp. 31-2.

⁴⁷ J. Rule, *The Labouring Classes of Early Industrial Britain, 1750-1850* (London and New York, 1986), pp. 116-7.

