****Rottnest Voluntary Guides Association Inc.**

The Military Barracks**

First constructed as the barracks for the military guard, and later occupied by the pensioner guards, these walls could tell many stories. One who did live here was a young man called Edmund Ashworth, and this is his story.

Edmund Ashworth was born in England in 1818. In 1840 he enlisted in the 96th Regiment of Foot, then under orders for New South Wales. He spent time with convicts at Port Arthur in Tasmania, at Norfolk Island and at Sydney before coming to Western Australia. While in this state he was sent to York where there was a Convict Hiring Depot, and here he chose to settle after his discharge from the army.

Early in 1847 he was sent to Rottnest. From his diary, he gives this account: *on the morning of 26th, a boat came to the wharf to take us over to a small island, ten miles from here. To this island are sent all the black men who commit themselves according to the laws of England. Some are here for murder, others for robberies. This island is about 21 miles in circumference and is called Rottnest Island.*

Ashworth’s duties at Rottnest consisted of overseeing working parties of prisoners, engaged principally in threshing corn. For this he received one shilling a day. He was obviously very wary of the prisoners for he commented that there was always another guard with him, for *there is no depending on these savages for they are very treacherous*.

He recorded his astonishment when he took a party to clear land for planting corn, and the prisoners stripped off and worked naked.

The Superintendent, Henry Vincent, and his family, together with the soldiers and the prisoners, were the only inhabitants. Ashworth’s quarters were comfortable, for he commented that he had a room to himself and the ‘old man’ (Vincent) had a great vegetable garden and often gave vegetables and fruit to the soldiers. The banded stilts or Rottnest Snipe as they called them, were also, according to Ashworth, very good eating.

As well as his duties with the prisoners, Ashworth engaged in teaching Vincent’s sons and for this he received twelve shillings per month. He enjoyed collecting shells and made a small shell house which he gave to Vincent.

When Mrs Vincent went to Fremantle for the birth of another child, Ashworth moved into the Superintendent’s house as housekeeper.

Francis Fraser Armstrong arrived on the Island later in the year to be the ‘moral agent’ – we’ll hear more of him later – and shortly before Ashworth left the Island, they engaged in a race around Garden Lake. Armstrong fancied himself as a runner, and so did Ashworth. They started in opposite directions and Ashworth proudly recorded that he beat his opponent by a good sixty yards.

Life on Rottnest apparently palled, for in October, Ashworth sent in his resignation and left to settle in York.

**From the diary of Edmund Ashworth**

I was born February 21st 1818 in the township of Rochdale in the County of Lancaster, England. At this time my parents carried on the trade of Woollen Weaving. But in consequence of a failure in the trade, they removed to a place called Grimble, three miles from the abovementioned place and there entered into the Cotton Business.

I was now about nine years old. I had five brothers and six sisters, and I was the youngest son. Shortly after my parents’ change of trade, I was forced through necessity to go to work in the Cotton Factory instead of being sent to the school to learn my books.

My parents had not the means to send me to school or they would have done so, but thank God I had the privileges of going on a Sabbath Day, and to my knowledge I never cost my parents anything for scholarship. I was always obedient to my parents and I always avoided bad company which my parents always taught me so to do.

On the 18th October 1834 we again removed from the abovementioned place to reside at a place called Newton Moore in the county of Cheshire, and here I was bound as apprentice to the business of Cordwainer with Mr John Jagger of Less, near Oldham.

NB Cordwainer: shoemaker working with Spanish leather.

**Edmund Ashworth** (as researched by RVGA member, Lesley Brent-White)

Edmund Ashworth was born in England in 1818. On June 23rd 1840 he enlisted in the 96th regiment of Foot, then under orders for New South Wales. He spent time with convicts at Port Arthur in Tasmania, at Norfolk Island and Sydney before Western Australia. Here, he was sent to York where there was a Convict Hiring Depot, and it was here where he settled after his discharge in 1847. He married Miss Charlotte Pollard of Guildford and they raised eleven children. Many of their descendants still live in and around York. It was from one of these I obtained a copy of extracts from Edmund Ashworth’s own diary and the following:

*On the morning of 26th a boat came to the wharf to take us over to a small island ten miles from here. (To this island are sent all the black men who commit themselves according to the laws of England. There are some for murder, others for robberies. Some are transported out to the island for life, others for less, according to their crimes. This island is about twenty-one miles in circumference and is called Rottnest Island.) Next morning I had to take charge of a number of black men and take them to work. The first work was to thresh corn in a barn. I receive one shilling a day for this. One of our men goes with me and we take our arms with us for there is no depending on these savages as they are very treacherous. The superintendent and his wife are the only inhabitants beside the soldiers and about 37 savages. The old man has a good garden of cabbages, pumpkins, melons, figs, peaches etc. and often gives us some. There is a great quantity of salt to be got on the island. I have a large room to myself and I teach the old man’s boys. I have made a small shell house which I have given to the superintendent. On the 27th October 1847 I sent in my application for discharge.*

*The superintendent would have been Henry Vincent.*