



Rottnest Voluntary Guides Association Inc.

Henry Vincent

On his appointment to the Island, Vincent was recommended as a 'good practical farmer' and instructed to commence construction of government buildings. He set to work quarrying stone, making lime, clearing land, and generally preparing for his building projects as well as fishing and collecting salt. In his first report for August 1839, Vincent stated that he was repairing old buildings. In October 1839, Vincent reported that he had completed a salt house, a store and a house. The government was content with the progress of the establishment, and in August 1840, Governor John Hutt sent a dispatch to Lord John Russell in London enclosing a copy of an Act to constitute the island of Rottnest a legal Prison. Vincent was praised on several occasions for achievements made on the island. In September 1849 Vincent was transferred back to Fremantle Prison as Gaoler. Thus still holding the position of gaoler at Fremantle Prison, Vincent's service appears to have been required to supervise the new convict work force. (British Colonial Office Aborigines, Australian Colonies – 1844, pp 373, 375) Gaoler at Perth October 1849. Reappointed Superintendent of Rottnest in October 1855.

When prisoners were later withdrawn from the island, Henry Vincent was placed in charge of construction of a new road to the southern districts. He returned to Rottnest as Superintendent in 1855, and during his time on the island built many of the fine buildings which are still used today. These structures have a distinct Mediterranean flavour but we do not know where this style of building originated. The Prisoners of Rottnest called Henry *Old Cokobut* (man with one eye)

It was recommended that Louisa Vincent receive a gratuity in consideration of various domestic duties undertaken on Rottnest. Preparing morning and afternoon rations, repairing garments of the prisoners, together with the general superintending of the internal arrangements – suggest a daily ration of meat and the same of flour (Protector of Natives /Col sec 29.3.1843) Approved. Matron at Rottnest June 1847, £18 pa. Matron to 1849

On December 31st 1866 Henry resigned from his appointment of superintendent of Rottnest, and resided at Fremantle. Henry and Louisa found temporary lodging at Mrs Higham's of Fremantle, and for about five months at a house belonging to Mr Paterson. They later moved to a house in Cantonment Street owned by Mr Scott.

Louisa separated from Henry in 1867 and filed for divorce the following year, stating for the last twelve years having suffered greatly from the violent temper and conduct of her husband. Vincent's annual salary was £229 (rent on 2 houses in Cliff St) £100, Government Pension £105, Military Pension £9, interest on mortgage £5. Henry appealed the decision (*Warders & Gaolers – David J Barker*)

The Colony is much indebted to Mr Vincent for the execution of many public works of importance carried out by native prison labour under his superintendence (*Inquirer 06/02/1867*). Not awarded full entitlement of £116.4d pa. Francis Henry died on May 6th 1869 from paralysis, aged 73 years. The Herald Newspaper (Fremantle) recorded his passing

Deaths: Vincent - on May 6th at Fremantle, Mr Henry Vincent, Sen, late Superintendent of Rottnest Island, aged 73 years.

Henry Vincent's Story

Good Evening

My name is Henry Vincent and I was superintendent of the Aboriginal Prison Establishment on Rottnest off and on from 1837 until 1867. You may have seen my name in the paper where I was described as “a cruel and sadistic man with a violent and uncontrollable temper”.

I am the first to admit that sometimes my temper got the best of me, but in the interest of a fair go, I would like to give my side of the story. I don't propose to rewrite history but I will let you decide.

Look about you. See these prison buildings, the farm buildings, the chapel, the barracks and the accommodation, the boat houses and the sea wall. Who built them? I did with the Aboriginal prisoners under my control. I was not an architect or a builder, only a retired soldier doing the job to which I was assigned to the best of my ability – To Plan; On Time; and On Budget.

It was hard and difficult work particularly when we did not share common languages. At one time there were 15 different Aboriginal languages spoken here plus English. This was a large Do It Yourself project where I had to train my workers to be stone masons, carpenters, roofers, painters. Not an easy task. I think we did a good job – after 170 years they are still standing and in use today.

I also had to keep my workers healthy so we had to grow our own vegetables to supplement the salt beef and brisket which formed the basic ration. Sometimes when the weather was bad we did run short. The Prison concept was that everyone could roam free on the Island on Sunday to hunt and fish bush tucker and to conduct ceremonial.

I acknowledge that over 370 prisoners died here in custody. But most died of infectious diseases. I had no control over the clothing and blankets issued or the numbers sent to the Island. I had to look after the prisoners with the resources provided. You want to do the blame game then look at who was controlling the purse strings or sentencing the prisoners to imprisonment on the Island.

The Rottnest you see today is part of our shared heritage. If we talk things through we can all get a better understanding of what the Aboriginal Prison was and did to the Aboriginal communities; what it did to the white community and how we can move on today.

This was my story and that is my wish.