Sandridge (Bendigo) Gaol, Victoria

Early penal confinement in Victoria

In the wake of the economic and social upheaval of the early gold rush in Victoria, the central authority responsible for the planning and administration of the new colony's gaols was undergoing a process of profound change. This was to a large extent brought about by the increased demand for prison accommodation in a colony rapidly growing in size — increasing from 77,345 to 408,998 in the years between 1851 and 1857. It had also been precipitated by the murder of John Price, Inspector-General of Penal Settlements in the Colony of Victoria, while he was inspecting one of the penal hulks stationed at Williamstown on 26 March 1857. Price was infamous, even in his own time, for his harsh attitudes to prisoners and their treatment and accommodation, an infamy which led to his own untimely death. It should, however, be noted that he had inherited a system in which there was clearly insufficient permanent accommodation for a burgeoning number of convicted criminals.

However, even before Price's death there had been criticism of his methods by the press and the public, and in late 1856 Select Committees taken from both houses of the Victorian Parliament were established to report upon an advisable scheme of penal discipline. The committees recommended:

- the hulk prison ships should be immediately broken up;
- lunatics not charged with serious crimes, and youthful lunatics should be sent to Yarra Bend;
- women should be housed in a new building at Pentridge and be employed in laundering and sewing;
- destitute orphans should not be kept in gaol;
- children of female prisoners should be provided for;
- juvenile offenders under 14 should be housed in a new building at Pentridge erected for that purpose and kept separate from other prisoners and given instruction by teachers for three hours daily and employed in trade or in the garden;
- schools should be established in penal institutions, books made available and on Sunday religious and moral books sanctioned by the Chaplains;
- prisoners should not be addressed in 'sarcastic, contemptuous, harsh or familiar language, but always with the strictest gravity and reserve';
- a fund should be entrusted to the Inspector-General for distribution to prisoners on release, and no prisoner should be discharged in prison clothing;
- two chaplains - Protestant and Roman Catholic - should be appointed by Government.

Under John Price's successor, Colonel Champ, the penal system in Victoria underwent a dramatic transformation, the most enduring evidence of which was provided by a great program of prison construction, cited by James Kerr as the most concentrated program of gaol construction in Australia's history. Nine major new prisons were planned and constructed (or built to replace or augment earlier complexes) over the next seven years. The construction program ceased abruptly in 1864, with attention shifting from gaols to lunatic asylums at this time.

Prison design and the Pentonville Model

The new Victorian gaols of the late 1850s conformed, in plan at least, to a relatively new concept in prison design based upon Sir Joshua Jebb's Model Prison at Pentonville.
(1840–42), in which a central observation point acted as a hub for radiating wings with cells ranged along either side (figure 1). James Kerr notes that from 1844 the English Pentonville model, of separate wings connected to a central hall by means of passages almost the full height of the wing, was promoted as the standard within the British colonies, and from this time variations upon the model started to emerge within Australia. The two earliest examples were the Port Arthur Separate Prison (1847–52) and the Fremantle Gaol (1851), each of which conformed to many of the characteristics of the Pentonville design but remained distinct in certain key aspects.

The Pentonville Model is not to be confused, as it so often is, with the panopticon principle of Samuel and Jeremy Bentham of the late-18th century (figure 2). The panopticon scheme had circumferential cells observable at all times from a central point, while the Pentonville had radial wings of cells, the corridors of which were observed from a central point.

Pentonville drew upon a model established as early as 1765, and largely took its cue from the progressive and influential ideas of England’s Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline and the Reformation of Juvenile Offenders (or SIPD).

The Pentonville prison was designed to operate on the principle of separate confinement. Prisoners were kept away from one another, confined to their individual cells, or undertaking individual exercise in private yards or in various yards between the radial wings. More severe was the regime at Cherry Hill, the Eastern Penitentiary at Philadelphia of 1929, where prisoners lived in solitary confinement – each cell in the seven wings even had its own small exercise yard. At Pentonville the prisoners were provided with a sink, water closet, heating and a reasonable degree of space. The
overall intention was that the prisoners should be comfortable enough to contemplate their past mistakes and future betterment, without distraction due to discomfort or the corrupting influence of other prisoners.

Prisoners would occasionally participate in communal activities, such as work or attendance at chapel, but were masked at such times and kept from direct communication. They were separate, if not at all times solitary. At Bendigo (and in Victoria generally) the principle of comfortable, separate confinement was not followed and the cells were cramped, without running water or water closets, and unheated. In other words, conditions were harsh rather than comfortable.

It is of interest to note that the Pentonville model was not accepted as readily in other states. No gaols in New South Wales were built according to this principle and it was really only at Fremantle that a comparable example to the Victorian gaols is found. The Fremantle gaol, while essentially comprising only two wings, was extraordinary for its height, rising a full four storeys. James Kerr also cites a cruciform block at Port Arthur, built to a limited extent on the 'Pentonville' lines.

Bruce Trethowan has noted that during the period 1851–1864 a core team of architects and draftsmen from the Public Works Department (PWD) was involved in the design of gaols. The group centred about Charles Vickers, Gustav Joachimi, R.A. Dowden, H.A. Williams, W.E. Davidson and C.G. Ross, with additional staff involved with particular projects. This accounts for the similarities in design and detail for the majority of these gaols. The plans for the Sandridge Gaol were prepared by Samuel White and C.G. Ross of the PWD.

The architect for the new gaol at Pentridge, Gustav Joachimi, noted that the design direction for contemporary prisons in general came from Inspector General Champ.
indicating that in the area of prison design the hierarchy of the PWD were willing to allow the designs to develop as desired by Champ, with minimal interference. Champ had shown his interest in the Pentonville plan from the very beginning of his involvement at Pentridge, and this became the standard for the design of the gaols as a group.

It is appropriate to note that the PWD was during these decades one of the most powerful influences in shaping the architectural character of Melbourne and of Victorian cities and towns in general. Most Victorian towns and cities identify strongly with the post offices, court houses, gaols and other public buildings bequeathed them by the PWD, the majority of which are distinguished by a degree of classicism in detail and planning. Where a departure from the classical mode was entertained it was usually in the interests of evoking associations between the particular style chosen and the function of the building, a practice directly associated with the tradition of the Picturesque.

It is useful to assess the character of this group of gaols in this light, for in general they comprise elements taken from two distinct architectural vocabularies: the buildings employ a generalised classicism, drawing to some extent upon notions broadly derived from Palladio, but here diluted into a form of colonial Georgian, while the walls with their towers echo the austere expression and associations of the Romanesque.

The walls and their towers resemble the embattlements of a medieval castle. The cell wings of the prison have a character which, while austere and functional, nonetheless evokes very general associations with the work of Andrea Palladio and his followers within the classical tradition. These associations were commonplace for the period, and this combination was standard for the group of gaols in question. Pevsner notes the popularity of Norman Romanesque for contemporary gaols in England, and the embattled walls of Pentridge prison provide a local example par excellence.

Bendigo Gaol and the others of its period can be seen as simpler, regional versions of the same concept. The entrance gate at Bendigo, the two quarters-buildings which flank it, and the walls and towers are all in absolute conformity with the standard approach for the non-Melbourne gaols of the period, and can be compared directly to examples such as Ararat Gaol (later known as J Ward), Geelong Gaol, and Beechworth Gaol. The main architectural feature which distinguished Bendigo from the other gaols of its period was the highly articulated facade of the chapel wing, but this was demolished by fire in 1959.

The built fabric at Bendigo has several limitations in terms of its ability to demonstrate the true principles behind the Pentonville concept. Although the cells were ventilated by means of a flue system, which used a furnace-created updraught by which to circulate air, they lacked the fully serviced (that is water, WC, gas) cells recommended by the Pentonville model. Additionally, all these gaols had sub-standard sized cells, and most failed to make anywhere near adequate provision for the central tenets of separation and isolated, supervised exercise. While the poor accommodation appears to reflect a harsh attitude among the colonial authorities toward the comfort of prisoners, it is possible that the lack of adherence to the principles of separation derives in part from an early recognition in Britain and elsewhere that full separate confinement was an inhuman, counter-productive and ultimately inappropriate practice.
Sandridge (Bendigo) Gaol

Prior to its settlement in 1851, the area now known as Bendigo formed part of the Ravenswood sheep run. The discovery of gold in 1851 caused a large population influx and by 1855 the small yet rapidly expanding mining town of Castleton had been rescinded and instead declared a district. Although this new district was originally named Sandhurst, the district was renamed Bendigo on 8 May 1891.

As a consequence of the 1850s gold rush, the alluvial goldfields of Bendigo were rapidly depleted and, as the town’s economy depended on gold, deep shaft-mining was instead introduced. Quartz mining was thus established as an industry and it served the town till the turn of the century. It was evident almost from the earliest settlement of Bendigo that a gaol was required in order to help counter the rise in crime that had accompanied increased prosperity. Bendigo Gaol was one of nine gaols to be planned and built in Victoria from the late 1850s.

Construction of the Sandhurst Gaol, later the Bendigo gaol, commenced on a site known locally as ‘St Jeans Hill’ in Rosalind Park. This was adjacent to the original Government Camp which had been the centre of authority of the early goldfields in the immediate area. Although conditions at this new gaol were to prove primitive, resources for prisoners had hitherto been much worse. Wrong-doers and convicts alike had at first been detained at a site known as Camp Hill, chained to trees. This situation was somewhat rectified when a small log lock-up consisting of three communal cells was built on Camp Hill and used as a prison. This small log lock-up was replaced in 1855 by a new gaol, dubbed variously the ‘Camp Oven’ and the ‘Iron Box’, which was constructed from iron-plates riveted together. This was notoriously cold in winter and hot in summer, leading to severe suffering on the part of the often over-crowded inmates. The prison first known as Sandhurst Gaol had been designed in 1858 to replace the 1855 structure but due to delays in construction it was not proclaimed until 1863.
The design of Sandridge (Bendigo) gaol was characterised by high walls, circular watch towers, radiating double-storey cell blocks, good natural light, and good ventilation. However, services such as running water, gas, and sewage were not provided. The design for the gaol proved to be influential, ultimately providing the basic concept for several other major goldfields gaols.

The perimeter wall and the two residences were constructed first; a dungeon containing both baking and cooking facilities was built later from Harcourt granite and baked clay bricks. This dungeon was serviced by a plenum heating system which ran through the brickwork, thus satisfying several requirements. As the prison took form, the dungeons tended to be used less for general purposes than for incarcerating truculent prisoners. Prisoner segregation was achieved by grouping cells singularly. Only the debtors, who were not punished by solitary confinement, were permitted to occupy group accommodation cells. At Bendigo an unusually high number of first-floor cells were joined in this manner, particularly in the south wing, which housed the female inmates. Separated exercise yards ensured that prisoners were fully segregated. As was the case with many other Australian gaols, the original design made allowance for additional cell wings to be added in the future, but these were never built.

A gallows was erected within the prison cell wings to a standard PWD design in June 1876. Although the drawings relating to the site are extensive, there is no specific drawing relating to this addition. Three prisoners were executed between 1885 and 1897, and buried within the grounds, as was standard practice in the gaols of the time.
Comparison

The Bendigo Gaol was one of nine large gaols built in Victoria at this time, all of which were clearly based on the Pentonville radial concept: Ararat (1859-1863); Ballarat (1857-1863); Beechworth (1859-1864); Bendigo (1859-1864); Castlemaine (1857-1861); Geelong (1849-1864); Maryborough (1859-1864); Melbourne (1857-60); Pentridge (B Division, 1857).

Although these gaols were notable in terms of their similarity in overall design and detailing, there are a number of aspects by means of which they can be differentiated: the number of their wings, their overall capacities, their materials, and their incorporation or lack of a chapel. The group can be divided into three sub-sets:

- Beechworth, Bendigo and Castlemaine
- Ararat and Maryborough
- Ballarat, Geelong, Melbourne and Pentridge

Pentridge (B Division) has been seen as a rather naive interpretation of the Pentonville plan, but at least it included a number of the appropriate innovations such as water, water closets and gas lighting to each of the cells. It followed a cruciform variation upon the Pentonville model. Ballarat and Geelong also followed the cruciform plan type. Ballarat with two wings and Geelong with four (figure 5). Beechworth, Bendigo and Castlemaine all followed a slightly different plan based on the potential for five wings or more should extensions be required in the future, although with only two

Figure 5 Geelong Gaol – 1859-1864. (Public Works Department)
wings realised at Bendigo and Beechworth and three at Castlemaine (figure 6). Ararat and Maryborough followed a slightly different plan again, with an intended design of three wings radiating at right angles from a central hall (left incomplete, with only one wing, in both instances).

Subsequent history

In 1939 the gaol was closed due to the outbreak of World War II. It had accommodated 64 prisoners in 1870, and 100 prisoners in 1890, but at the time of its closure accommodated only 22 prisoners. The prison was recommissioned as a detention barracks and used to detain military personnel who had committed offences, such as being absent without leave. An amount of £20,000 was authorised in 1953 to refurbish the complex, and extensive plans were prepared by the PWD, under the leadership of Percy Everett. The renovated gaol was reopened as HM Bendigo Training Prison in 1954. At this stage it contained 21 prisoners and was considered ‘Victoria’s’ most modern prison.

On Easter Monday 1959 a fire substantially destroyed the bulk of the southern chapel and administration wing of the cell complex. The fire was eventually brought under control with the help of the 91 prisoners, none of whom attempted to take advantage of the confusion to escape. Subsequently, new accommodation was built using the remnant walls and foundations of the original buildings. In the ensuing decades the role as a training prison has led to further alterations and the construction of numerous sheds and buildings in the various yards of the prison. Most significantly, the cell blocks were upgraded to include heating, sewerage and improved lighting within the individual cells in 1992–93. In 1994 the prison held 80 prisoners and its accommodation level remains much the same today. With the major changes currently taking place within the Victorian prison system, including the decommissioning of most of the 19th-century gaols, the future of the Bendigo Gaol is yet to be finally determined.