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Cockatoo Island Dockyard

Conservation Management Plan

Volume I

Report prepared for the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust
June 2007

2.0 Historical Analysis

2.1 Introduction

This section provides a series of essays and development summaries which examine the history of Cockatoo Island within specific contexts, particularly its changing character, uses, public roles and associations related to the its non-colonial history of industrial and manufacturing functions, maritime activities and labour/union organisations.

The approach taken reflects and responds to a number of factors including:

- the essentially 'split' nature of the CMP for the Island in its draft form, being divided between Colonial/Institutional and Dockyard/Industrial areas, functions and associations;
- the particular requirements of the Brief for the CMP which included the need to address a number of specific subjects in the history of the place (relating to different parts of the site, periods of history and wider contexts);
- the existence of a number of detailed specialist histories and detailed primary source material which needed to be incorporated and/or referred to in the specific subject histories (but which would 'overbalance' a more conventional 'through-composed' narrative of the place);
- the desire to present the extensive body of historical material and analysis in a readily usable form, with shorter sections on specific subjects and related graphics being able to be referred to in particular situations (such as future interpretation etc); and
- the use of a number of specialists for different components of the work, each of whom identified and interpreted the available historical material in different ways.

Overall, the historical accounts and chronological summaries all seek to tell an interesting and logically developed story about particular aspects and associations of the Island, and its dockyard history in particular. These histories, taken together, also:

- provide the basis for the subsequent analysis of the physical layout, fabric and evolution of the place (including archaeological resources);
- identify associations and values which may or may not be reflected in the physical character or fabric of the place; and
- provide essential supporting information for the evaluations of significance and related conservation policies for the place in the CMP.

2.2 Cockatoo Island: History And Heritage Overview

2.2.1 A Penal Colony at Botany Bay

British convicts travelling to Australia in the First Fleet knew that they were going to the far ends of the earth, both for punishment and to make escape difficult, if not meaningless. The motives for claiming and settling Australia were much more diverse. Britain's ruling classes relished the idea of an empire on which the sun never set, so far flung that it embraced almost every continent. The navy admirals, like military personnel anywhere, longed not just for new territories to conquer but for the wherewithal that went with new territories: the commissariat stores, the wharves, dry docks, the officers' mess (elegant affairs on land as well as sea).

Australia's first permanent European settlements began as prisons but they also had to house the British governors, the Navy and the Army. All these people had to be fed which, especially in the early decades, required storage facilities for grain. The prisons and the settlements that grew up around them also had to be defended, for Britain feared the designs that the French, the Russians and even the Americans, who had recently won their independence, might have on their newest and largest colony.¹

As Geoffrey Blainey argues in his book *The Tyranny of Distance*, distance shaped the settlement and subsequently the growth of Australia. From 1788 to the early 1800s, it took an average of 180 days (almost 26 weeks) to travel on a boat from England to Australia. Improved ship design and navigation methods saw this cut to 110 days (16 weeks) by the 1820s but not until the coming of 'clippers' in the 1850s did the trip get down to 90 days (13 weeks).² The sense of isolation was enormous; the only contact with the world beyond was by mail.

Within Australia itself, notions of distance and travel times emerged with the pattern of settlement. Not content with the prison facilities in Sydney, successive colonial governors looked to other sites, including Hobart and Port Arthur, Fremantle, Port Macquarie, Norfolk Island and Moreton Bay.³ All these sites had pluses and minuses. All lent themselves to port facilities, the only way at the time to transport people and food around the antipodes.

Australia, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, was more dependent on its ports than almost anywhere in the world. All its earliest European settlements were perforce ports and even slightly inland outposts, such as Ipswich and Parramatta, were accessible by river.⁴

Two centuries later, this group of early convict settlements is almost unrecognisable. Port Macquarie is a major regional town and a growing holiday and retirement centre. Its remnant convict structures have been overshadowed or erased by urban development. Fremantle, now well ensconced within the urban area of Perth, has retained more of its convict fabric. Increasingly, that fabric is a backdrop to the real business at hand, the America's Cup transformation of Fremantle to the fun parlour of Perth. Brisbane has been even less kind to its convict heritage, with successive state governments allowing most of it to be demolished, with just a handful of isolated structures remaining, including the

1827 Commissariat Store, now overshadowed by the Riverside Freeway. The only place left where you can get any real feeling of Moreton Bay as a penal establishment is at St Helena, a small island just off the coast.

Hobart, with less redevelopment pressures than the other urban convict sites, has retained much more convict heritage and even retains a sense of ‘the convict stain’ that hung over the colony and then the state. This stain, still strong in Hobart in the 1930s, was eradicated completely from Sydney in the same decade, with the demolition of the Commissariat stores at Circular Quay to make way for the headquarters of the Maritime Services Board.⁵ Sydney began to re-invent its convict heritage in the late 1960s with the gradual, and then rapid, transformation of The Rocks from a working class port area to a haven for domestic and international tourists.⁶ Convict-built structures on Macquarie Street survived a number of efforts to have them replaced by hospital or legal structures. Today, the Hyde Park Barracks and the Mint cater as much to well-heeled lawyers looking for lunch as they do to international tourists brought up on a prose or television diet of Robert Hughes’ colourful accounts of convict life in Sydney.

The convict sites that have retained sufficient of their built heritage and landscape setting to interpret convictism to modern audiences are relatively isolated: Norfolk Island in the Pacific Ocean, Port Arthur on the Tasman Peninsula and, remarkably, Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour. These are Australia’s three greatest convict sites. The first two became tourist sites quite early in their post-convict phase⁷, whereas Cockatoo Island remained a working dockyard until the 1990s.

Cockatoo Island is the most remarkable of the survivors because it served as a convict prison and grain depot, penal establishment, reform school, naval building yard and depot, and a commercially-operated shipbuilding yard and naval maintenance site. Cockatoo Island retains the largest convict-built dry dock in Australia and one of the largest examples of a convict-built dry dock in the world.

2.2.2 A Prison on Cockatoo Island

A prison on Cockatoo Island, built by convicts for convicts, took shape in 1839 and 1840. Because of the shortage of labour, some convicts were given permission to remove their ‘irons’ for roofing and shingling. Irons were normally only dispensed with, courtesy of Governor Gipps, as a reward for good conduct. Workshops, wharves and a mess shed were erected, enabling the Island to hold 300 prisoners.

In September 1841, Gipps wrote that ‘I now propose to confine at Cockatoo Island the great majority of the class of Prisoners formerly sent to Norfolk Island’. Gipps considered Cockatoo Island ‘the place of great security within the Colony, not actually a Prison’.⁸

Seventeen grain silos, to hold wheat, were excavated out of solid rock in the early 1840s, some as large as six metres deep and almost seven metres wide. A guard house and barracks for soldiers followed, along with 12 solitary cells. The fear of food shortages in the colony, born of early difficulties in growing crops and latter difficulties in coming to grips with a climate marked by both

irregular rainfall and unexpected periods of drought, saw Gipps concerned about providing emergency supplies for the populace and the military authorities.

Gipps favoured having Cockatoo Island under the eye of the government, not least because it had fewer escapes than Norfolk Island, 700 miles from land. He even preferred it to the not-quite-so-remote settlements of Port Macquarie and Moreton Bay.⁹ In 1844, Cockatoo Island took the bulk of prisoners brought back from Norfolk Island because the Hyde Park Barracks could not accommodate such large numbers.

By late 1845, Governor Gipps had decided to press for a dry dock at Cockatoo Island, 'especially if Sydney be made, as I trust it shortly will be, a station for Men of War'.¹⁰ Gipps received support for his plan from a Select Committee of the Legislative Council and, in 1848, convicts began work on the first dry dock in the southern hemisphere. Governor Gipps and his senior officials were keen for the colony to have a naval dockyard, not least to keep the British Navy involved and committed to the defence of Australia.

With the gradual dissolution of the convict system, convicts requiring 'strict coercion' were removed from Cockatoo Island to Norfolk.¹¹ Convicts remaining at Cockatoo Island found that financial responsibility for their establishment had moved from the military chest to the Colonial Treasury.¹² During the construction of the dry dock, a number of inquiries were held about conditions on the Island, as the residents included invalids, lunatics, the lame and blind and unruly men waiting to be relocated to Norfolk Island, 'a place to them possessing the greatest Terror in the world'.¹³

In December 1851, a visiting Magistrate reported that 19 'Aboriginal Blacks' had been received on the Island from 1 January 1839 to 16 December 1851. Twelve had died, one was freed, four were sent to North Island, one to Van Dieman's Land and one remained on the Island. The large death rate was accounted for thus: '*it is a well known fact that Savages do not bear captivity but pine and die in any situation*'.¹⁴

2.2.3 Building the Fitzroy Dry Dock 1848–1865

Work began on the excavation of the Fitzroy dry dock in 1848, with prisoners undertaking a variety of tasks. Although the Resident Engineer was under pressure to have the dock completed promptly so it could receive vessels, the focus on labour as punishment, rather than on productivity, meant that the dock took a long time to construct (the larger dock in Morts Bay, opened in 1854, was completed using paid labourers in less than 18 months). On 5 June 1854, Governor Fitz Roy laid the first stone for the inverted arch lining but the dock was not ready to take its first vessel until December 1857. Alongside the dry dock were engine houses, a police barracks, offices, a chapel and a mess room. Excavation was often hampered by tides, with some prisoners serving as divers. Along with the male prison population, the Island in 1858 had 89 free people, including 14 wives and 44 children. At the time, accommodation was expensive in Sydney so staff preferred to bring their families with them to the Island.

The dock accepted its first vessel on 1 December 1857. Initially, there was considerable concern that the government dock would compete with private business for work and its use was confined to serving Royal Naval vessels but, by the mid 1860s, this requirement had waned and many dockings at Fitzroy Dock were undertaken through leasing of its facilities by private and commercial shipwrights. By April 1865, 163 vessels had docked at the Fitzroy Dock. By September 1860, GK Mann had taken control of the Island, reporting to the Under Secretary for Public Works. He found an '*extreme Penal Establishment*' which placed men '*who are disposed to work*' on the same footing as those who '*are not*'. Charged with turning the Island into a dock yard and arsenal, Mann suggested abandoning the old prison structures and requested a '*properly fitted up Prison Hulk*'.¹⁵ Already, the tension between a working dockyard and a place of correction was becoming apparent.

2.2.4 From Penal Establishment to Industrial School

In 1860, 258 prisoners were living on the Island and their grievances were many. They went on strike over remission of sentences and sometimes refused to work because of the poor quality of the rations. Attempts to escape were common but rarely successful. A school for prisoners opened in June 1863. While the prison quarters were substantial sandstone structures with shingle roofs, the prisoners slept in hammocks, without partitions between them, while some were in solitary confinement.

With the growth in dry dock trade, the increasing numbers of 'free mechanics' and engineers on the Island did not sit well with the small, residual prison population. By 1869, the government had decided that the remaining prisoners should be rehoused at Darlinghurst and other jails, to 'give place to other inhabitants than the worst of our felony'.¹⁶ At this time (1869) the dockyard became a state government enterprise, administered as a separate section of the Harbours and Rivers Branch of the Public Works Department, under EO Moriarty.

Meanwhile, the prison continued to operate as a government institution, firstly as an industrial school and reformatory for girls and as part of the Naval School ships for boys and, later, to house New South Wales state prisoners. Girls from the Industrial School at Newcastle arrived on the Island in May 1871, screened from Fitzroy Dock workers by a ten foot high fence.¹⁷ This screening, on a small island, indicates how compartmentalised the Island was for much of its history, with inhabitants in one area leading quite separate lives from inhabitants in another, unless their paths crossed through work (prisoners and warders) or in a more inadvertent fashion. The girls were not always well behaved, especially when boats of youths cruised around the Island, and some visiting sailors were wont to break into the reformatory. Boys were also to be found on the Island, principally working on a variety of gardening work. They lived on the *Vernon*, an industrial school ship which moved from Farm Cove to be moored off Cockatoo Island in 1871.

By the late 1870s, both the management of the girls and their conditions had improved considerably but the best results were still achieved with younger girls, with much less success with older girls sent from the streets.¹⁸ Nonetheless, in such a small and tightly demarcated society as Cockatoo

Island, tensions often flared and boys belonging to families whose fathers worked at Fitzroy Dock remained very conscious of the girls, almost literally, over the fence.

2.3 The Development and Operation of the Cockatoo Island Dockyard 1870–1992

2.3.1 A New Dry Dock

By the mid-1870s, there were demands for a new, longer dry dock, with more up-to-date machinery, including hydraulic lifts. The Engineer-in-Chief of Harbours and Rivers, after examining docks in London and at Williamstown in Melbourne, noted that the Fitzroy Dock was no longer large enough for the bigger vessels in HM Navy or even in the merchant service, so recommended a new dock at the western end of the Island.¹⁹ This was despite the dock having been extended to 400 feet (122m) from an original length of 284 feet (86.5m) by 1870.²⁰ The NSW Government, keen to see Sydney remain as Australia's pre-eminent port, did not want its dockyard facilities overshadowed by Melbourne.

The NSW Government took the decision to construct a first-class graving dock in 1880, the same year that the Fitzroy Dock was extended for a second and final time to its current length of 475 feet (145m) (Although this was still not long enough to take the steam ship *Orient*, the first steam ship built for a regular Australian service)²¹. Work began on the new dock in October 1882, with completion expected in December 1884, augmented by a second contract begun in March 1883. By 1889, the NSW Government had procured a graving dock 'second to none in point of size and completeness.'²² Named the Sutherland Dock, the new dock was a spectacular site, either with its caisson in place and full of water or, after its massive pumping engines had removed the water, when it lay empty. In either case, its designers, engineers and builders had created one of the most advanced docking facilities in the southern hemisphere, large enough to command respect even in the Royal Navy. This preoccupation with keeping the Royal Navy engaged with Sydney's port facilities continued into the new century.

2.3.2 Closing the Island Prison 1880–1909

An outbreak of typhoid fever in the mid-1880s saw the Chief Medical Inspector, John Ashburton Thompson, reveal that the Island housed 50 permanent residents living in cottages at the east end or on the heights, 120 in the Biloela Reformatory and another 30 people, mainly contractors. Thompson found drainage and sewerage provision inadequate and the Island in a filthy state. His report had to be taken seriously because there was often an outbreak of fever on ships docking at Cockatoo Island.²³ On 8 June 1888, the Biloela Industrial School was closed and the site was proclaimed as a public goal, prison and house of correction. By the following year, this new establishment housed 85 male and 108 female prisoners, with approximately two thirds in some form of employment, most in or about the prison. In 1893, male prisoners quarried, rough-dressed and conveyed sandstone for the new female punishment cells.

By 1896, Biloela could claim to be the oldest established reformatory in Australasia, with an 'enrolment' of 560, including upwards of 300 boys who had been transferred from the *Vernon* reform ship to the new *Sobraon*, three times as large. Women were employed in needlework and shrinking cloth while men continued to quarry stone for additional buildings which dotted an increasingly crowded landscape.²⁴

Despite being condemned as a prison in 1898 on the grounds that its internal form prevented different classes of prisoners from being adequately separated from each other, the prison continued to house about 200 men and women. Increasingly, women with long sentences were sent to Bathurst Goal but prostitutes continued to be assigned to Biloela, with short-sentenced women going to Darlinghurst Goal. There is an intriguing parallel between the way the New South Wales authorities classified, located and relocated prisoners in the 1880s and 1890s (within Sydney and as far afield as Bathurst) and the way earlier governors had decided—within a much larger geographical canvas—to locate and relocate classes of convicts.

While having working dry-docks next to a penal labour force seemed a good idea, in terms of access to cheap labour, the two purposes proved increasingly difficult to pursue simultaneously and the dockyard won out. To remain viable for both naval and commercial work, the dockyard needed regular bouts of capital investment and new technology, especially the introduction of electricity. These issues came to a head in the early years of the new federation.

By 1901, work had started on a new jail at Little Bay, where each prisoner was to have a separate cell. Increasingly, Biloela came to house street undesirables who had no visible means of support, including women goaled for drunkenness. The last male prisoners left Biloela in 1906 and, on 1 February 1908, the *Evening News* told its readers that 'that melancholy medley of stone and wooden buildings on the heights of Cockatoo Island, near Balmain, is shortly to be pulled down'. Biloela ceased to be a prison in September 1909 upon the opening of Long Bay Prison at Little Bay, on the northern shores of Botany Bay.

2.3.3 Federation and an Australian Navy

Australia became a federation in May 1901, after much debate and a series of referenda. The British Parliament authorized a Bill enabling the six colonies to come together under a new federal parliament, which sat in Melbourne (the only city with a Parliament House impressive enough to house the new houses of Representatives and Senators) until 1927, when the provisional Parliament House was opened in Canberra.

However, the overlay of colonial governments remained strong. While the federal constitution granted the new federal government powers over defence, postal services and telegraphy, the new states still held the key powers of taxation and the ownership and regulation of land. The British Navy still protected Australia and its antipodean Admiral still ruled the roost from Admiralty House in Kirribilli, with its commanding views of Circular Quay and the City of Sydney

Cockatoo Island, one of the thousands of parcels of Crown Land owned and controlled by the NSW Government, was, in modern parlance, a key item of government infrastructure; its two docks, the Fitzroy and the Sutherland, were major ship servicing and refitting facilities. Between 1904 and 1910, the NSW Government extended the fitting and machine shops and constructed two new slipways, along with steel-working facilities and cantilever cranes. The dockyard gained electrical power between 1904 and 1906. The state government also funded a northern shipyard in 1912 to build the cruiser *Brisbane* for the new Royal Australian Navy (RAN).²⁵

An Australian Navy effectively came into existence in September 1910, when the destroyers *Parramatta* and *Yarra*, ordered in 1908, reached Australia from Britain, but the King did not authorize the title 'Royal Australian Navy' until October 1911.²⁶ Scottish shipbuilders completed the other ship ordered by the Federal Government, the *Warrego*, in 1910, then dismantled and shipped the entire vessel to Sydney, where it was rebuilt at Cockatoo Island between December 1910 and June 1912.²⁷

The Commonwealth Government had already, in May 1909, asked the NSW Government to find them a suitable naval dockyard and, in January 1913, the Commonwealth bought freehold title to Cockatoo Island for £96,500, paying another £350,000 for the Sutherland and Fitzroy Docks and just under £400,000 for buildings, workshops, houses and equipment.²⁸ The same year, Admiralty House, provided by the NSW Government as the official residence for the Admiral commanding the British naval squadron in Australia, saw the last of 11 admirals depart. The Commonwealth Government then used the house as a residence for the Governor-General when in Sydney.²⁹ While successive British governors still ruled the roost on the other side of the Harbour at the NSW Government House, the locals had finally taken over control of their own naval facilities.

The 'new' Commonwealth Naval Dockyard that Cambridge-graduate John King Salter, a member of the Royal Corps of Naval Constructors, took charge of in 1914 was a rather ramshackle operation, with inadequate power supply, outdated equipment and a shortage of skilled workers. Bureaucratic infighting between the Naval Board and the Public Accounts Committee of the Commonwealth caused further delays and cost overruns in the completion of Town-class cruiser *HMAS Brisbane*, which cost twice as much to build as her sister ships *Sydney* and *Melbourne*, built in the UK.³⁰

Work had begun on the *Brisbane* late in 1912, when the dockyard still lay under the jurisdiction of the NSW Government. By its completion in December 1916, Australia, following the British declaration, had been at war with Germany for over two years.

With the outbreak of hostilities in 1914 Cockatoo Island took on a new sense of urgency as warships were made ready and commercial vessels were fitted out to carry troops and supplies. During the war years, the dockyard built more than 50 ships, launches and ferries, converted or refitted over 100 troop transports and undertook repairs on over 50 warships and cargo steamships.³¹ The Island was a major component in the preparation for, and carrying on of, war for Australia, although it was a largely hidden and isolated part of Sydney Harbour. As an island, its workings were not apparent to outsiders and its large workforce of skilled tradesmen, workers and officials rarely visible.

To cope with the war time demands, an extensive program of construction and renewal had taken place on the Island during the war to meet the requirements. Like many industrial operations, the war had been good to Cockatoo Island Dockyard, with full employment and high turnovers. This continued for the immediate years afterwards, when troopships were refitted and converted back to regular commercial duties.

Employment peaked in December 1919 at 4,085 people.³² The Island workforce, mostly commuting by ferry from the inner industrial suburbs of Sydney, were an almost-hidden army of skilled tradesmen and semi-skilled workers, at the centre—but rarely visible except from nearby harbourside locations—of a huge, working port, full of vessels belching smoke, ferries plying passengers and cargo ships going to or from major ports around the world.

The end of the war and a downturn in naval work refocused the government on the workings at Cockatoo Island and how best to manage it. In 1920, a Commonwealth Government committee, set up to consider the administration of the Cockatoo and Garden Island dockyards, recommended that Cockatoo Island be abandoned as a naval yard and devoted to merchant ships under the Ship Construction Branch of the Prime Minister's Department. As an island continent, many Commonwealth parliamentarians were extremely conscious of the need for self-sufficiency in naval and shipping matters, forcing a Royal Commission on the issue.

The Commissioners commented that Cockatoo Island is 'the only naval establishment of its kind in the Commonwealth...[and] compares most favourably with the best equipped Dockyards in the British Empire as regards machinery and appliances'. They noted its handicap was its inability to accommodate a ship larger than HMAS *Australia*, let alone large ships then being constructed by the Royal Navy in an attempt to re-establish British naval supremacy.³³

The operations at Cockatoo Island had also been marred by arguments about cost overruns and the uncertainty of Navy allocations for refit work and new construction. Such cost debates are endemic in defence procurement but make life extremely difficult for both management and workers in a highly labour-intensive industry. In March 1921, the Naval Board instructed the Commodore in charge of the Island to cease work on the Town-class cruiser *Adelaide* and the coal storage vessel *Mombah*. Most of the 2,500 employees at the dockyard were summarily dismissed³⁴, forcing them into a sluggish economy where well over ten per cent of all male workers were already seeking employment.

The Navy lost control of Cockatoo Island Dockyard in June 1921, when the Shipbuilding Board assumed responsibility for both Cockatoo Island and Williamstown in Melbourne. Work resumed on the *Adelaide* and the *Mombah*. In September 1923, Cockatoo Island and nearby Snapper Island were transferred to the Australian Commonwealth Shipping Board, which also had responsibility for the docking and repair of Commonwealth Line steamers. The dockyard was to be placed on a commercial basis, building and refitting for both government and private businesses. It constructed

refrigerated cargo steamers, lighthouse service vessels and the seaplane carrier HMAS *Albatross* for the RAN.

With insufficient work from the Navy, which preferred to undertake as much of its own work as possible at Garden Island under direct Navy control, Cockatoo Island Dockyard embarked on tenders for outside work, including a large tender, with other companies, to the Sydney Municipal Council, to supply, erect and maintain six turbo-alternator sets at the new Bunnerong Power Station on the shores of Botany Bay. The conservative NSW Chamber of Manufacturers challenged the Dockyard's right to participate in such a tender; the conservative Bruce Government then happily supported the High Court's conclusion in 1927 that such activity went well beyond the Commonwealth's constitutional powers in matters of defence. Unable to keep its large skilled workforce, the dockyard started to lose work to competitors, especially to British shipyards. Work declined and employment fell from 1,290 in 1928 to 560 by 1932.³⁵ By then, Australia had been in the grip of a world-wide economic depression for over two years and unemployment in some Sydney industrial suburbs was over fifty per cent.³⁶ The dockyard was a pale shadow of its heyday during World War I, the remaining workers remarkably lucky to still be on a payroll.

2.3.4 A Commercial Dockyard

In February 1933, the Commonwealth Government leased Cockatoo Island to a company, Cockatoo Docks and Engineering Company Limited, which was founded specifically to take over the Island shipbuilding and maintenance operations, with rent based on a percentage of turnover. The new operators, which still giving priority to naval work, were free to take work from any customer. With sensible industrial management, the Dockyard's historian John Jeremy³⁷ concluded that 'the workload gradually grew with a modest programme of naval shipbuilding, ship repair, and a wide range of commercial work, from heavy engineering to the manufacture of equipment for the dairy industry'.³⁸

One of the first jobs of the new company, the *Yarra*, a 1,366 ton sloop, 265 feet long, was launched in March 1935 and completed in December of that year. Tugs, oil lighters, patrol vessels and a variety of small craft came from the yard, as did more sloop ships. Late in 1938, the company received a order for two new destroyers and, by the time both were finished³⁹, Australia had not only (again following the British lead) declared war on Germany, it had also, after the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, declared war on Japan. In the First World War, Japan had been an ally of Australia and Japanese naval vessels had sailed around Australia in search of German vessels. In July 1941, Prime Minister Menzies had told Cockatoo's assembled workers, nine months into the war with Germany: 'I want you to regard yourselves as being engaged in the true service of this country and in the true service of the British Empire.'⁴⁰

2.3.5 War Comes to Sydney

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour took the US by surprise, although the US Government was already in tense negotiations with the Japanese. The scale of the attack, which damaged or destroyed much of the US naval fleet in the Pacific, stunned Australians, as did the air attack on Port Moresby on 4 February 1942 and the fall of Singapore, said by the British to be impregnable, to Japanese forces 11 days later. Just four days after that, the Japanese launched an air attack on Darwin and continued to attack naval and merchant shipping off the east coast of Australia. On the evening of 31 May 1942, three Japanese midget submarines entered Sydney Harbour. All three were destroyed, but not before one managed to fire torpedos and sink the *HMAS Kuttabul*, a ferry turned depot ship, killing 19.

Press reports of the incidents were heavily censored but harbourside residents saw much of the action and the rumour mill worked overtime. Everyone knew that war had come to Australia and to Sydney Harbour. Wartime rationing and severe building restrictions saw all effort directed towards the war. The biggest wartime construction projects in Sydney were the Concord Repatriation Hospital, opened in 1942, and the much-debated Captain Cook Graving Dock at Garden Island, where 3,500 men reclaimed 30 acres from the harbour for the complex. The siting of the dock, between Potts Point and Garden Island, drew criticism ranging from the fear that the proposed site would 'invite catastrophe for the 100,000 citizens living in the area' as an obvious target for bombing, to the assertion in the Sydney Morning Herald that:

*The dock cannot be of the slightest use in this war. They say it will take three years to building. To judge the time needed to build the city railway and the harbour bridge, the dock will take double the three years estimated.*⁴¹

This proved unduly pessimistic. While the war in Europe was drawing to an end when the dock opened in March 1945, it did service the British Pacific Fleet in the final drive on Japan.⁴²

Cockatoo Dockyard, well away from the high density apartments that overlooked Garden Island's dockyard construction, rarely occasioned complaint. To the working class residents of Balmain and other inner southern suburbs, it was a source of employment. To the middle class residents of Woolwich, Greenwich and Hunters Hill, it was just another element in a heavily industrialised maritime landscape.

Other docks re-opened or were transferred to the Commonwealth Government during the war. The Newcastle State Dockyard, closed in the midst of the depression in 1933, re-opened in 1941, while in October 1942, the Williamstown Dockyard, controlled by the Victorian State Government, was taken over by the Commonwealth. Cockatoo Island remained as a privately-run operation, as did Evans Deakin's expansion in Brisbane and BHP's new shipbuilding operation in Whyalla, in South Australia.⁴³

In wartime Sydney, only the Cockatoo Island workers and their families had a real sense of the frenzied pace of activity on the Island, which operated seven days a week. In the 1940s, the industrial setting of Sydney Harbour saw Cockatoo Island as just one more large industrial installation. Powerstations commanded harbourside sites at Balmain, White Bay and Pyrmont. Not far from Cockatoo Island, Lever and Kitchen's soap plant belched all manner of fumes into the atmosphere and, almost everywhere you looked from the Island, small and large boat-building operations could be seen, from Balmain to Woolwich. Gasometers dominated the landscape at Waverton and Mortlake, while the coal terminal at Balls Head and the oil terminals at Waverton and Berry's Bay gave Sydney Harbour a harsh, practical, industrial feel. Further up the Parramatta River, the Newington Armaments Depot set the scene for a succession of military storage facilities, while the paint and chemical factories at Clyde poured excess effluent into Duck Creek, Homebush Bay and the Parramatta River. Cockatoo Island had the largest structures of any of the Sydney Harbour islands, including its grand Titan Crane but, from a distance, it appeared as just another part in the jigsaw of harbourside industry.

2.3.6 Cockatoo Island 1945

By the end of the war, almost every part of Cockatoo Island had some kind of engineering or maritime structure, with just a handful of trees left near the old residences and the industrial school. Huge new structures were added during the war, including No. 2 Slipway, a new turbine shop, a new destroyer wharf and new foundry and bolt shops. Air-raid shelters were built at various locations and this involved changes to some of the convict-built structures.⁴⁴ The small size and physical constraints of the Island, especially many existing structures, gave the Island the appearance of being overcrowded with development, in marked distinction to many other industrial sites, such as steelworks, which were usually located on broad-acre settings with plenty of room to expand.

Cockatoo Docks and Engineering Co were proud of the Island and its history, although in their commemorative war record publication, a lavish affair, the convict history of the Island was quickly passed over and its later role as a civil prison didn't rate a mention. However, the wheat silos cut into solid sandstone by the convicts were singled out for attention, including the fact that blasting to remove 100,000 cubic yards of stone for the new Turbine Shop cut through two of the silos.⁴⁵

Norman Frazer, Managing Director of Cockatoo Island, pointed out in his foreword to *Cockatoo Docks, Sydney, War Record 1939–1945* that, at the start of the war, Cockatoo Island was the largest shipbuilding and engineering works in the country. During the war, 750 ships had docked at Cockatoo Island: 355 naval and 395 merchant vessels. The largest naval ships ranged in tonnage from 10,000 to 21,000 tons, while the merchant ships went up to 24,000 tons. The Sutherland Dock, measuring 690 feet by 88 feet, was considerably larger than the older, convict-built Fitzroy Dock, at 474 feet by 47 feet. The ships built in the northern and southern shipyards were considerably smaller, reflecting, by World War II standards, the relatively modest size of the shipyards. The largest naval ships built at Cockatoo Island were the Tribal-class destroyers *Arunta*, *Warramunga*

and *Bataan*, all just under 3,000 tons, while the largest merchant ships were the *River Clarence* and the *River Hunter*, at 5,000 tons.⁴⁶

2.3.7 The Vickers years 1947–1986

In 1947 an important change took place on the Island, when Vickers Limited, a large British shipbuilding and engineering company, who had been a shareholder of the Cockatoo Docks and Engineering Company and enjoyed a strong working relationship with the dockyard, bought the majority of shares in the Company as part of an expansion of their engineering interests in Australia. Vickers operated the dockyard until 1986, when Comsteel Vickers (as it was, by then, known) was acquired by Australian National Industries Limited. The Vicker's years coincided with both a great leap forward in shipbuilding technology and expertise, as well as the gradual decline of naval shipbuilding at Cockatoo Island.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Cockatoo Island continued to be used for a variety of naval and merchant work, starting in the latter half of the 1940s with the refit of naval vessels for merchant service. The infantry landing ship HMAS *Manoora* was handed back to the Adelaide Steamship Co in August 1949. The *Kanimbla*, a famous pre-war passenger ship, had also been stripped of most of its accommodation to take landing craft. After the war, it was refitted as a passenger vessel again, one of the largest such undertakings ever attempted in Australia.⁴⁷

From the 1960s, commercial work gradually declined and more and more of Cockatoo Island's activities revolved around naval requirements, especially refits of submarines. Most naval work since the war was undertaken at cost. Cockatoo's last great commercial contract was to build a roll-on-roll-off passenger and vehicular vessel for the Australian National Line, to provide a service from Sydney to Tasmania, similar to the service provided by the *Princess of Tasmania* (built by the State Dockyard at Newcastle) between Melbourne and Devonport. Laid down in September 1962, Ship 220 (known colloquially in the yard as the 'Duchess of Woolloomooloo') was launched as the *Empress of Australia* in January 1964 and completed in January 1965. With a gross tonnage of 12,000, the *Empress* could take cars, semi-trailers, containers and 250 passengers.⁴⁸

No more such contracts were secured by Cockatoo Island. As the dock's historian succinctly puts it:

*Commercial dockings steadily declined in number during the 1960s and became a rare event in the final years of the dockyard. A number of factors contributed to this trend: shipowners' reluctance to repair ships in Australian yards because of a perceived unreliable industrial climate, increased time between dockings, and fewer ships in Australian trade... Not only were the docks at Cockatoo too small for modern ships, they were unsuitable for the modern machinery widely adopted overseas for ship cleaning and painting, and they became uncompetitive, even with other docks in Australia.*⁴⁹

The fate of Cockatoo Island from the 1960s to the 1990s lay with naval demands and the availability and cost structure of docks elsewhere. RAN submarines docked at Cockatoo Island in the 1950s and a small number were refitted in the 1960s. It was only with the coming of the Australian Navy's

Scottish-built Oberon-class submarines, from 1967, that Cockatoo Island picked up more refit work. Based at HMAS *Platypus* in Neutral Bay, Cockatoo Island was nearby. New facilities were installed for the refits, which could take between two and two and a half years per submarine.⁵⁰

Having lost a tender to build HMAS *Tobruk* to Carrington Slipways and one for patrol boats to NQEA⁵¹, Cockatoo Island won a bid in 1979 to build a fleet-replenishment ship, of French design, for the Navy. Difficulties with the design, the recruitment of skilled tradesmen and complicated negotiations with the Commonwealth over a price formula all led to long delays. The largest naval vessel ever built in Australia at 17,933 tonnes (with a cargo capacity of 10,000 tons) and the last to be built at Cockatoo Island, the *Success*, with provision for a crew of 209, had sea trials in December 1985 and was commissioned by the Navy in April 1986, finally entering operational service in 1987. The complex requirements for building such a vessel and the implications for the Island's infrastructure and workforce are spelt out in John Jeremy's *To Build a Ship: The Construction of HMAS Success at Cockatoo Island* (Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, 2004). During the construction period, employment peaked on the Island at 2,650 workers, including 400 apprentices.⁵² It was one of the largest single workplaces in Sydney.

2.3.8 The Final Years 1986–1992

Cockatoo Island and its holding company, Vickers Australia, lobbied for contracts to build new submarines in the early 1980s but Cockatoo's island location (which prevented direct rail or road access), 'its poorly laid out old facilities and an entrenched industrial culture' meant there would be no chance of success if they had entered into the bidding process.⁵³ A Swedish design was selected and the Commonwealth Government poured millions of dollars into a new submarine facility in Adelaide, whose economy was faltering following the collapse of the white goods industry.

A 14 week strike at Cockatoo Island between May and August 1989 created long delays in submarine refits, which the strikers demanded should be kept at Cockatoo Island.⁵⁴ In June 1990, the Hawke Labour Government placed the last two refits with its corporatised 'Australian Defence Industries' group at Garden Island. This proved the death-knell for naval activity at Cockatoo Island. With the last refit completed on 4 June 1991, the Island lost any prospect of remaining a major force in ship building and ship repair. The lease terminated on 31 December 1992.

Eight years earlier, the Department of Defence Support and the Department of Housing and Construction had requested a report on the Island by a leading heritage specialist, James Semple Kerr. At the time, there was considerable concern in heritage circles and the National Trust that the Commonwealth Government, despite having established the Australian Heritage Commission in 1975, was not taking its own heritage properties seriously, from naval and army installations to airports and post offices. Kerr's study focused on the nineteenth century, using documentary and physical evidence to assess 'the cultural significance of the penal and institutional remains above the escarpment'. The Commonwealth Government gave permission to the National Trust of Australia (NSW) to publish the study in 1984.



Figure 2.1
'Convicts letter writing at Cockatoo Island' in 1849. By 1849, convicts on the Island were employed in building the Fitzroy Dock. (Source: Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)

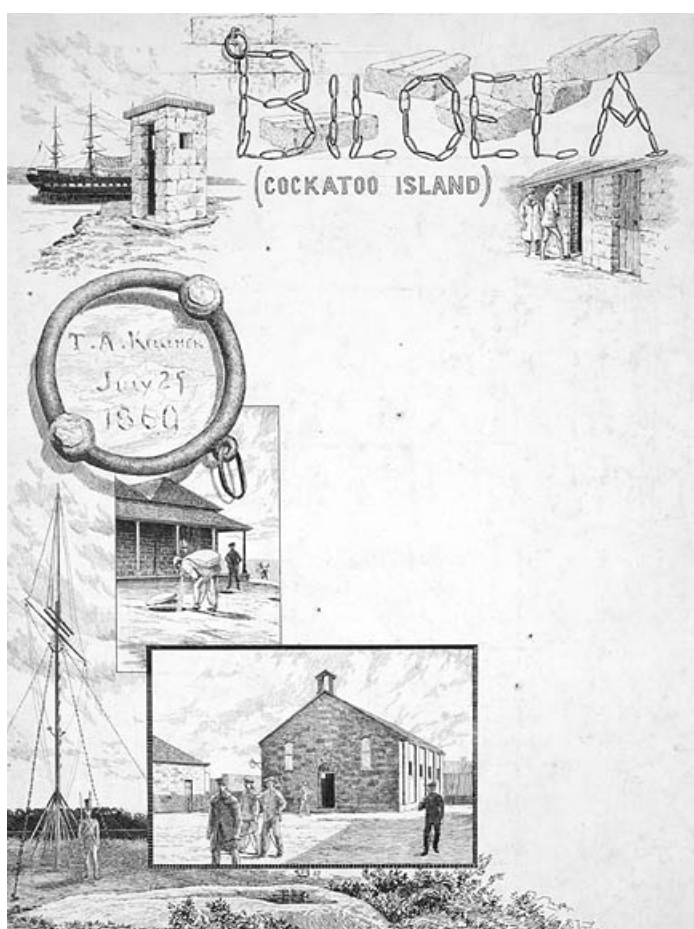


Figure 2.2
An 1889 pamphlet on the gaol at Cockatoo Island, then renamed 'Biloela' in an attempt to distance itself from its reputation. Images of its convict past include the guard houses, military flagpost, convicts at work and the name of the Institution spelt in chains and irons. (Source: Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)

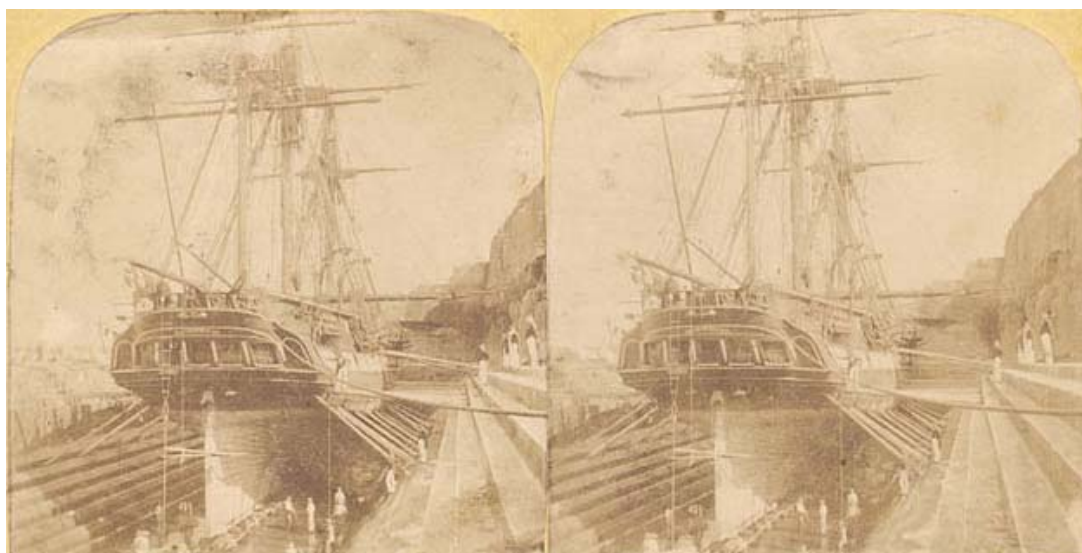


Figure 2.3 A stereoscopic view of *HMS Iris* in the Fitzroy Dock in 1858. Prisoners appear to be working in the dock under the eye of guards above. *HMS Iris* was first flagship of the Royal Navy's Australia Station commanded by Commodore Loring. (Source: Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)



Figure 2.4 Cockatoo Island from Birchgrove c1860. Note the sentry boxes on the lowland at left and the partially completed workshop right of centre. The western end of Building 143 contains the two tall arched openings for the boilers. The scars of recent excavations are visible in the rock face behind the workshop. (Source: Mitchell Library)

PLAN of COCKATOO ISLAND

Scale 2 Chains to 1 Inch

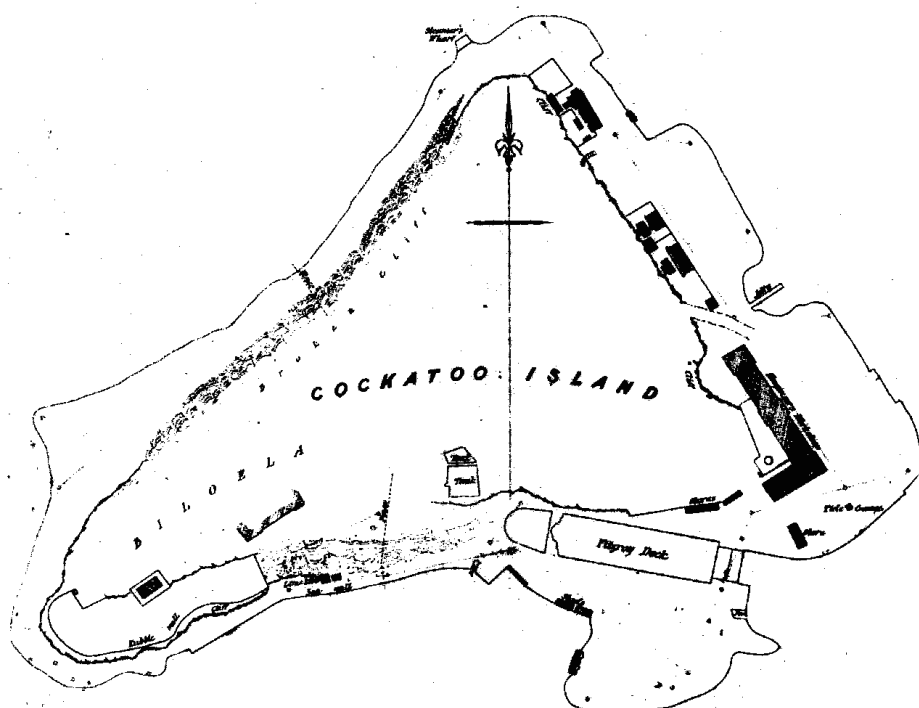


Figure 2.5 Plan of Cockatoo Island c1870 showing the Fitzroy Dock as completed and with outline of the first extension. The Engineering Workshops have been completed to their full size (Source: Jeremy, op cit. p8)



Figure 2.6 Fitzroy Dock 1870. This photo shows the extension of the Fitzroy dock in progress. The excavation can be seen underway in the foreground, with a rock face left as a natural dam wall while work is completed, thus allowing the dock to be left in service while the extension is made. Note the steam crane on the right and the open caisson. (Source: Mitchell Library)

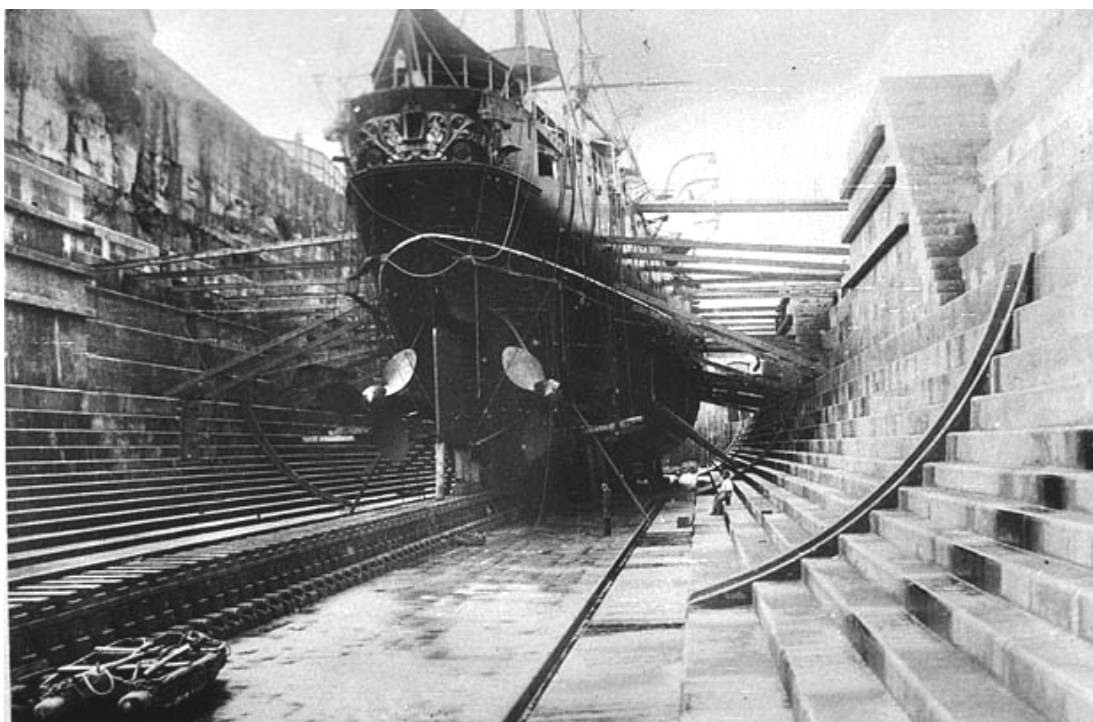


Figure 2.7 The HMS *Orlando* in Sutherland Dock c1890s. At the time of completion, the dock was one of the most advanced facilities in the colonies and trumped the Calliope Dock in Auckland (opened in 1888), which had been providing docking facilities for the Navy beyond that possible with Fitzroy Dock. (Source: Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)



Figure 2.8 Nautical School Training Boys aboard the *Sobraon* in c1890. The *Sobraon* was moored off Cockatoo Island between 1890 and 1911, having replaced the *Vernon*, which had stood there since 1871. The Nautical School Ships were replaced by a specialised facility at Mt Penang, near Gosford. (Source: Clark, MS, and J Clark, 2000, *The Islands of Sydney Harbour*, Kangaroo Press)