

THE ALBURY GAOL

Edited talk by Howard Jones (presented at A&DHS General Meeting, November 2008 and reprinted from A&DHS Bulletin No 486)

Albury Gaol had a life of 83 years, yet is largely forgotten. It housed men and women who had committed crimes from murder to bigamy, sedition, counterfeiting, malicious wounding and some who simply crossed the Murray River illegally.

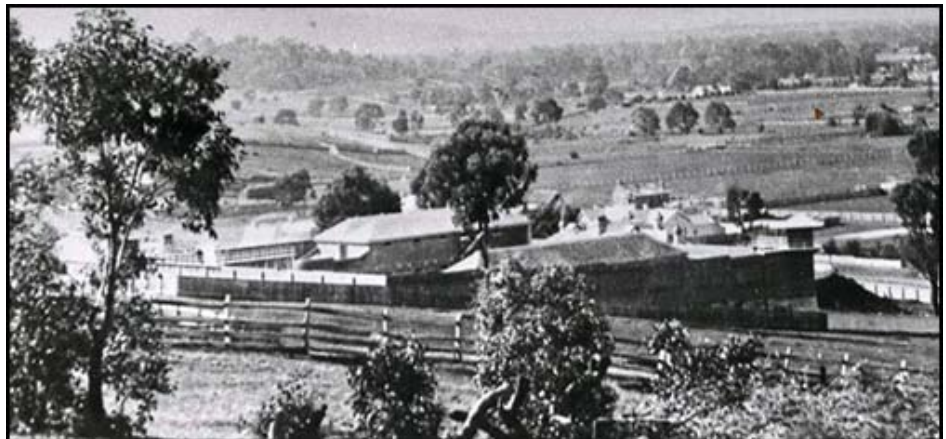
BEGINNINGS

A Court of Petty Sessions was started in Albury in 1840. When the first District Court began sitting in Albury in 1860, a need for a gaol arose. At that time, Albury had a small lock-up between St Matthew's Church and the post office with two cells 12 feet square, called locally the Black Hole. The first judge to sit in Albury, Thomas Callaghan, was horrified by it and demanded the Colonial Government build a gaol.

Bushrangers were still active on the Border at this time. An escaped prisoner, a bushranger called Jack the Devil, was captured by Albury police, held briefly in the lock-up and then sent back to Berrima, on horseback in company of two Albury constables, and wearing hand and leg irons. Prisoners arrived in Albury from a wide area of southern NSW.

DESCRIPTION

Albury Gaol was built in 1861 where Cahill Place and St John's retirement village now stand. It was designed by the Colonial Government as a "Braidwood type," being similar to that at Braidwood and several other gaols including Wagga, Yass and Deniliquin, all built in the early 1860s.



Originally the gaol was a two-storey brick cell block with the gaoler's quarters at the front, including fireplaces that were, of course, denied prisoners. The building had six cells on each floor, measuring 10ft x 6ft (about 3m x 2m). They could take up to three prisoners. Cells in the Junee Correctional Centre are of similar size today.

The gaol took the first prisoners about March, 1862. Michael Tiernan was appointed the first gaoler and his wife, Martha, the matron. On the staff were a turn-key and four warders who were paid six shillings a day each. The man who had built the Courthouse, Thomas Allen, and his wife, became gaoler and matron soon afterwards.

In 1871, the average number of prisoners held was 25, overseen by three warders (two by day and one at night). Some prisoners wore iron shackles. Magistrates visited monthly to record how prisoners were employed and punishments inflicted.

THE EXTENDED GAOL

Between 1860 and 1880, Albury's population grew from 1500 to 5500, and the railway arrived. A bigger gaol was needed. The block of 12 cells was extended on two levels in 1879-81, with another 16 cells (four for women), that were 10ft x 10ft. A gaoler's house, an L-shaped block for

a workshop, hospital ward, kitchen and surgery were added. All were built of brick on granite foundations. (Some pre-cut granite blocks were recovered in 1993 for the re-building of St Matthew's Church).

Also new was a 16ft high brick perimeter wall enclosing an area measuring 169ft x 170ft, with watchtowers at two corners. The wall tapered from 16 inches at the base to 14 inches, capped by round-topped moulded bricks (still to be seen in 2008 in a nearby front garden at 509 Thurgoona Street). An escaping prisoner would have found it hard to get a grip.

However, two prisoners made a hole in the brick wall in 1882 and escaped, one to Wagga and one to Melbourne.

The gaol had timber gates in front of a 16ft x 16ft iron screen incorporating wrought iron gates. A stone arch over the entrance bore the legend GAOL. The gaoler's house was to the right and the guard room to the left.

The 1879 design included one cell designated for solitary confinement and another was the condemned cell. On June 1, 1881 the condemned cell was used. Henry Wilkinson, 46, was hanged for murdering a woman and her father in a wine shanty on the Jindera Gap. Thirty people watched the execution in the yard.



A bizarre incident was reported in the *Albury Banner* during the time Wilkinson was awaiting trial: "Chess in the Gaol. Two of the prisoners in the Albury Gaol were detected a few days since playing chess in contravention of the regulations.

The board had been made out of an old pair of trousers, and stitched on to a pocket handkerchief, the uncovered portion of which formed the white squares. The chessmen were very ingeniously cut out of soap. As playing the game is against the rules of the prison, the board and men were seized and removed."

GAOLERS OR GOVERNORS

Thomas Allen remained the gaoler (sometimes called governor) until he was transferred in 1883 after some 20 years in charge.

Next was Frederick Augustus Ramsay, a British veteran of the Crimean War, and a son of a major-general in the Indian Army. Ramsay came to Australia in 1857 and served in the Gold Escort Police at Tumbarumba before trying farming. He entered the NSW prison service in 1878, serving at Darlinghurst, Parramatta and Yass gaols before Albury. It was in Ramsay's time that NSW passed an Act allowing prisoners to work outside gaols.

Dean Street had plenty of violence and drunken behaviour 120 years ago. In 1887, a man who stabbed two others in Dean Street got three years in gaol.

The next gaoler, Douglas Rowley, came in 1888. Rowley, 40, a former schoolmaster and storekeeper at Parramatta, had seven children living with him at the gaoler's house. He died from dropsy in November 1889.

Apart from Wilkinson the murderer and Rowley the gaoler, nine people died at the gaol between 1881 and 1890. Inquests were held at the gaol. Sometimes the coroner appointed 12 jurors, six of them prisoners. One such prisoner-juror was Sidney Primrose, a young bank clerk serving a sentence for embezzlement.

The gaol record books are still kept in Sydney. Some contain photographs of prisoners (from 1884), and a microfilm of these can be viewed at the Albury Library-Museum.

Several Chinese who crossed from Victoria were arrested in Albury in 1893 and 1894 and held in the gaol for evading the poll tax.

In 1894 the prisoners included the “Dora Dora murderers,” two Queensland Aboriginals who speared to death a man in 1892, but escaped and were on the run for two years. They were sentenced to death, but the sentences were commuted to long periods of imprisonment.

LIFE IN GAOL

Prisoners were not idle. Men worked in the workshops or gaol gardens, chopped wood, laid bricks, painted and did some carpentry. Women were given knitting, sewing, washing, cooking and sweeping, the whole idea being to make the gaol self-sufficient. Prisoners made all the prison clothing, socks and hats. Some of this was sent to other gaols.

POLITICS

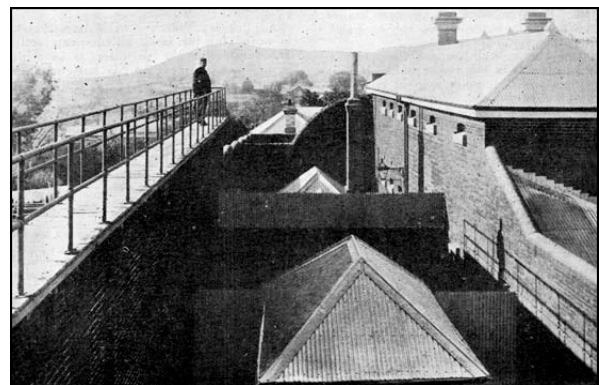
In 1909, there was a famous trial at the Albury Court House, when several leading socialists were tried for sedition, riot, unlawful assembly and conspiracy at the Broken Hill mining riots. Tom Mann, who had organised a big docks strike in London, was found not guilty. He became a leading national trade union leader in England during and after World War I. Mrs Mann accompanied her husband to Albury. The Judge had to order the governor of the gaol to allow Tom Mann to have his pyjamas. After all, he was only on remand.

Henry Holland, a Sydney journalist, was found guilty of sedition and sentenced to two years in the Albury gaol, but was released after only five months. He moved to New Zealand, became a Labour MP and Leader of the Labour Party from 1919 until his death in 1933, shortly before Michael Savage became New Zealand’s first Labour Prime Minister.

In World War I, some early communists, known as Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World) were arrested in NSW for anti-war activity.

Tom Barker was a union organiser who spent several weeks in Albury gaol. He worked later in Russia and knew Lenin and Trotsky, and ended up a trade union leader in England and local councillor in London.

Paul Schmoork was a German sailor who arrived in Australia in 1911. He was gaoled for six months in Wagga in May, 1915, for spreading reports likely to cause alarm among the civilian population.



In August 1915, James Lalor, of Ballarat, got nine months for making statements likely to hinder recruiting, but was released after three months.

The gaol continued throughout the Depression years and into the 1940s. It was officially closed in 1943, but the Army used it during the war as a lock-up.

After the war it fell derelict and became a playground for kids until it was demolished in 1947. The Government transferred it to the Housing Commission, who used the bricks for the flats.

In 2013 the Albury & District Historical Society published “Albury Gaol: Home of killers, conmen, bigamists, socialists and hapless Chinese migrants,” a 40-page booklet by Howard Jones.