

On the lookout: defensive surveillance of convicts and foreigners as a defining element of early Queensland architecture (1820s-1880s)*

Ray Kerkhove and Cathy Keys†

The role of surveillance in Queensland architecture and history is surprisingly underrated given that Queensland's earliest most commanding architectural structures were penal and military outposts. The dismantling of these colonial buildings has diminished awareness of their earlier importance. This paper examines the largely-forgotten role and impact of surveillance on early Queensland society and investigates the monitoring of convicts and foreign vessels.¹

The desire to observe people and environments has a long history.² New modes have evolved, but the same motivations remain. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* has become a critical source for understanding the role of surveillance in architecture, and in identifying its disciplinary and punitive elements.³ By contrast, Anna Vemer Andrzejewski's *Building Power: Architecture and Surveillance in Victorian America* located surveillance within vernacular architectures. Her research revealed surveillance motivated by efficiency, hierarchy and fellowship as 'acts of sustained observation of others that have transformation of behaviour as their intent – of the surveillant and/or those under surveillance'.⁴

Convict surveillance

Some of Australia's earliest European buildings were barracks 'overlooking and set apart from gaols and prison workplaces'.⁵ Originally, these barracks were built similar to castles, featuring high walls, turrets, stores, gun slots and even wells (in case of prolonged siege).⁶ Their purpose was to watch and contain convicts, thus preventing their insurrection – a fear vindicated

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† Dr Ray Kerkhove is Historian-in-Residence at Noosa, formerly (2017-2019) a historian with the Aboriginal Environments Research Centre (School of Architecture, The University of Queensland) and Visiting Fellow with the Harry Gentle Resource Centre (Griffith University). His research focuses on Nineteenth Century Queensland Aboriginal history and material culture.

Dr Cathy Keys is a Research Fellow in the School of Architecture, The University of Queensland. Her research explores the social, cultural and historical properties of architectural space in Australia.

by convict revolts at Vinegar Hill, Sydney 1804, and Norfolk Island in 1826. Queensland's first settlement at Redcliffe in 1824 was a log-walled penitentiary: a guard house, jail, soldiers' barracks and prisoner's barracks surrounded by a stockade of timber posts and pickets.⁷ When shifted to Brisbane in 1825, the early colony remained a set of walled compounds, rather similar to the Georgian barracks and structures which are still visible on Norfolk Island. Reverend Schmidt observed early Brisbane as being just two barracks: one for male convicts and another at Eagle Farm for female convicts, with a 'guard by soldiers.'⁸

The impact of such architecture on Queensland's immigrants would have been significant, since the structures continued to dominate the settlement's skyline decades after the penal colony closed. For instance, two years after the closure, James Demarr, found Brisbane still defined by stone and brick structures of penal origin:

the capital town of the district of Moreton Bay.... having been for nearly twenty years a penal settlement ... its best buildings were Government stores, barracks, prisons, residences of officials, and such like.⁹

It is important to note that in Demarr's opinion, Brisbane's only elegance was a convict hospital. Though Brisbane by then had 400 free citizens, Demarr considered their efforts at construction to be crude and ramshackle. He was particularly disgusted by Brisbane's inns, 'of a low class, all either slab-built huts or weatherboarded houses.'¹⁰

Four years later in 1847, Major de Winton arrived to head the 99th Regiment. He too noticed that 'the only substantial buildings in my time were the barracks, the officers' quarters, the court house and gaol.'¹¹ Like Demarr, de Winton considered the rest of the town unimpressive: 'the remainder being weather-board structures. ... jotted down apparently indiscriminately, or at the sweet will of the early settlers.'¹² By 1848, Brisbane had 960 residents. Even so, it could only boast one 'regular' street. Apart from handsome military-penal buildings, it still comprised 'rough hewn timber dwellings topped by shingled roofs.'¹³

Ipswich ('Limestone') similarly remained a relic of penal settlement for longer than is usually considered. It began as a depot for surveillance of lime-mining convicts. Initially, it was nothing more than soldiers' sentry boxes,¹⁴ a small stone store for convict food supplies,¹⁵ a slab shed (convict quarters),¹⁶ and a 'half brick half wood' building – the soldiers' barracks.¹⁷

The 'father of Ipswich', first free settler and last convict Superintendent was George Thorn. He was a convict guard from the 4th Kings Own Regiment. Thorn's background ensured early Ipswich remained spartan and military. Ipswich's first hotel-hostel was simply the old barracks, which Thorn lined

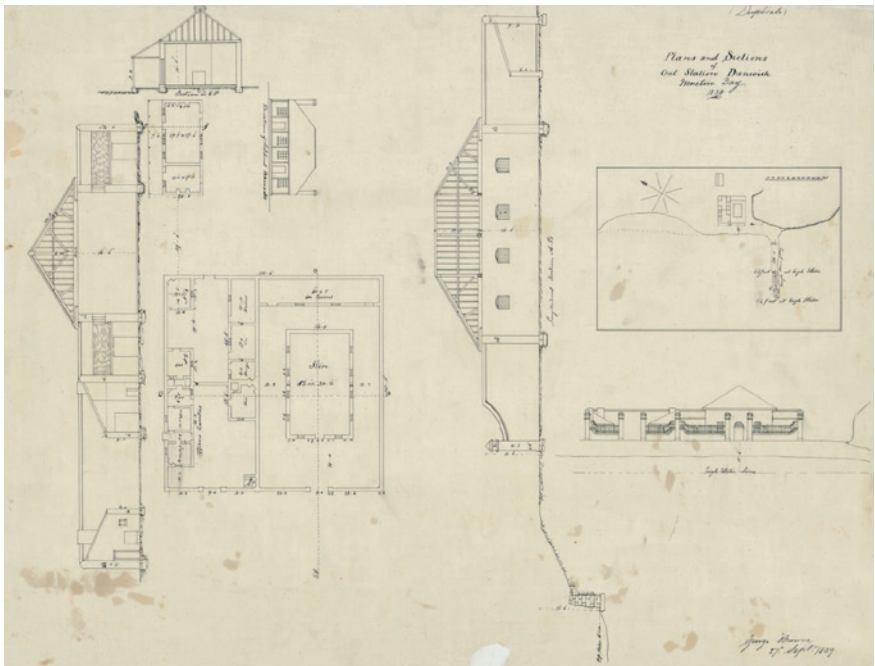
with 20 military-style stretchers along earthen floors and slab walls. These seem to have persisted into the 1850s and later.¹⁸

Monitoring foreigners

Immediately Britain took possession of New South Wales in 1788, Australian colonies were burdened with creating coastal forts and batteries to ‘defend major settlements, ports, harbors and coaling stations from attack by foreign vessels of war.’¹⁹ In line with English ‘ring fence’ diplomacy, defensive outposts peppered coastlines²⁰ – overland invasion being deemed impossible.²¹

Such forts were amongst Australia’s earliest architectural structures. For Queensland, from September 1824 – concurrent with first settlement at Redcliffe – Moreton Bay’s main entrance was guarded by a small military unit at Amity Point Pilot Station and Dunwich, North Stradbroke Island.²² Its warehouse and military barracks at the stores depot were protected by a three-metre thick brick wall or stockade.²³ The dock was built defensively.²⁴

The river entrance to Brisbane lay almost within view of Dunwich barracks, being directly across Moreton Bay. Brisbane’s penal colony was otherwise



Plans and Sections, Outstation Dunwich, Moreton Bay 1838, Queensland State Archives, 27 September 1839. (Queensland State Archives, Digital Image ID 5214)

defended by geography, being hidden 12 miles up a meandering river, which was difficult to enter on account of large sand banks.²⁵ Major Clunie planned a lookout for ‘Clunie’s Flats,’ Lytton,²⁶ and a rough cutting and fence protected the passage to the New Farm plots,²⁷ but otherwise further defence works were added in continent-wide splurges on fortification. This was a response to a number of war scares: the Crimea (1853-1856), Napoleon III (reigned 1852-1870), and Russia’s expansion in the Russo-Turkish War (1877) and Afghanistan (1885).²⁸ Russian and French vessels plied Queensland waters. Noumea – a French military base – lay only 700 miles from Brisbane. Distance gave further concern: ‘Moreton Bay, 700 miles north of Sydney... separated...by...unoccupied country...completely isolated.’²⁹

Defence dominated 1860s public debate in Queensland,³⁰ reaching such a crescendo that parliament passed the Military Contribution Bill in May 1864 for a contribution towards the cost of stationing British troops in Queensland. Governor George Bowen meanwhile ordered that volunteer units be formed ‘as rapidly as circumstances would permit’³¹ along with ‘necessary fortifications... barracks.’³²

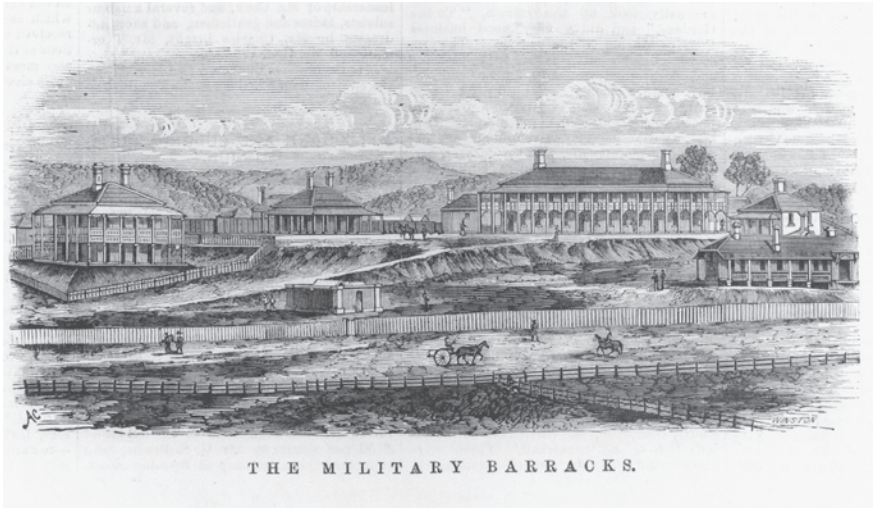
Thus designs for a large new Victoria Barracks were ‘cheerfully granted’ with zero dissent.³³ It was touted as one of Brisbane’s most iconic buildings,³⁴ also monitoring what contemporaries called ‘the silent and unceasing growth’ of sometimes-lawless settlers.³⁵ Indeed, it served as the policing base during Brisbane’s Bread Riots of 1866.³⁶

Victoria Barracks was definitely sited in the landscape to maximize surveillance, commanding ‘a splendid view of the river and the more prominent portions of North and South Brisbane’.³⁷ It was well-fortified:

The walls are built of brick, eighteen inches in thickness up to the second floor, and fourteen inches from thence to the roof, which is slated. The main portion of the building, intended for the ordinary accommodation of the troops, is ... supported by four massive hardwood pillars. In another part of the yard is the guard house, consisting of one room and two cellars.³⁸

Significantly, its stables opened onto a walled causeway, enabling mounted soldiers and police to pour down onto any trouble spied from their verandas. It and the old William Street barracks accommodated local military detachments, visiting army volunteers, and the addition of 88 Imperial soldiers and three officers.³⁹

Surveillance, however, was mostly maritime. Free settlement in 1842 intensified the use of seaways⁴⁰ – shipping swelled with exports and migrants, 14,000 entering through Moreton Bay between 1848 and 1859.⁴¹ Until the first railway was opened in 1865, the Queensland economy depended on ports, which developed early: Port Curtis (Gladstone, 1847), Port Denison (Bowen, 1861) and Mackay (1862).⁴²



Military Barracks, Petrie Terrace, 1872, Illustrated Adelaide Post.

(State Library of Queensland)



Walled causeway at Victoria Barracks, facing Countess Street, August 2019.

(Photograph by Ray Kerkhove)



Watercolour painting of Cape Wickham, 1888, showing Robert Bulcock's wooden lookout tower and residence, known as the 'Homestead' located at Bulcock Beach, Caloundra.

(Original watercolour painting held in John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland)

Thus the public worried that Ipswich could be taken by a 'single man-of-war.'⁴³ As a result, Queensland mostly invested in waterside fortification. Naval stores were added to Kangaroo Point (1886-1887). Working and 'signalling' cannons were placed at the Brisbane River mouth (on St Helena Island), along Brisbane's riverside botanic gardens,⁴⁴ and around Townsville (1870s) – the latter evolving into several fortified sites. Green Hill on Thursday Island was also fortified.⁴⁵

Due to limited resources and even more limited manpower, Queensland's navigational aids often doubled as military surveillance. It is no accident that lighthouses, pilot stations, beacons, signal towers and signalling flags appear so early in Queensland's history.⁴⁶ Such structures had a vital function in scanning Queensland's horizons for 'friend or foe', and communicating the news to authorities. In 1855, Brisbane's iconic mill tower was co-opted into communicating with vessels through coded flags. By 1865, it was a Signal Station and Observatory, with a time ball on a signal mast.⁴⁷

When telegraph lines were introduced in 1861, a line was immediately run from Brisbane to the river mouth at Lytton, to communicate with vessels offshore. Signal Hill telegraph station was established there in 1873. Fort Lytton – Brisbane's main defence – was built adjacent (1880-1882).⁴⁸ It expanded up-river minefields and earthworks for SB howitzers, added after the Russian-Turkish war scare. In 1889, its firepower was upgraded.⁴⁹

During the second Russian Scare in 1885, even a humble timber observation tower built for recreation became a 'military lookout'.⁵⁰ Robert Bulcock had a tower built on the most elevated section of his land at Caloundra, with an observation platform 30 feet (9 metres) high. The government considered this a vital surveillance point over the northern entrance to Moreton Bay. Thus it

was ‘manned voluntarily by the few settlers day and night in all weather.’⁵¹ In the early 1880s, beachside Ballinger’s Hill (1.5 kms north) was fortified as an early warning station and renamed ‘Battery Hill.’⁵² The Queensland Government created telegraphic communication with Caloundra Heads within the ‘course of a few days’ and boasted that arrangements were:

so complete that the appearance of a hostile vessel at any part of the coast, and at any hour, can be notified to headquarters with the quickest despatch. All messages relating to defence measures will be treated as “urgent”.⁵³

Later, this elevated site was utilised as a key surveillance point for Caloundra’s first lighthouse (1896). This was a timber framed circular tower 38 feet high, 171 feet above high water, clad in sheets of corrugated zinc anneal, its fixed kerosene light visible to 16 miles.⁵⁴

It is significant that Caloundra’s military lookout / lighthouse stood beside Robert Bulcock’s house – the first European building on the coast between Bribie Passage and Mooloolaba.⁵⁵ Equally, Fort Lytton, Amity Point pilot station and Dunwich Barracks, and the military barracks and Commissariat Store of William Street respectively represent the earliest European structures



Early photograph of Bulcock’s watch tower, lighthouse and cottage.

(Image courtesy of Dave Slawson, Caloundra)

for the Brisbane River mouth, the Moreton Bay Islands and Brisbane City. This suggests, as William Clark recalled, that first impressions of early Queensland consisted of fortification; ‘the voyager passing upward from the river bar met the first evidence of settlement at the penal stockade – the women’s quarters at Eagle Farm.’⁵⁶

Endnotes

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