

## The Brown's River [Taronga] Probation Station

Richard Lord

This Station was among the first opened to accommodate the convicts sent to Van Diemens Land under the Probation System of Penal Discipline, as distinct from the Assignment System of the colony which operated until 1840, and it was established to supply labour to build the Channel Highway. All its supplies were brought in by sea and unloaded below the Station on the natural shelving rocks which made ideal landing stages for whale boats, and were then carried up the track which can still be followed today.

On the 15th August 1839 Daniel O'Connor presented to the Crown a plan<sup>1</sup> of the proposed site for a Road Station near Brown's River, along with a design for the Station on land owned by himself. He offered two almost identical areas of land. One (coloured pink) was on the bank of the Derwent River and had an area of 5 acres. The other (coloured green) was a square block, further inland and situated on the side of the hill, It measured 700 links on all sides, with an area of 4 acres, 3 roods, 24 perches. Evidently G.D. Babington, the Director of Public Works, inspected the two sites and wrote the following note on the plan:

On a more minute examination of this Country I have decided on adopting the Area coloured Green as it possesses many decided advantages over that Coloured Pink; for besides its nearer proximity to building Materials, and the Main Road, by which labour will be obviously saved, it is nearer to water and has a healthy aspect, being exposed to the morning sun.

Office of Public Works

24th August 1839

Included on this plan is the notation that the proposed Station was 7¼ miles from Molle Street [Hobart Town], which indicates that the line of road which is now the Channel Highway had already been surveyed.

However, on the 16th October 1841 the Government purchased a third site from Daniel O'Connor for five shillings. This land measured 7 chains 10 links square, contained an area of 5 acres and was situated on top of the saddle, up from the sites which O'Connor had first offered<sup>2</sup>.

In the mean time construction had commenced and in July 1841 the officer

commanding the Royal Engineers Office in Hobart Town asked, "that as the buildings for the Probation Parties are immediately required at Brown's River and Jerusalem, that a foreman be sent to each place". Consequently a Mr Burton and a Mr Carpenter were appointed as Acting Foremen of Works at salaries of £150 per annum, with rations for themselves and a servant each during the erection of the buildings. However, the correspondence does not make it clear as to which station each man was sent<sup>3</sup>.

In a Return of Public Works of a Convict Nature<sup>4</sup> we find that construction commenced in July 1841 with a garrison of one sergeant and twelve privates and an unknown number of convicts. The general estimate of its cost was £845 4s 3d, by the end of the year it was not finished and £75 8s 1d had been expended on it. By the end of 1842 the expenditure had increased to £186 12s 10½d.

On the 13th November 1841, Sergeant J[ohn M[itche]ll] Carter, 51st Regiment, wrote a report on the destruction of the entire building occupied by the prisoners<sup>5</sup>.

The Major of Brigade,

Sir,

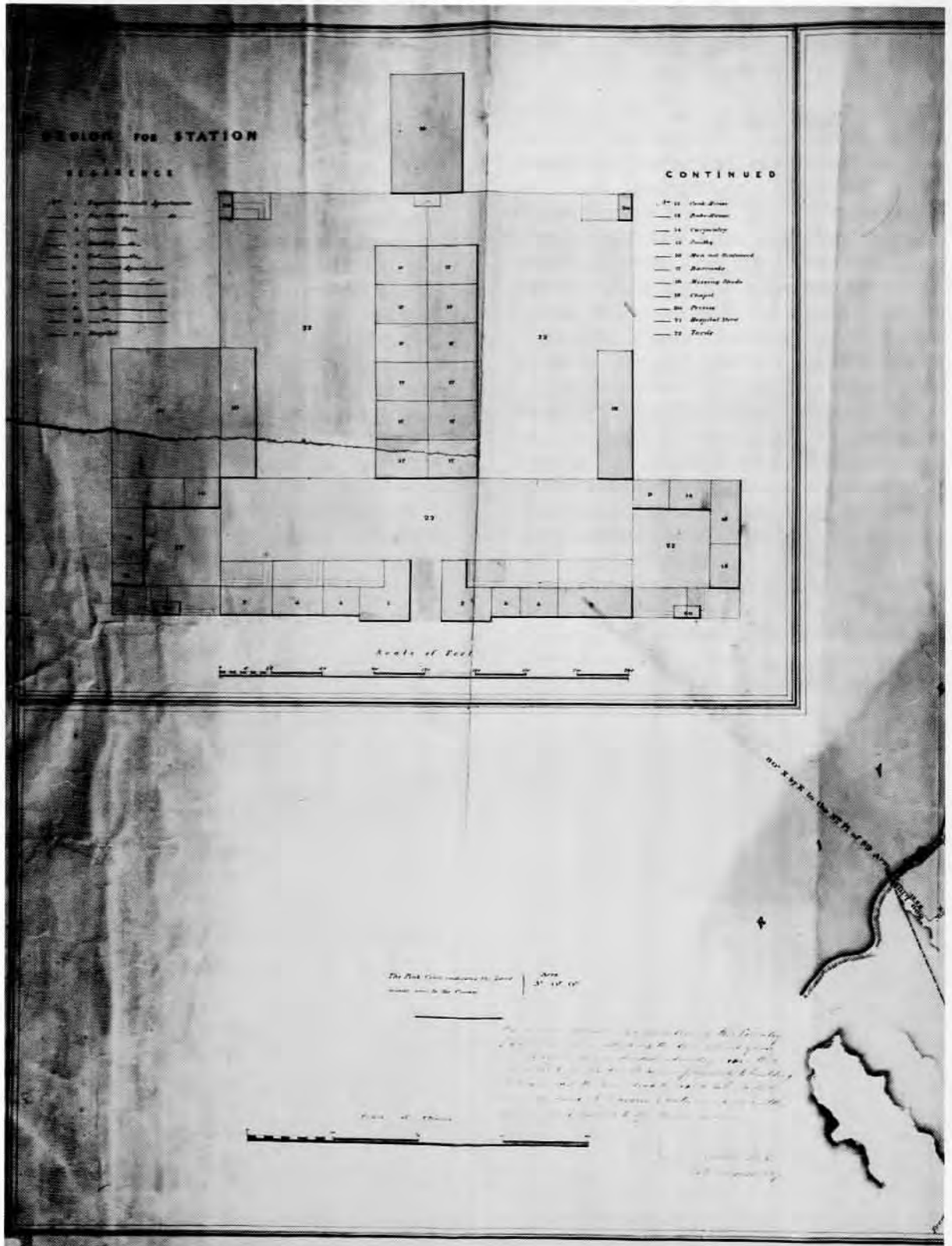
According to orders as stated in Section No. 5 of the Book of Standing Orders I now transmit the following circumstances for the information of the Lieut. Colonel Commanding.

A fire having broken out in the Prisoner's Barracks at the hour of 10 o'clock on the night of the 12th Inst., which consumed the whole of that building, without any further injury to any other part of the Barracks. Consequently I had the whole of the Detachment under arms until the fire was over. Likewise Sir, it is my opinion that the fire originated in consequence of the prisoners being allowed to keep very large fires during the whole of the night. Had the fires been put out at proper hours the building could not have taken fire. Had the wind continued during the night as in the afternoon the whole of the buildings on the station must have been consumed.

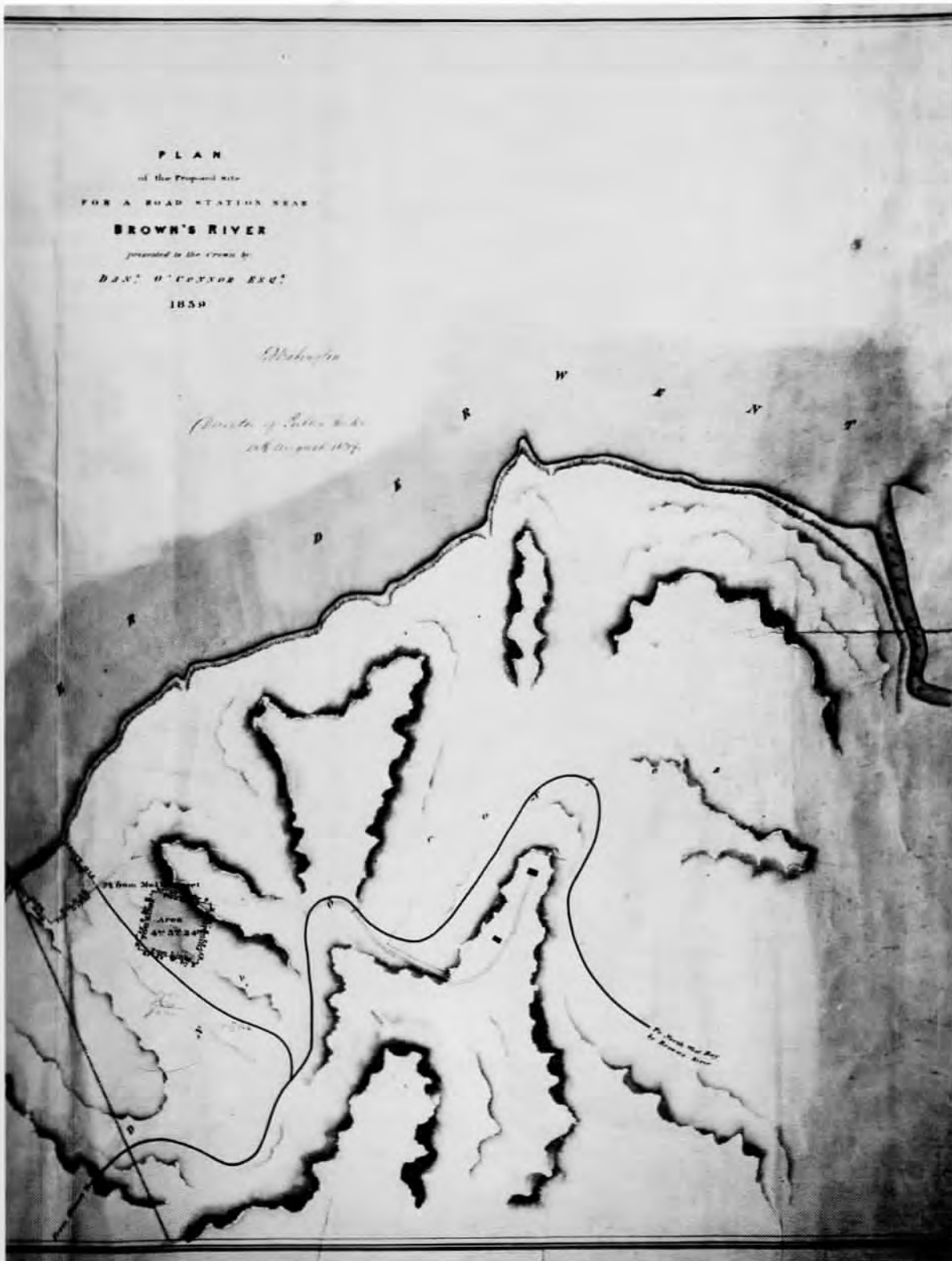
Signed J.M. Carter, Sergeant 51st Reg.

From the Annual return of the Civil Establishment we learn that the following officers were appointed in 1841<sup>6</sup>:

Supt. Jas. Skene	1 Sept. Salary £200
Assist. Supt. Jas. O'Sullivan	19 July Salary £73
Assist. Supt. O.S. Whitehead	8 Sept. Salary £73
Assist. Supt. R.G. Symonds	5 Oct. Salary £73
Store Keeper, W. Hance	9 July, ½ Salary £30



Design for Brown's River Probation Station, 15th August 1839.



*Plan of the Proposed Site, Brown's River Probation Station, 15th August 1839.*

ARCHIVES OFFICE OF TASMANIA.

## Nineteenth Century

In addition to their salaries they were also to be supplied with rations, quarters and fuel.

During this time no permanent residence had been constructed for the Superintendent so a house was rented from Mr Daniel O'Connor. The payment for this was approved in a memo from the Colonial Secretary, John Burnett, to the Deputy Commissary General and the Acting Clerk of Accounts<sup>7</sup>:

The Lt. Governor approves of a warrant being prepared in favour of Mr. Daniel O'Connor for the amount of Rent due to him for the occupation of a House near the Brown's River Station.

The house in question was occupied by the Supt. of the Probationary Party until Quarters were erected for that Officer on the Station. It was rented from 1st July 1841 to 30th November 1842 inclusive at the rate of £1 per week. At this date it is assumed that "Acton", the large three-storied sandstone building which stands on the bottom side of the Channel Highway overlooking Taronga, which was the site of the Probation Station, was built as the Superintendent's residence. In the Census return for 1843 we are told that the station was built of stone, brick and wood. The population consisted of 33 free men and about 370 prisoners as well as a further 32 persons made up of the Superintendent James Skene, medical officers, overseers, etc. with their families and two female assigned servants.

From the Annual Return of the Civil Establishment for 1845 the staff had been changed and increased, namely<sup>8</sup>:

Supt.			
J. Fraser	27 Dec. 44	Salary	£150
Religious Instructor,			
J.G. Medland	20 June 45	Salary	£200
Assist. Supt.			
J.Laffer	23 April 45	Salary	£73
Storekeeper,			
R.H. Wigmore	30 April 45	Salary	£60
Overseer,			
T. Chadwick	9 May 45	Salary	£63.17.6
Overseer,			
J. Mitchel	8 Oct. 45	Salary	£63.17.6

In another Annual Return of Convict Stations<sup>9</sup> the accommodation for officers and prisoners at the close of 1846 the Brown's River Hiring Depot, as it was now called, is described thus:

1 hut for 40 men	=	40
1 hut for 30 men	=	30
6 huts for 20 men	=	120

13 huts for 10 men	=	130
21 huts	=	320 men.

100 Separate Apartments  
13 Solitary Cells  
2 Mess Rooms  
2 Small Stores  
No land was under cultivation.

The Separate Apartments were very good, however, it [the Station] was to be abandoned.

In a further Return of Convict Stations<sup>10</sup> in the Colony of Van Diemens Land at the close of 1846 the personnel at the Brown's River Hiring Depot had been reduced to:

Establishment  
1 Medical Officer  
1 Superintendent  
1 Assistant Superintendent  
1 Overseer  
1 Storekeeper  
1 Dispenser  
1 Writer  
0 Others

Hard Labour  
2 Blacksmiths  
1 Carpenter and Cooper  
1 Messenger  
43 in Road Parties  
2 Sub Overseers  
Total: 49

Barrack Duties  
2 Bakers and Cooks  
1 Barber  
4 Servants  
3 Shoemakers and Tailors  
4 Wardsmen  
4 Watchmen  
4 Wood and Water Carriers  
1 Writer  
1 Hospital Orderly  
4 Other Barrack Duties  
Total: 28

Miscellaneous  
2 Discharged  
2 Exempt to Light Labour  
3 Sick  
1 Solitary Confinement  
Total: 8

Grand Total: 85 convicts and 7 free persons.

By 1846 the Probation System was found to be not working as was expected and so Charles Joseph Latrobe Esq., who was the Superintendent of the Port Philip District, was charged with carrying out an enquiry whilst Administrator of Van Diemens Land between



*View from "Acton" showing the site of the Brown's River Probation Station which was situated on the hill in the right background, 1986.*

PHOTO CARL WOOD.

13th October 1846 and 25th January 1847. His report (No. 25) was on the Brown's River Hiring Depot<sup>11</sup>:

Brown's River is on the Derwent seven miles from Hobart Town. Three years ago the Buildings of this Establishment were of a most miserable description. Since then they have been improved, and greatly added to are of stone, brick and wood, well ventilated and secured. The Superintendent has a good house but quarters are required for a Religious Instructor and two overseers. The store in use is a tolerable brick building. The two mess-rooms are large and will accommodate two hundred men. The Cook and Bakehouse form one brick building. The yards are not divided except that between the ranges of Separate Apartments which is railed off from the other part of the station. The Separate Apartments are arranged in two tiers, they are well built and boarded inside and radiate from a centre formed by the windows at the rear of the Superintendents' quarters. These apartments were considered to be the best built of any in the Island, and were not occupied owing to the small number of passholders on the Station.

The Sleeping wards consisting of twenty one, and accommodating if necessary three hundred and twenty, would with the one hundred Separate apartments quarter four hundred and twenty men. The Sleeping places are broad and the division partitions high — the bedding is aired in the yard which is not a good system. There was a quantity of sawn timber in the yard of the Separate Apartments likewise brick, both burned and unfinished, which, if new buildings should at any time be erected, would be found useful.

The Solitary Cells are of stone and excellent, thirteen others are in an unfinished state.

A Church School and Hospital are much required, the buildings used at present for such purposes are most miserable barns. There is no regular School, but a Bible Class has been formed by one of the officers for those willing to be instructed, and is held on Sundays and also two days in the week.

The water required for the Depot is procured from a well a short distance from the Station: a stone tank has been constructed so as to collect water for washing.

It was suggested that this Station should be abandoned, it being found expensive, and unprofitable, but that it might answer for a Female Penitentiary large sums having been expended on its formation. No land whatsoever is attached to the Station. The want of a ready and abundant supply of water is the principal objection.

The Medical Officer visits Oyster Cove — there are also two passholders, one a writer the other a dispenser who receive sixpence a day each. The passholders were only eighty five. The early abandonment of this Station as a Hiring Depot was decided upon.

Very little is known about the convicts who were stationed here. While the vast majority passed from notice after serving their sentences, it is only those who continued to offend that come before the public eye. One such example was William Mansfield who died at Port Arthur on the 28th February 1858, aged 32, and was one of only nine convicts known to have been buried on The Isle of the Dead, Port Arthur and given a headstone to his memory<sup>12</sup>.

Mansfield's native place was Kidderminster, but he was tried at Leicester (Leicester Borough Quarter Sessions) on the 25th February 1842 and sentenced to seven years transportation "for stealing a watch, 2 waistcoats and a silk handkerchief from his father for rows (*sic*)". His hulk report while in England says "bad" but the Surgeon's report says that his "general conduct on the voyage was good." He was aged 19 years, a labourer by trade, 5 feet 4¾ inches tall, of the Protestant faith, could read and write and was unmarried.

He embarked on the "Gilmore" on the 4th April 1843 and sailed on the 16th April from London, arriving in Hobart Town on the 20th August that year. Upon arrival he was ordered to serve two years probation and was sent to the Brown's River Probation Station south of Hobart Town.

His first sentence in the colony was:

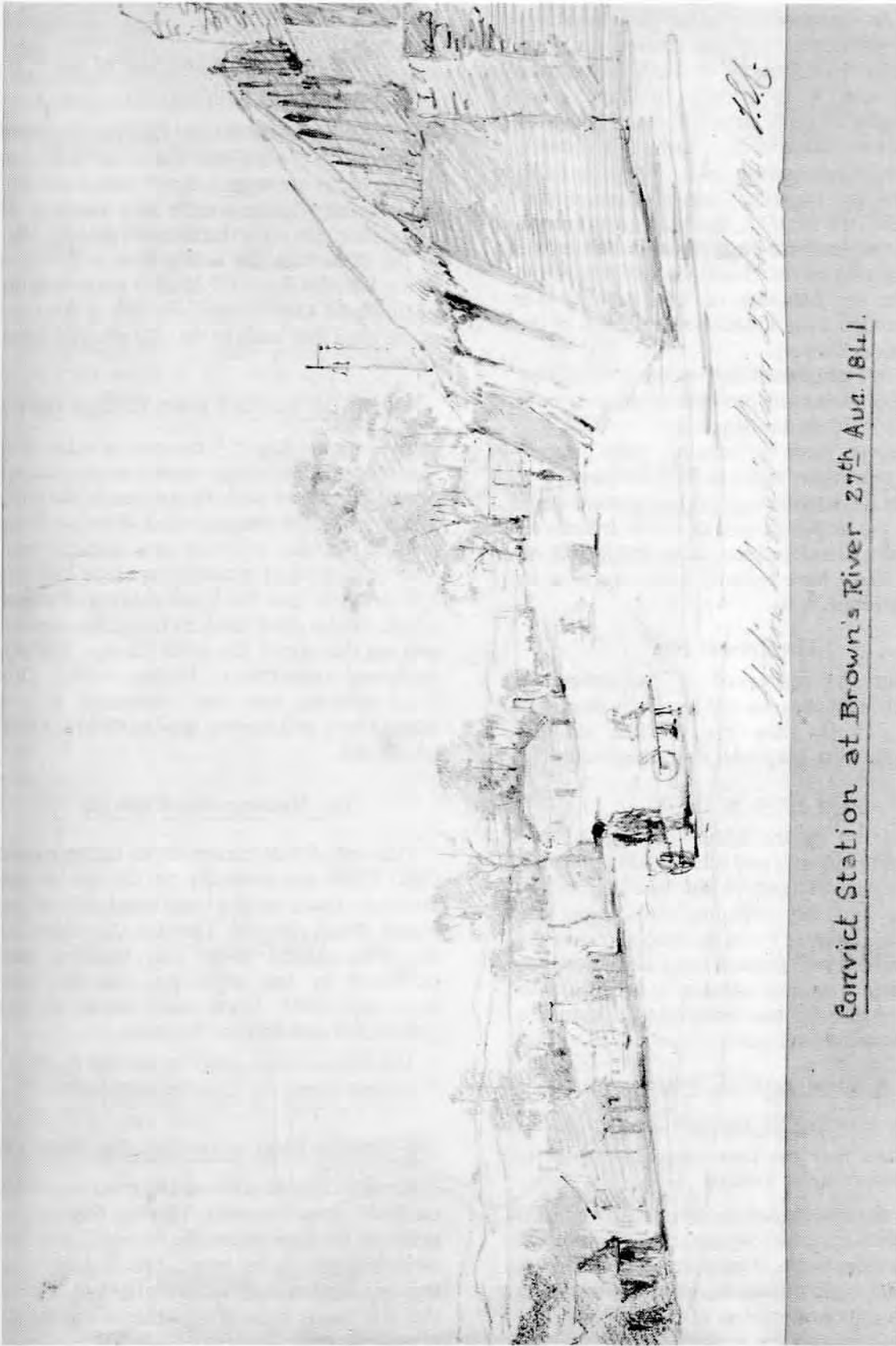
30th December 1843, Brown's River Probation Station, misconduct in making away with a pair of boots, 14 days solitary.

This was followed by:

19th September 1844, Hobart, felony, committed for trial, tried Hobart Supreme Court 22 Oct. 1844, burglary in the dwelling house of Frederick Lipscombe [at the Grange] and stealing 2 coats value £1 and other articles his property.  
Not Guilty.

30th December 1844, Prisoners Barracks, absconding, 12 months hard labour in chains.  
24 February 1845, Probation Brown's River, disobedience of orders in repeatedly refusing to work, existing sentence of hard labour on the road extended to 1 month.

7th March 1845, probation Brown's River, idleness, 1 month hard labour on the road.



*Station Brown's River 27th Aug 1841 T.C.*

Convict Station at Brown's River 27th Aug. 1841.

*Pencil sketch of the Brown's River Probation Station, 27th August 1841, by Thomas Chapman.*

TASMANIAN MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY.

## *Nineteenth Century*

After serving this sentence he was moved from Brown's River. Today no buildings remain on the site, only foundations and parts of walls, From some of these remaining foundations it is evident that the stone buildings were quite large and required a great quantity of material for their construction. However, there is very little evidence of this material on the site. This is quite understandable for in 1871, the year after Joseph Moir completed the Shot Tower, he started the construction of the Tower Factory. The stone used in the building of this Factory was obtained from the abandoned buildings of the Probation Station.

All that remains of the Station is mainly on private property and has been extensively built over by modern housing.

However, some features are quite discernable if one knows where to look for them. One of these is the remains of the underground cells which are on Kingborough Council Reserve, are easily found and should be retained at all costs. These have recently been classified by the National Trust.

### **The Present Site**

Without the assistance of archaeological research eight sites can still be clearly identified today. These sites are marked on the accompanying map and described below.

#### The Quarries (1 and 2)

On the top of the hill is the site of two sandstone quarries and a large tailings dump. The stone was used in the building of the Station and the retaining walls along the Channel Highway. From the second quarry the outline of a well formed road leads down to the Station, passing another quarry which is 8 feet deep and has been converted into a private swimming pool.

#### A Stone Tank for Washing (3)

This is described in the Latrobe Report as <sup>13</sup>:

A stone tank has been constructed so as to collect water for washing.

The site of this tank today is clearly marked by a semi-circular cutting into the natural stone of the bank. It measures 15 feet across by 8 feet high. However, what material was used in the construction of the tank, or how deep it went into the ground we do not know

because of the fill that has accumulated over the years.

#### The Muster Yard and Site of the Main Buildings (4)

This is the site of the muster yard and the main buildings to house the convicts. All that remain today are large areas of man-made flat land, some retaining walls and sections of foundations showing through the ground. Part of the stone tank for washing, as mentioned in the Latrobe Report<sup>14</sup>, is sited in the middle of this area. On the southern side is the start of the road that leads to the clay pits and brick clamps.

#### The Clay Pits and Brick Clamps (5)

In the Latrobe Report<sup>15</sup> mention is made that some of the buildings were constructed of brick. These were made by convicts in the gully just south of the Station where there is a large area of flat clay which is now grassed over. There are signs of excavations made into the hill to obtain clay for brick making. Further south, on the other bank of the gully, one can still see the site of the brick clamps, (kilns), and large quantities of broken bricks. This brick making area was connected to the Station by a well formed road around the side of the hill.

#### The Underground Cells (6)

Here are all that remain of the underground cells. These are probably on the site of the building shown on the right hand side of the pencil sketch done by Thomas Chapman on the 27th August 1841. This building was destroyed by fire at 10 p.m. on the 12th November 1841. These walls would be the oldest still standing in Taroona.

The Solitary Cells are of stone and excellent, thirteen others are in an unfinished state<sup>16</sup>.

#### The Convict Road to the Landing Point (7)

From here the remains of the road continue on down to the flat rocks. This was the landing point on the river where the Station's supplies were brought in by boat. The foundations that are here correspond with the last hut on the left hand side of Thomas Chapman's pencil sketch.



The Well (8)

This is also mentioned in the Latrobe Report<sup>17</sup>. It is situated down in the gully, away from the Station and the labour involved in carting water must have been great. It has been cut out of the natural rock to a depth of 32 feet by 8 feet across.

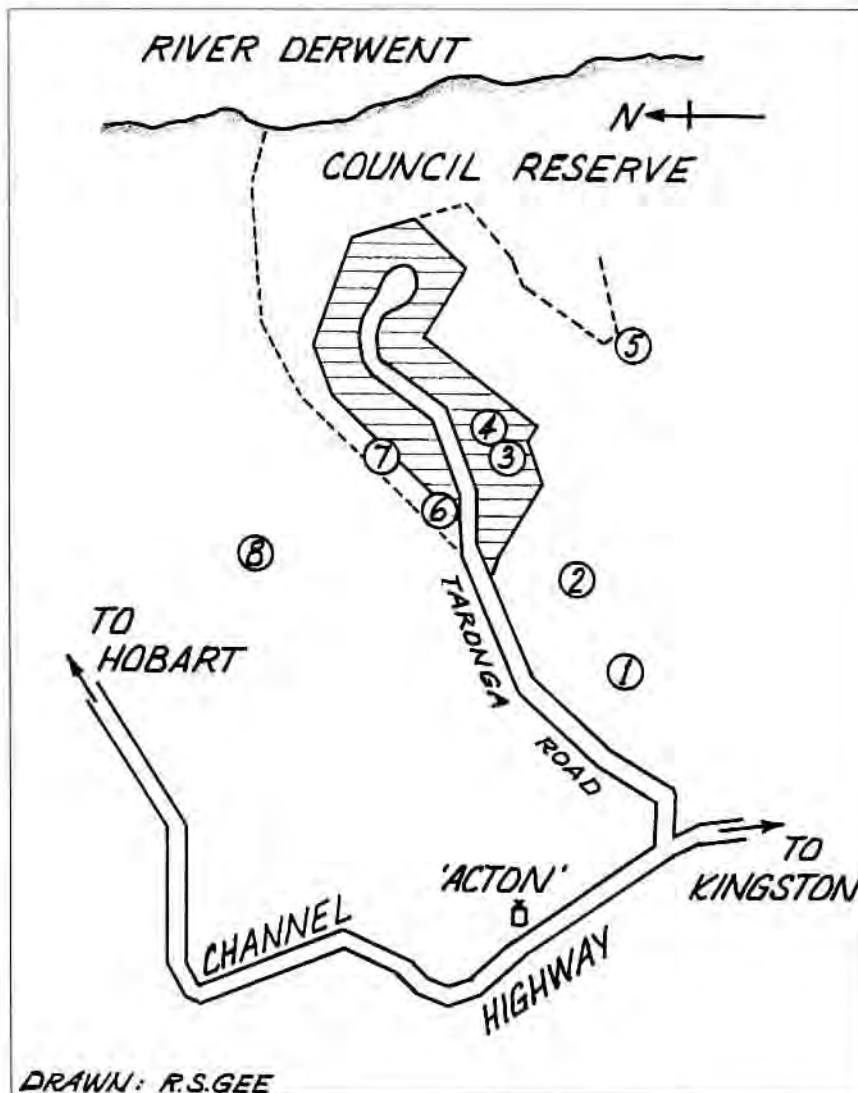
References

1. Plan Folder 77, 290/1069, AOT.
2. Vol. 3/2710, DO.
3. CSO 22/47, File 73, pp. 1-5, AOT.
4. *Ibid* pp. 8-9, AOT.
5. CSO 50/16-17, 1841-1842, p. 88, AOT.
6. *Ibid*, p. 245, AOT.
7. CSO 22/88, File 1865, p. 55, AOT.
8. CSO 50/20, p. 226, AOT.
9. GO 33/60, pp. 1451-1458, AOT.

10. *Ibid*.
11. Transcripts of the Latrobe Report C.O. 280/206 on the Probation Stations of Van Diemens Land 1847 "are Crown Copyright Records in the Public Record Office, Chancery Lane, London, and appear by permission of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office".
12. Lord, R., *The Isle of the Dead Port Arthur*, Richard Lord and Partners, Tarooma, 3rd Edition, 1985.
13. Transcripts of the Latrobe Report, CO 280/206, AOT.
14. *Ibid*.
15. *Ibid*.
16. *Ibid*.
17. *Ibid*.

Acknowledgements

Mr Reg Gee for the map.



Site of the Probation Station as at 1986.